

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES — DRINKING WATER

Motion

HON STEPHEN DAWSON (Mining and Pastoral) [2.06 pm]: I move —

That this Council condemns the Barnett government for its failure to provide safe drinking water supplies to all Indigenous communities throughout the Mining and Pastoral Region.

Before I am accused of being an oracle by members on the far side of the house because I gave notice of this motion on 19 June 2013, I say at the outset that I am not an oracle. However, at that time, which was weeks into my term as a member of this place, I saw an issue of significance to communities in my electorate. As it happens, that issue that was prominent then is also an issue today. I am not an oracle, but I am raising an issue that is very important and warrants a proper response from the government. I make that point because a couple of weeks ago one of my colleagues moved a motion and a member of the government made a similar point, so I wanted to place on the record today that I am not an oracle and that this motion is as much an issue now as it was then.

As it happens, when I was running for a seat in Parliament—so before I took my seat in this place—and was travelling around my electorate, particularly in the Kimberley and in the Pilbara, the issue of water quality, particularly safe drinking water supplies in Aboriginal communities, was drawn to my attention on a number of occasions; in fact, on many occasions. That is the reason I gave notice of the motion at that time. Since that time, an Auditor General's report titled "Delivering Essential Services to Remote Aboriginal Communities" was tabled on 6 May this year. I will quote extensively from that report because I believe it will add to the debate. At page 2, the Auditor General states —

My findings were that the Remote Area Essential Services Program delivers reliable power and water supplies to selected remote Aboriginal communities, but the quality of drinking water often falls short of Australian standards. I have identified a number of areas for improvement and have made a number of recommendations to be considered.

The Auditor General states in this report that some things are working properly, but he highlights that there is a significant issue related to safe drinking water in remote Aboriginal communities. I am not making this up, and a number of other members in this place this afternoon representing the Mining and Pastoral Region have heard the same issues when they have visited Aboriginal communities, particularly some of the more remote communities. Elements of this report are fairly damning, because significant problems exist in delivering safe drinking water to remote communities. In preparing for this debate, and even in the last few days, I have taken the opportunity, as has my office, to check with some of the Aboriginal communities, particularly in the Pilbara. Punmu is a good example. Its drinking water is fairly good and every two months the bores are tested by Pilbara Meta Maya Regional Aboriginal Corporation, a contractor engaged by the Department of Housing, and then, on an ongoing basis, Remote Jobs and Communities Programme workers test water. The Punmu community also has a backup plan, comprising a backup pallet of water and a delivery plan if an issue arises with the drinking water or perhaps with the pipes. When there is an issue with the pipes, there is no indication whether these problems result from an annulus or piping annuli; we do not know what the problem is.

I am told that families in some of the other communities are advised not to allow children, and babies in particular, to drink the local water. I am told that the Kiwirrkurra community has a reverse osmosis system, but occasionally, when too much water is used, an imbalance is caused and they have to use bottled water. In that community, families are advised not to allow their babies to drink local water. I know that in the metropolitan area doctors also advise families not to allow their babies to drink from a tap; in fact, families are advised that their baby should drink purified water, at least for their first nine to 12 months. My household is going through that issue at the moment. My household has a water purifier and a steamer to make sure our bottles are clean, and every ounce of water that is used in the kettle is purified first. Remote communities do not have that luxury.

The Kunawarritji community has a water–mineral imbalance issue, and children, not just babies, in that community drink bottled water only. The community clinic there ordered more bottled water months ago with a government department. I am advised that its last containers of water will run out in the next few weeks, so I will chase that up on behalf of that community. The fact is that in that community children cannot drink the local water because of the poor water quality.

I have spoken to other communities. I am advised that Pilbara Meta Maya regularly checks the bores at the Warralong community, which is a very good thing. I talked to the community of Mingullatharndo, which is about five kilometres outside Roebourne. I do not believe that this community falls under the remote area essential services program, but I am advised that every family in that community brings in its own water supply in bottles mostly, and has done so for the past 15 years. The community tells me that at the moment it is having conversations

with government, with Aboriginal native title groups and with other agencies to seek to put bores on the land so that they can tap into the East Harding River water supply so that the community can have quality water.

I will go back to the Auditor General's report, if I may. We know from this report that about 15 per cent of the state's Aboriginal population lives in remote communities across Western Australia. We know from debates in this place previously that there are about 274 remote Aboriginal communities across the state. In undertaking this audit, the Auditor General visited 27 remote communities. The report states that the Department of Housing's remote area essential services program comprises 84 communities. That means that about 190 remote Aboriginal communities in the state do not fall under this plan. That is historic. That issue relates partly to the funding by governments, both state and federal, to provide services in these communities.

However, 190 communities throughout the state, and mostly in my electorate, are not engaged in this program, and I am aware that a lot of them have issues with their water quality. As I said, this audit covered 84 communities in this program. We all know that some of those communities have tiny populations; we are talking about handfuls of people. In other communities, such as Bidyadanga south of Broome, there are about 600 people. I imagine that in some of those bigger communities, particularly in Bidyadanga, the water quality would be better than in some of the smaller communities. The Auditor General's report lists the communities that are part of the remote area essential services program, and quite a lot of them are tiny communities and are receiving services. A number of bigger communities are not on this list and are not receiving services at the moment, which is a real problem.

The remote area essential services program was initially an agreement between the commonwealth, the state and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. It was signed in the late 1990s and was to provide housing services to eligible Aboriginal communities. It provided services such as power, water and sewerage. In January 1999, the state Department of Housing began managing that program. The state-funded remote area essential services program run by the Department of Housing has responsibility for repairing and maintaining the power, water and wastewater infrastructure in those eligible communities. The program also has the responsibility to maintain and monitor wastewater. I will go to the Auditor General's report. I am using two copies; one is highlighted and one is not. One is for show, and I encourage other members of this place to read it. It is a very good report. This copy is not as pretty, so I will read from the less pretty one, but I will keep the other one here with me so that members know which report I am talking about. The audit conclusion on page 6 of the Auditor General's report states —

The Remote Area Essential Services Program delivers reliable power and water supplies to selected remote Aboriginal communities, but the quality of drinking water often falls short of Australian standards. Testing of wastewater systems was irregular or incomplete between January 2012 and 2014, so Housing could not be sure if they were working effectively.

Housing's current arrangements for managing the Program limit its effectiveness and efficiency. In particular, they restrict the Program Manager's effectiveness. The condition of key assets and associated future costs is not well understood, and weaknesses in coordinating services to communities means there are missed opportunities to reduce costs.

The criteria to determine eligibility for the Program have not been applied since 2008. This means that Housing does not know if the right communities are in the Program. Some communities may be receiving services they are no longer entitled to while others may have become eligible but are receiving no services.

The report points out that there is a real issue with the quality of drinking water in those communities and the fact that the quality of the water often falls short of Australian standards. I have asked the Minister for Housing in this place some questions about water quality in remote Aboriginal communities. I have to place on the record that when I ask the minister questions in this place, he is very gracious and always ensures that an answer is provided. Like the Minister for Education, the Minister for Housing always endeavours to get it as soon as possible if it is not available on the day. On 18 August this year, I asked the Minister for Housing the following question —

I refer to the royalties for regions funding allocated in 2012–13 to improve water quality in remote Aboriginal communities administered by the Department of Housing.

(1) What was the value of allocated funding and how much was expended in each of the following years —

I then gave three years —

(2) Which 33 communities were targeted, and were works undertaken in all these communities?

(3) How many contracts were issued in total?

- (4) How many contracts were issued to local and regional service providers?
(5) How many Aboriginal contractors were allocated work and on which projects?

The answer that the minister provided to the first part of the question indicated that in 2011–12, \$5.7 million was allocated, but only \$1.4 million was expended in the communities; in 2012–13, \$4.9 million was allocated, but only \$3.3 million was expended; and in 2013–14, \$1.5 million was allocated, which is less, and \$4.4 million was expended, which is significantly more. However, that still does not account for the money that was supposed to have been spent in the two previous years.

Hon Col Holt: How much is the difference?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: It is \$11 million, and about \$8 million has been spent, so \$3 million is significant.

Hon Col Holt: I wonder how it will go this year.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: We will see what is spent this year, minister. However, \$3 million is significant when we are talking about remote Aboriginal communities in this state that do not have quality drinking water; in fact, they have unsafe drinking water. If that money were spent, it would make a significant difference to many of those communities.

I go back to the key findings of the Auditor General's report. At page 6 it states —

Drinking water quality often does not meet Australian standards:

- Tests detected either *E. coli* or *Naegleria* microbes in at least one community in every month in the two years to June 2014. Both of these can cause serious illness and are potentially fatal. The microbes were found at least once in sixty-eight communities in the last two years, and more than eight times in four communities. The presence of these microbes means that the drinking water is non-compliant with the Australian guideline.
- In the same period, four communities exceeded safe levels of uranium in their water by up to double the level allowed for under the Australian guideline.
- Fourteen communities recorded nitrates above the safe level for bottle-fed babies under three months old in 2014.

Testing of wastewater systems between January 2012 and June 2014 to establish if they are working effectively was irregular or incomplete and failed to meet contractual requirements. The lack of testing means that Housing could not always know if wastewater systems were effective. Ineffective systems can result in blockages and even sewage overflows, which can directly impact on community health.

I want to go back to those points about what was detected in the water—*E. coli* and *Naegleria* microbes. These things are serious. I am not for a moment blaming the government because some of these things have been found in the water in the communities. Of course I am not saying that it is the minister's responsibility that these things are there. I am saying that given that we know there are serious issues with the water, more needs to be done to fix the problem.

Over the past few months—again, I do not want to sound like a broken record—we saw moves by the government, particularly the Premier, to close remote Aboriginal communities, which I am pleased to say have fallen by the wayside. We should have been making those communities more liveable. In this case, we should have been making sure that the drinking water supplied in those communities was safe and met the Australian standards. Yes, it is costly to provide some of these services in regional Western Australia, but if we can provide them in country towns, we should be able to provide them to these remote communities. I contend that the royalties for regions fund could be used to ensure that we lift the quality of the infrastructure and the services in those communities. Whether we need to spend money on drilling more bore holes or whether we need to ensure that the casing around the pipes is better than it is, more needs to be done. It is not rocket science. Certainly, I do not have the answers to how each one can be fixed, but some very learned people work for the state government, including in some of its agencies, and I am sure that some of those scientists would have the answers, if only the government would say that it would spend the money. It knows there is a problem there and it should fix it.

I go back to the Auditor General's report. As I said, the last point was about the testing of wastewater systems and the Auditor General states —

Testing ... between January 2012 and June 2014 ... was irregular or incomplete and failed to meet contractual requirements. The lack of testing means that Housing could not always know if wastewater systems were effective. Ineffective systems can result in blockages and even sewage overflows, which can directly impact on community health.

On the same day, the Australian edition of *The Guardian* had an article about the Auditor General's report. The media may well have got a sneak preview of the report, although that seems unusual given that it was tabled in this place. Nonetheless, this article came out on the same day as the report. The article was written by Calla Wahlquist and is titled "E Coli, uranium and nitrates found in water of WA remote communities". It states —

Eighty per cent of remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia whose essential services are delivered under a state-run program failed water safety tests by testing positive for E coli or Naegleria.

Between July 2012 and July 2014, E coli or Naegleria microbes were found in regular water tests of 68 of the 84 communities whose water, power and sewerage is provided under the state-run remote area essential services program. Of those that failed the national water safety standards tests, 39 failed at least twice and 29 failed three or more times.

In addition to those breaches, the water supplies of one in five communities in the program showed unsafe levels of nitrates or uranium contamination.

The results were contained in a report tabled in parliament on Wednesday by the office of the state's auditor general, Colin Murphy.

It goes on to state that the most affected communities for water quality were not communities in the Pilbara, but communities in the West Kimberley. It references the community of Jarlmadangah, which is about 220-odd kilometres outside of Broome and not far from Derby. That community failed the microbiological tests five months in a row last year and Koorabye, which is nearby, failed 11 times in two years. The article goes on —

Discussing Jarlmadangah, the report said: "The community told us that by the time they get a note from a failed water test they have already been drinking it for a week or two. They routinely boil water 'for babies and young ones'."

The fact that communities are drinking this water for a week or two, and perhaps in some of the other communities that are not tested they are drinking this water for a longer period, is a real concern. What are we going to do to fix it? I hope that in the minister's contribution this afternoon or next week he is in a position to tell us what his agency has done in response to the Auditor General's report.

In preparing for today's debate, I also found a bulletin from Australian Indigenous Health. This organisation's core funding is provided by the Australian government Department of Health. The bulletin has an Edith Cowan University logo on it. I certainly understand that the paper, titled "Environmental health challenges in remote Aboriginal Australian communities: clean air, clean water and safe housing", was compiled by a number of experts from the Telethon Kids Institute, the School of Paediatrics and Child Health at the University of Western Australia and the School of Medicine, University of Hobart, Tasmania. There is a section in this bulletin about the contamination of drinking water. Again, it is probably something that we already know. It states —

Access to good quality drinking water that has acceptable levels of bacteria and heavy metals is an ongoing concern in remote Aboriginal communities. However, as with other environmental exposures discussed in this review, the health impacts of poor quality water in Aboriginal communities has not been fully addressed. Insufficient access to clean drinking water and functioning sewerage systems contributes to skin, eye and diarrhoeal diseases in Aboriginal communities. Gastroenteritis is second only to respiratory infections as the leading cause of hospitalisation for infection in children younger than 2 years, with rates up to 11 times higher in Aboriginal compared with non-Aboriginal children. GI hospitalisation rates also vary between geographical locations, higher in remote versus non-remote regions. Among Aboriginal children less than 5 years of age in W.A., the highest hospitalisation rates were found in the remote Kimberley and Pilbara-Gascoyne regions, where rates were 3.5 times higher than for Aboriginal children living in metropolitan areas.

I will not quote exhaustively from this report but it does seem to suggest that there is a big link between the quality of drinking water in some of our remote communities and the prevalence of things such as gastroenteritis or respiratory infections in some of our communities. It is not just the case that there is water in these communities that people cannot drink but people drinking this water in some of these communities are getting sick as a result. Although it is potentially hard for the minister and his agency to find money to plough into this program, another agency, the Department of Health, has to find the money to treat these people who are getting sick as a result of the water quality not meeting Australian standards. This is not a criticism of the government; it is a criticism across the board. If only one agency could speak to the other. In fact, if only Treasury could get two agencies at the table and say, "Hang on, the Minister for Housing wants more money so he can ensure that the water quality in some communities is better. The Minister for Health keeps asking for money to treat sick kids from Kimberley, Pilbara or Gascoyne communities. What is going on here? Maybe there is a way of sorting this out." We know it is more costly. It is very costly to treat people in hospital. It is my view—this is not based on science—that if we spend money to ensure that drinking water is safe in our communities, we could save money

in the long run. If we give the money to Housing in the first place, we would not have to give as much to Health. It would save money but it would also save people from getting sick. It would save kids from getting sick and it would save families from being displaced and needing to go to places such as Broome, Derby, Hedland or Karratha for medical treatment. It is a simple thing but it could have enormous benefits for us. We should bear in mind that if someone has to go to Derby, Broome, Hedland or Karratha with their sick children, most likely they are taking children out of classrooms, out of schools. That is an issue. Obviously, we have an issue with attendance in some of our communities. In many cases, they are going to places such as Broome, Derby, Karratha or Hedland and staying with family members so they are contributing to the overcrowding in the houses of family members. I have spoken to the Minister for Housing—indeed, I have asked questions in this place—about overcrowding and the money being spent on houses that have been trashed as a result of overcrowding or other reasons. There is a continuum. If we were to spend some money and if we were to ensure that quality drinking water was available in all our communities, there would be lasting benefits for us and for the state.

I am not so naive as to suggest that this issue can be fixed overnight. This issue has been around for a while. The Auditor General's report has highlighted that this issue exists today and it should be fixed now. I hope since this report was tabled in February in this place —

Hon Col Holt: May.

Hon Alanna Clohesy: May.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I beg your pardon; 6 May. Thank you. I am pleased that some members in this place are listening. I hope that since this report was tabled on 6 May, moves have been made by the Department of Housing and the Housing Authority to fix these issues.

Another issue that was raised in the Auditor General's report related to the Department of Housing paying \$1 million a year for a program manager. The Auditor General said that it is not effectively doing the job it was contracted to do. The Auditor General's report states that there is a risk that Housing may have overpaid for services. Again, this is a concern because \$1 million is being paid for a program manager when roughly \$4 million has been spent on the program in total. One million dollars is significant. If there is wastage, it needs to be stamped out; it needs to be stopped. If there is wastage, that money could be used to help some of those communities that have not been helped so far. We need to help some of those 190 communities that are not part of this program.

I wanted to touch on the other point that I mentioned earlier but did not delve into. The Auditor General suggested that he or his agency is not convinced—I am probably putting words in his mouth—or not sure that the right communities are in the program. Of the 80 communities in the program, some of those communities should not be in the program anymore, for whatever reasons. I will be keen to hear from the minister when he makes his contribution what the Department of Housing has done about that and whether it has undertaken a review to work out which communities should be in and which communities do not make the cut.

I am also keen to hear from the Minister for Housing about whether any move has been made to increase the number of communities involved in the program so that there are more than 80, not just that some have been moved in and some have been moved out, but also that more are getting the level of service required to ensure that there is safe drinking water in communities.

I am not sure what process the Department of Housing and its contractors go through when they test the water in these communities and whether biocides are used, for example, to destroy living organisms in the water. That is something I have an interest in and something I will look at further outside of today's debate. If the minister is in a position to let me know, I am keen to know how the water is monitored by the department or by the department's contractors. If he is not in such a position today, I will ask him again. I am keen to get a sense about whether the process is rigorous. We know that proper reporting has not been happening, but I am keen to get a sense from the minister today about whether, since the Auditor General's report, that reporting is actually happening in place. As a parent of a young baby and having listened to Hon Martin Aldridge's contribution about his children in the previous debate, I must say that our children are precious—no doubt about it. Our children are precious wherever we live in this state. Whether we live in the metropolitan area, in a regional community or, indeed, in a remote Aboriginal community, all our children are precious, and we should be ensuring that a basic level of service is provided in these communities. I have to say that water, in my view, is one of those basic levels of service that should be provided. As I have said before, royalties for regions should be used. These communities are in regions that are making significant amounts for the state, and some of that money should be reinvested in those communities to ensure that they have quality services. I have acknowledged before that the remoteness of communities is a concern and that it is not always going to be possible to provide the same level of service throughout the state in many respects, but water should be one of those that is freely available. Not only should it be freely available, but also it should be safe for people to drink.

Granted that the government may decide in some communities that it is simply too expensive to fix the pipes to have running water that is safe all the time, but we must ensure that all those communities always have bottled water available. It cannot be a case of, “Oh well, we spoke to a government agency months ago and there should be more on the way”; it should always be there. Somebody should be responsible for it. Somebody should be checking up on that issue.

I want to move on to an issue about plumbing and plumbing repairs in remote Aboriginal communities. I understand that some work has been done by the Building Commission. Obviously, that does not fall under the minister’s portfolio, but it does fall under the portfolio of the Minister for Commerce. The Building Commission put out a consultation paper in February this year titled “Basic Plumbing Repairs in Remote Aboriginal Communities”. The paper essentially proposes a change to the current laws around plumbing to allow residents in some of these local communities to receive a basic level of training so that they can undertake minor plumbing repairs in the communities. How do we do that? Obviously, we have to ensure that there are some private companies being paid to undertake plumbing work in remote communities, but that when they are doing it, they are ensuring that local people in some of those communities are benefiting and learning from it so that they can take on some of these basic tasks. It was a concern, I have to say to the minister, to hear this week that in his portfolio the Mowanjum Aboriginal Corporation has had to let go 12 local workers because it had lost a maintenance contract to an eastern states company. I have not spoken to the CEO, Steve Austin, of the Mowanjum Aboriginal Corporation, but I understand that Mala from Josie Farrer’s office has, and she has been advised that essentially people in those communities are having to turn to Centrelink now to support their families because there will not be local jobs in those communities. I am aware that in the case of one of these jobs in particular, a plumber has been put off. Mowanjum is not off the beaten track; it is only between six and 10 kilometres away from Derby, but it is a significant-sized community. It has had some issues over the years. It has had significant issues around suicide. Real jobs, therefore, in these communities are important. Real jobs in these communities ensure that people are lifted out of poverty and that people can make a life for themselves, and indeed for their families. I think it is short-sighted of the government, whether it was the minister or someone in the minister’s department, to have allowed this contract to go east and a local Aboriginal corporation to miss out on 12 jobs in that small community. I dare say that it will have a lasting impact on a lot more than 12 people. In talking about 12 families, I am probably talking about 60 people who may well now be on Struggle Street as a result of this organisation losing out on funding.

I want to get back to the consultation paper on basic plumbing repairs in remote Aboriginal communities. I am not sure whether the minister is aware of this issue and that report.

Hon Col Holt: Which one?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: This is the Building Commission paper titled “Basic Plumbing Repairs in Remote Aboriginal Communities”. It was put out in February this year. I had suspected that it came out because people knew that an Auditor General’s report was on the way that touched on the issue of a lack of quality water and quality services in some of those communities. I had thought that this was pre-empting the Auditor General’s report. Perhaps it was not. It is from a different agency. It is from the Department of Commerce. If it was not pre-empting the Auditor General’s report, I think it is very good. If it was pre-empting, it is also very good that someone took on the initiative and said, “Right, there is a problem in these communities. How are we going to fix it?” Whether it is Karratha, Broome or Derby—the Minister for Agriculture and Food would also know—to try to engage a professional or a tradesperson in some of our towns is expensive. To get a tradesperson to go out to a place such as Jarlmadangah, Looma, Koorabye or Warralong is very expensive and it is not always going to be possible. In fact, what happens is that those communities have to wait, probably for days, for the job to be fixed and it costs government agencies significant amounts more to fix the problem. Therefore, it is actually a sensible solution to have a policy in place to ensure that local people in some of those communities can be trained. I am talking about basic skills. I understand that the people at the Master Plumbers and Gasfitters Association in this state are supportive of this policy. They, too, recognise that we do not have enough tradespeople in the regions. We do not have enough tradespeople available all the time to go out and do these jobs when they need to be done. They recognise that there would be benefit in the policy, whether it be providing a restricted licence to people or a permit scheme to allow them to do the basics in communities; I think it is a great idea.

As I have said previously, the unfortunate reality is that despite it being 2015, many Indigenous communities continue to face acute health problems as a result of poor quality drinking water and poor quality sanitation. We need to do things better and we need to do things differently. As I said last week during a different debate, I am ashamed that some of our communities—I mean no disrespect to anybody in this chamber or the government—are like Third World communities, the difference being that people around the world save money to send to people in Third World countries to give them a better quality of life. It is a real shame that in 2015 we do not provide safe drinking water for our Aboriginal communities. It is not just me saying this; the fact is that the

Auditor General has said that there are serious issues with the quality of drinking water in our communities and more needs to be done. Up until that report, money was being spent, but people did not know what it was being spent on. There was no proper management or procedures in place and we were not sure whether the right towns and communities were getting the services they needed. Although the wording of my motion makes it a “condemning” motion, I do not mean to be condemning this afternoon. I am looking for solutions because this is a really important issue. Aboriginal communities in my electorate should get a quality level of service and should have access to quality drinking water. As I said earlier today, if we spend the money on that issue, there could be massive benefits in the areas of education, health, employment and housing. We need to spend the money now to ensure that people do not get sick, because in that way they can stay in their homes. Providing safe drinking water is a good thing to do. I appreciate the opportunity to talk to my motion this afternoon. I look forward to the government’s response.

HON COL HOLT (South West — Minister for Housing) [2.53 pm]: I thank Hon Stephen Dawson for bringing this motion before the house. The government will not support it because, as Hon Stephen Dawson pointed out during the last few sentences of his contribution, it is a “condemning” motion. However, I welcome the fact that we can talk about these issues in this house and put a spotlight on some of the issues that are being experienced out there so that we can implement change and bring about continual improvement. I have always said in this house that we want to improve the life circumstances of people living in this state. If there are issues that need to be addressed, we need to hear about them. We need to raise them in a forum in which we can try to address as many of them as we can. I have always encouraged members of this house to contact me directly if they know of any instances in which the system is potentially falling apart or there has been a breakdown in the system so that I can address them. I am more than happy to take all correspondence, because I want to see a better outcome for those people the state government is trying to look after.

Hon Stephen Dawson covered a lot of ground in his contribution and went way beyond some of the safe drinking water issues. Perhaps he is an oracle with his prediction that this issue would come out, but I would say that he prodded someone in the ribs at the Office of the Auditor General and someone saw his motion on the notice paper. The Auditor General probably peruses the notice paper and thought he would work on this one next.

Hon Ken Travers: He is both an oracle and a leader!

Hon COL HOLT: Maybe. It is a welcome spotlight under which to raise these issues.

I will touch quickly on the Mowanjum issue. It was not that long ago that we had a debate in this house about Homeswest maintenance not being good enough. One of the reasons that the head contractor model was implemented was to address the same concerns that Hon Stephen Dawson raised in another motion in this house not that long ago. From my point of view, maintenance issues decline every day. My office does not get as many complaints and the Department of Housing does not receive as many complaints about maintenance issues as it used to because that part of the system is working pretty well. The issues that Hon Stephen Dawson raised concern community development, regional development and the “jobs in local places” side of the equation. For me, it is about trying to get the balance right. We need to get the job done while providing opportunities for local employment so that people can build on their skills and still deliver a maintenance outcome.

Mowanjum is a very interesting story. Over the past few years, a number of houses have been built and a large number of refurbishments have been done in Mowanjum through the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing. Over that period—I do not have any data with me, but I am happy to supply it—there has been a great deal of work in those communities. Guess what? A lot of people in the communities got a lot of work out of that agreement. One of the outcomes delivered out of the NPARIH contract—I made a ministerial statement about it on Tuesday—is local Aboriginal employment in those communities. Mowanjum has been a recipient of that outcome. When there is that focus —

Hon Stephen Dawson: Yes, but lost in the last few days, minister.

Hon COL HOLT: I am trying to explain why. Between 10 and 12 houses have been built and something like 31 houses have been refurbished. There was a lot of work going on in those communities that was funded by the federal government. As part of that, local people were employed to help the trade assistants to work on those refurbishments. The member talked about a plumber losing his job, but it is my understanding from the information that I received that there is not one tradie in that group of people; there is no tradesperson in the Mowanjum community who works at that level. I would be happy to learn whether that is not right so that I can pursue it. These guys were working on the refurbishment of houses. Since then, there has been a stop on the delivery of that program and there is no work left in the community. The normal maintenance of housing continues, but there is no big, ramped-up, hump of activity that will deliver a lot of jobs to locals. Work will continue and some of that work requires certain trades, which those in the local Mowanjum community cannot supply because they are not tradespeople, so some of them will come from Derby.

Hon Mark Lewis: Sorry to interject, but we do need qualified tradespeople.

Hon COL HOLT: Similar to another motion a little while ago about Homeswest maintenance, there must be a balance between making sure that jobs are being done, and done properly, to deliver community and regional development outcomes for the people who live there—I would love it if Mowanjum people were qualified to be electricians, plumbers and the like; that would be a great outcome because they could do those local jobs—and delivering the right outcome in maintenance by maintaining a job presence for the people who live there. I am very keen to get to the bottom of the Mowanjum situation. As much as possible, I want the subcontracting from those head contractors to go to local communities. I know that the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing has a build coming up in the next two or three years. It is my expectation that when there is more activity in Mowanjum, there will be more jobs for local people. One of the greatest challenges is what we do in the meantime. I note the strategic reform unit is looking at how these communities function and at their education and employment outcomes. It has a big job ahead of it. But housing definitely has to play its role.

As Hon Stephen Dawson pointed out, housing in the communities is the key player and a key player in providing opportunity for local employment. I accept that we have to work harder. My message to all head contractors and the Housing Authority is that I have a fairly high expectation that if a local contract can be done in local communities to the quality required, locals should be encouraged to competitively price to deliver it. We want to deliver value for money and the right outcome. Sorry to be distracted with Mowanjum, but I have an expectation about that as well.

Hon Stephen Dawson talked about the Auditor General's report. That is a very good report around the failures of the system. However, the failures of the system are not as great as they may sound from the report. Of course we need to focus on the failures in the system, because we want to make continual improvements in the system, and Hon Stephen Dawson has pointed that out very well. However, in the vast majority of cases, services are being delivered as required. If services were not being delivered as required and people did not have a safe and adequate supply of drinking water, everyone would move out of those communities and no-one would be living there. However, that is not the case.

I want to paint a bit of a picture around the challenges that the Housing Authority has in this space. As the member pointed out, the Housing Authority is not responsible for every Aboriginal community out there. It is responsible for the delivery of the remote areas essential services program, and that is what the Auditor General is focused on. We are only one slice of the pie, if we like. However, having said that, as a government, we need to look at how we can supply services across the spectrum of Aboriginal communities, not just remote Aboriginal communities. We also still have to worry about how we can deliver safe and adequate water supplies in many of our country towns. There are many challenges in our dry and drying climate in many parts of the state. In most cases, we are delivering a great outcome for our Aboriginal communities and our towns. However, sometimes the system fails, as the Auditor General has pointed out, and we accept that.

Just as an indicator, the remote areas essential services program now has an asset value of about \$765 million across the 91 Aboriginal communities that the state government is responsible for. There has been a great deal of investment into those communities to provide essential services. Some of the challenges go beyond being able to put in the infrastructure. Some of the challenges are underlying issues, such as the quality of the groundwater in the area in which those communities live. In the past, some of the settlements in this state were probably built in areas in which there was an adequate supply of water throughout the year. I have visited some of the remote communities in the Kimberley and the Pilbara, and I will be going to the goldfields next week. Some of those communities are not necessarily there because of the availability of water; they might be there for cultural reasons and have to face the problem of the availability of water. To give an example, about two months ago I was in Ngalingkadji, which is just outside Fitzroy Crossing. It is a community that houses about 30 people. It is relatively small. It has a very new and modern reverse osmosis water system. Has Hon Stephen Dawson been out there?

Hon Stephen Dawson: Yes.

Hon COL HOLT: I have to tell members that the water tastes like—I would like to say something else, but it does not taste very good at all. It is also a little salty, which the reverse osmosis has not quite fixed. That is not because of the system. It is because of the groundwater that the system is drawing from. We need to find a solution for that community, and the Department of Housing is doing that. There are young children in that community. Although the water quality is fine in that it will not cause any health issues, it does not taste very nice. If we want to have sustainable communities that can grow and thrive and deliver education, health and employment outcomes, the supply of safe and reliable drinking water is, as the member pointed out, a vital ingredient. We therefore need to address these issues. As the Auditor General pointed out, the challenge around remoteness is one that we cannot get away from in this state. We all know that Western Australia is a very large and remote state and that there are people in this state who like to live far away from town centres and out on the land. However, that creates its own challenges in providing essential services. This might sound as though it is

an excuse. I know that the member did not say that, and I appreciate that. All I am saying is that that is one of the challenges that we all need to work towards resolving.

Debate adjourned, pursuant to temporary orders.