

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES — DRINKING WATER

Motion

Resumed from 16 September on the following motion moved by Hon Stephen Dawson —

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.

HON PETER COLLIER (North Metropolitan — Leader of the House) [1.08 pm]: As Hon Col Holt is away on urgent parliamentary business, I seek leave for the honourable member to continue his remarks at the next day's sitting.

[Leave granted for the member's speech to be continued at a later sitting.]

HON SAMANTHA ROWE (East Metropolitan) [1.09 pm]: I am very pleased to rise to speak to the motion that has been brought forward to this place by my colleague Hon Stephen Dawson, because it is a very important motion and one that we should be able to debate quite sensibly today in this place.

To those members who have not had a chance to read the Auditor General's report titled "Delivering Essential Services to Remote Aboriginal Communities", I strongly recommend that if they have an interest in this area they look at this report, because some fantastic recommendations have been made that this government needs to take into consideration when looking at this motion. We have not yet heard the minister's complete response, and I look forward to hearing the rest of his response in due course.

Quality drinking water, of course, is vital. It is vital to everyone's health and it has an important role to play, particularly in Aboriginal communities where people do not have the same level of access to quality drinking water that everyone here in this place and in the metropolitan parts of the state enjoy. Quality drinking water and access to it is not only incredibly important, but also an essential service that everybody in this state is entitled to. A World Health Organization article, titled "Water, sanitation, health, small community water supply management", notes —

Community water supplies in both developing and developed countries are more frequently associated with outbreaks of waterborne disease than urban supplies. Investing in these supplies will reduce waterborne disease outbreaks and overall cost.

That is a sensible report and the World Health Organization is obviously correct in that thinking. We clearly have to manage the situation for our Western Australian Aboriginal people in regional communities within the Mining and Pastoral Region who do not have the same access that we have to safe drinking supplies. It is clear that something needs to be done. The reason my colleague Hon Stephen Dawson has brought this motion to this place to debate is to see what we can do to make sure that this does not continue, because, quite frankly, in 2015 we should not have people in this state not able to access safe, clean and reliable drinking water. There is an issue around the remoteness of many of our Aboriginal communities, which presents a challenge to the government and to the Department of Housing to deliver and provide safe and clean drinking water. But that does not mean that people should be left with very unsafe drinking water, as they are currently. As I said, it is baffling that in 2015 many people in the state do not have access to clean and safe drinking water such as we have here.

The Auditor General report, which was tabled in May this year, confirms that water quality in some of our remote communities falls well short of Australian standards. The report made a number of recommendations on how we can improve the quality of water in remote communities. As I said, these recommendations should be taken into consideration and implemented as a matter of urgency by this government. Around 15 per cent of the state's Aboriginal population lives in around 274 remote Aboriginal communities throughout WA. These communities are at the forefront of the water quality issue that we are talking about today. In some communities parents are advised not to allow their babies to drink the local water for fear of negative health effects. I believe that we have an obligation to ensure that these communities are provided with safe, clean and accessible drinking water. I am sure that everyone in this place would agree with us on that.

Who, therefore, is responsible for making sure that we have clean drinking water available in our communities? The Department of Housing administers the management of essential services, and that includes power, sewerage and water. Through the program, the Department of Housing has responsibility for repairing and maintaining the infrastructure required to provide the power, water and sewerage systems, as well as monitoring the water quality. The Auditor General report was primarily concerned with identifying problems with the delivery of safe and clean drinking water, and assessing the Department of Housing's ability to meet the terms of its contract. I want to read an excerpt titled "Audit focus and scope" on page 11 of the Auditor General's report —

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The focus of this audit was to assess how well the Department of Housing delivers essential services to remote Aboriginal communities through the Remote Areas Essential Services Program. We focused on three lines of inquiry:

- Does the Program provide effective essential services to remote communities in accordance with relevant requirements, standards and guidelines?
- Does Housing actively manage essential services maintenance and repairs in those communities?
- Does Housing integrate its services well and coordinate them with other relevant agencies?

The report's findings demonstrate that there are a number of outstanding issues and concerns about the department's contractual compliance and its capacity to meet some of the targets of the Remote Areas Essential Services program. An example of problems with the department's contractual compliance is in the period between 2012 and 2014 when the department failed to comply with obligations to regularly and comprehensively test remote community drinking water. That is a fairly important part of the department's key duties and responsibilities, I would have thought. In addressing some of the problems impacting the delivery of safe and clean drinking water, it is essential that there be close monitoring of and access to the Department of Housing's contract, and of compliance by contractors with the contract's terms.

In looking for new and innovative ways to improve the supply of clean and accessible drinking water to Aboriginal communities, it is also really important that we consider the role in planning and decision-making that community members can and should play. The National Water Commission, in a statement put together in June 2012, notes the following on Indigenous access to water resources —

Access to water resources for cultural and economic purposes can make a significant contribution to the aspirations and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians. Until recently this has been largely overlooked in our water planning and management decisions. The National Water Initiative ... recognises Indigenous people are legitimate stakeholders in water planning and management, and acknowledges the need to identify Indigenous water values and water requirements in water plans.

Indigenous Australians have managed their lands and waters sustainably for thousands of generations. Through their spiritual, cultural and customary connections to the landscape, they have acquired a deep knowledge and understanding of Australia's water systems. Incorporating this knowledge into Australia's water management approaches represents an opportunity for all governments to recognise Indigenous water issues and improve the sustainable management of our water systems.

I think that is a really sensible piece of information that we should note and I think the government should note it. Aboriginal people should certainly be part of the planning process to make sure that they have sustainable, clean drinking water.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, the Auditor General's report states that the drinking water in some of our most remote Aboriginal communities is not actually compliant with Australian standards. Water testing has detected E. coli in some drinking water supplies, which can be fatal to those who consume it. For members who are not aware, the symptoms of E. coli infection include abdominal cramps, diarrhoea, fever and vomiting. For a very small proportion of people, particularly the very young and the elderly, this can lead to life-threatening circumstances and can sometimes even be fatal. Uranium is another contaminant that was detected in WA drinking water. It was found in levels far above the allowable level, which obviously poses very serious health risks to those who drink that water. Poor access to safe and clean drinking water, and ill-functioning sewerage systems, obviously contribute to the numerous illnesses that we see in some of these remote Aboriginal communities. It is not something that we see in our metropolitan communities because, quite frankly, it would not be put up with. If it were happening in our own backyards, we would not stand for it. Why should these remote Aboriginal communities have to put up with it? Just because they are seen as being so far away does not mean that they should be ignored or have less access to clean, safe drinking water, which in the metro area, quite frankly, we all take for granted.

As I said, illnesses and diseases that are more prolific in remote communities do not only mean that people end up getting diarrhoea and vomiting et cetera, but can also include skin and eye conditions and sometimes respiratory conditions. We are looking at a whole range of health issues that are affecting some of these Aboriginal communities. Healthy drinking water is acknowledged world over as being an integral component of good health. I think we are doing a great disservice to our remote Aboriginal populations by failing to provide them with some of the most basic and essential services. Not only that, if a number of illnesses and health issues in rural communities relate to the fact that there is poor or no access to safe and clean drinking water, the result is that these people have to travel to hospital. A great cost is involved in doing that. We would be far better off as a state—as I am sure everyone here is aware—to make sure that people do not need to come down to metropolitan

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areas to visit hospitals simply because they cannot access or have reliable access to safe, clean drinking water in these remote areas. It does not even make economic sense, if members want to look at it from that perspective.

I would like to make some comments on the Closing the Gap program. Poor quality drinking water in remote Aboriginal communities in WA is probably only one issue that contributes to some of the poor health outcomes in these communities. This issue is definitely a matter of urgency that requires the government to make some decisions and possibly the implementation of the recommendations within the Auditor General's report to make sure that it is rectified as soon as possible. When we consider the efforts being made at multiple levels of government—whether it be federal or state, or part of the Closing the Gap initiative—it is surprising that this issue has not been given more focus by the Barnett Liberal government in WA before Hon Stephen Dawson brought this motion into this place last week. The National Water Commission notes the importance of addressing drinking water as part of the Closing the Gap agenda. I refer to page 3 of its report, which states, under “Remote community drinking water security” —

A crucial part of the Australian Governments' *Closing the Gap* agenda aims to improve the health outcomes of Indigenous communities by addressing drinking water quality and sanitation. This is a significant challenge, given that drinking water quality in many small remote Indigenous communities often does not meet Australian Drinking Water Quality Guidelines. The Commission considers that institutional support for these Indigenous communities to improve water security, through tools such as the Community Water Planner, should be considered as a contribution under the *Closing the Gap* agenda.

The Closing the Gap priorities and progress reports of 2015, compiled by the Closing the Gap campaign steering committee, show that although improvements have been made in terms of improving health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, we still have a way to go. I think everybody in this place would acknowledge that we still have quite a way to go in that regard. The campaign steering committee found in its report, “Close the Gap: Progress and priorities report 2015” —

The Campaign Steering Committee welcomes the absolute gains in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life expectancy from 2005–2007 to 2010–2012. Over that five-year period, life expectancy is estimated to have increased by 1.6 years for males and by 0.6 of a year for females. But a life expectancy gap of around ten years remains for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when compared with non-Indigenous people.

Both the modesty of the gains, and the magnitude of the remaining life expectancy gap remind us why the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) Closing the Gap Strategy and the target to close the life expectancy gap was needed. It remains necessary today.

The report goes on to state —

Another year a father can spend with his son, or a grandmother with her grandchildren, or a trusted Elder guiding the life of their community, is to be treasured.

I think it is really important to note that, yes, we have made some gains in this area, but unfortunately we still have a long way to go. I think the fact that in 2015, in a country as wealthy as Australia, having people living in remote communities within this state who are not able to access clean, reliable drinking water is quite frankly just not good enough. The government certainly needs to take note of the Auditor General's report that was tabled in May. I am sure the relevant minister has made note of this report but I would like to comment on its recommendations because I believe they are an important part of this motion. It is also a way forward for this state to ensure equality for people in receiving basic essentials such as safe and clean drinking water. Page 8 of the Auditor General's report sets out the recommendations for what the Department of Housing should implement, stating —

- by December 2015 have determined how it can improve water quality in remote communities to meet Australian Drinking Water Guidelines
- by December 2015, take steps to ensure that Service Providers' testing of wastewater systems complies with contractual requirements
- review its contracting of the Program Manager and Service Providers before issuing new contracts in 2016 to ensure:
 - clear roles and responsibilities for contractors
 - clear performance measures for contractors
 - efficient service delivery
 - efficient use of contractors' capabilities

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- clarify with government the roles and responsibilities for essential services previously provided by the Commonwealth to remote Aboriginal communities
- ensure that communities' eligibility for Program services is subject to regular review
- improve its coordination of services to remote Aboriginal communities internally and with other agencies.

I would have thought that that would be relatively straightforward. I hope that the government not only agrees with the recommendations within the Auditor General's report, but also looks at how and when it might be able to implement them. As I said, it is 2015. The fact that some of our remote Aboriginal communities do not have access to clean, safe drinking water is simply not good enough.

HON KEN BASTON (Mining and Pastoral — Minister for Agriculture and Food) [1.32 pm]: This is a very interesting topic. I thank Hon Stephen Dawson for putting this motion on the notice paper. I noted that it was put on the notice paper in 2013. I guess at that time some issues relating to Jigalong were very much on the front page of the paper. I will talk about that in a minute. It is very easy for us to stand in this place and say that we want safe drinking water, with the logistics behind that. We have moved a long way since Jigalong.

Hon Stephen Dawson was saying that before he was elected to Parliament, he travelled north to familiarise himself with the Mining and Pastoral electorate. I, too, did the same thing. I had the privilege of visiting many Indigenous communities throughout the Kimberley and out from Broome. I ended up in a little community called Ngumpan, about 80 kilometres out of Fitzroy Crossing on the turnoff to Wangkatjungka. The member is shaking his head; he obviously knows about it. I arrived there to find that the community was out of water. I was told that there had been some problems when the Department of Health told the community to clean out one of the tanks, which it did. Members of the community drained the water and then proceeded to scrape the bottom with shovels. If any members know what a square mouth shovel looks like, it is relatively sharp and of course went through the floor of the tank, which meant that they could not even refill it for the bore. They desperately tried to use several large tubes of Silastic with a plastic cordial bottle cut in half and pushed over the top of the hole. As members can imagine, the cordial bottle tended to keep curling and pulled the Silastic off the hole, and there was still a hole in the tank. With my little bit of bush ingenuity —

Hon Jim Chown: You stripped off and dove in!

Hon KEN BASTON: I assure the member that there was no water in the tank. I had one of the contractors with me who had some contracts up there for servicing these facilities so I suggested that he cut up an old boot and get a piece of steel and some Tek screws and screw that to the bottom of the floor over the hole. When the water gets on it, the leather swells and blocks the hole and it is all right. I was told that that worked for many years. That tank has since been replaced. I was pleased to find out that a \$500 000 chlorinator system was installed in the last 12 months. By the way, that tank was on a large tank stand and was elevated—one of those old Southern Cross ones. We fixed that problem in the north. Anyone who thinks that water is just on tap all the time should realise that it is not easy at all.

I touched on Jigalong earlier. For those members who do not know where it is, it is about 150 kilometres east of Newman and has about 500 residents from time to time. That is another issue, of course. The people do move around and it is sometimes harder to access than normal. Jigalong's water supply is sourced from four bores, and these bores are sampled monthly to ensure that they have a good supply of water. The Department of Housing is responsible for maintaining that water supply. In September 2012, there was a problem with the water and the community had to use bottled water, especially children. In 2012, the state government put in \$10 million to rectify the issue. The water treatment plant cost in the order of \$486 000. The electrical infrastructure upgrade cost \$9 million. In January 2015, the water treatment plant was operational. I was pleased to just learn that the new power station is due for completion by the end of the month. That will be a state-of-the-art Horizon Power plant equal to anything in the Kimberley. Progress is being made. Quite a bit has happened since this motion was lodged in the house.

The supply of essential services to Indigenous communities is a priority for this government. Since the commonwealth government unilaterally walked away from its longstanding obligation, Western Australia has had to shoulder the task of improving services to remote communities, including the supply of drinking water.

One of the other interesting things—we have this reform that will be looking at it—is that many communities were covered by the federal government and local government could only go as far as the boundary and that was it. Then another provider had to grade the roads within the area. Balgo is one that comes to mind that very much fits into that category. With commonwealth funding being cut off, that will finally probably put some responsibility back on the state to ensure that everything happens. The chamber is very much aware that the government recently announced the regional service reform program to provide an efficient and well-coordinated

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service to Aboriginal communities. I believe that that reform program will be the secret to finally pulling it together and working out who is responsible. I assure members that a lot of money was spent but not a lot of money got to the places where it was needed.

I was sitting on a plane travelling back from Broome one day and I spoke to a lady from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs in the eastern states. We had a debate on how many houses should be built and what their design should be. She had envisaged many homes being built at Balgo. It was an interesting trip.

The provision of water is very much an integral part of the program for all the purposes mentioned by other members on numerous occasions. We are not waiting for the outcome of the review; indeed, rigorous testing will continually be carried on water. There has been continuous improvement in water quality through the improvement water treatment system. The state continues to provide \$30 million per annum to fund repairs and maintenance. I am sure the Minister for Housing will provide further details when he comes back from urgent parliamentary business. The government recognises the challenges of supplying water to small communities in remote areas with varying occupancy and where the local water source is poor quality. The Water Corporation currently services and bills 31 Aboriginal town-based communities, all of which are in the Mining and Pastoral Region, with the exception of two—Badjalung in the Shire of Quairading and Cullacabardee in the Shire of Swan. I have a list of Aboriginal town-based communities—and their local government area—that are billed by the Water Corporation. I will not read them all out because I cannot pronounce all their names! There is Bilgunguru in Broome; Bindi Bindi in Ashburton; Budulah in Derby–West Kimberley; Burrinunga in Derby–West Kimberley; Cullacabardee in the Swan; Djimunda Ngunda in Derby–West Kimberley; Gooda Binya in East Pilbara; Guda Guda in Wyndham–East Kimberley; Iragul in Dundas; Irrungadji in East Pilbara; Junjuwa in Derby–West Kimberley; Karmalinunga in Derby–West Kimberley; Nambi Village in Leonora; Kurrawang in Coolgardie; Malingbar in Broome; Mardiwah Loop in Halls Creek; Marmion Village in Menzies; Marta Marta in Port Hedland; Mirima in Wyndham–East Kimberley; Morrell Park in Broome; Mowanjum in Derby–West Kimberley; Nilir Irbanjiin in Broome; Ninga Mia in Kalgoorlie–Boulder; Nulleywah in Wyndham–East Kimberley; Parnpajinya in East Pilbara; Punju Njamal in Port Hedland; Warrayu in Wyndham–East Kimberley; Wongatha Wonganara in Laverton and Woodgamia. The provision of drinking water to other Aboriginal settlements and remote communities is managed by the Department of Housing. The water is supplied by the Water Corporation at the main point and is delivered by the Department of Housing.

Between 2010–13, the Water Corporation provided infill water and wastewater services to six Aboriginal town-based reserve communities. Those towns were Mindi Rardi and Kurnankgi, which are connected to Fitzroy Crossing; Nicholson Camp and Lundja, which are connected to Halls Creek; Nambi Village, which is connected to Leonora; and Bondinin, which is connected to Wiluna. Services have been upgraded to the standards of the adjacent town and customers have moved from bulk metres to individual customer metres. There have been some infrastructure upgrades with the provision of smart metering, water wise education initiatives and education and engagement on billing and debt management. In 2012 the Water Corporation carried out a smart metering trial. It was the largest water metering trial undertaken by any water utility in Australia and was jointly funded by the state and federal governments. The trial took place in Kalgoorlie–Boulder. The metres send messages back to the corporation. There were huge water savings in the Kalgoorlie area during the trial. The system lets the corporation know when there is a leak because of its continuous flow of water. It is a much more accurate system and I am sure it will be beneficial if the communities have that type of infrastructure. The water portfolio agencies and organisation have commenced working together to review existing data and services to provide the best advice and information to the regional services reform program.

In summary, I bring to the attention of members that the provision of safe drinking water to Indigenous communities is a priority of this government and it will continue to improve the initiatives being prepared. Every endeavour is being made, but some communities are stretched far and wide. One that comes to mind—I think the honourable member referred to it in his speech—is Punmu, which is in the Rudall River National Park. The community started in 1981 and is about 640 kilometres south east of Port Hedland. When I visited that area, I was hit by its isolation. A nurse out there had been waiting for a dentist for four years. Of course, when I arrived she was very distressed because only the day before she was told that after a four-year wait, the dentist would not be coming the next day. We do not realise how isolated some of these communities are and testing the water and having somebody there to make sure the water is suitable for drinking purposes can easily go foul when it is tested only once a month. We must educate the people in those communities and let them have some responsibility. The water system has been designed and installed by the Water Corporation. Punmu has an excellent system. There are bores. Water supplies are varied because there are bore fields 80 metres deep to shallow bore fields while at Kalumburu there is a billabong where a floating tail pipe is sucked off the top. The problem in Lombadina, which is north of Broome, is contamination from a rubbish tip because, quite simply, the

water is very shallow and therefore there can be interaction between the two. Those types of things need to be taken into account in the future.

We will not support the motion. It is obviously a long time since Jigalong had its problems. People are more aware of it and the government is more aware of it. A regional committee is in place to look at the communities and their needs, whether they are power or water needs. In the time that we have been in government, Kalumburu has been given a state-of-the-art hybrid power system with solar and diesel power. The cost of diesel to get to those communities is huge. The honourable member also raised an issue about—I do not think he used the term price gouging—the cost to get tradesmen to the communities, which is enormous. It is often cheaper to fly out tradesmen because of the tyranny of distance, which I have already demonstrated. Generally, there are issues out there, but I think under this government there have been some great steps in the right direction that will continue to consume dollars and time. I believe this government is very much on top of the issue.

HON DARREN WEST (Agricultural) [1.50 pm]: I rise to make some comments about a failure of governments. Hon Stephen Dawson has brought a great motion before us for discussion, as he often does, which states —

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.

I note that this motion targets the Barnett government. The Barnett Liberal–National government has not been across its brief on this issue, but I think it is fair to say that previous governments, both federal and state, perhaps need to shoulder some of the responsibility for the position that we find ourselves in—that basic human right that clean safe drinking water should be available to all Western Australians no matter where they live. Members would not think that there are whole departments for water and housing that report back to government and that the government leaves to develop strategy, when we find ourselves having to do something about drinking water quality in remote Aboriginal communities.

As a member from a region of the state that has quite a low number of Aboriginal communities in his electorate, and reading some of the information I have researched over the last couple of weeks—knowing that this motion was coming forward—it borders on being somewhat frightening that whole groups of people are living with, I think it is fair to say, substandard drinking water. It is something akin to what we would throw our minds to when someone says the words “Third World”. I think this is another government failure. I know there are well-meaning government members, but with many other things the government has tried to achieve, this has fallen flat and they have failed.

I dug out a couple of things from *Hansard*, including tabled papers and ministerial statements from the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and the Minister for Child Protection, Hon Helen Morton. I thought I would get some information about what the government is doing—its strategies and goals for improvements in this area. I found that the Aboriginal Affairs Cabinet Sub-Committee initiated a review of programs for young Aboriginal people. The review showed that the state government invested about \$115 million annually into these programs, but that less than 15 per cent of the programs could demonstrate effectiveness. It is very noble to throw money at problems in Aboriginal communities and invest in youth services, but I wonder about the government’s priorities when many of the areas the committee’s review refers to do not even have safe drinking water. There is no mention that safe drinking water might be an important part of the government’s strategy. Hon Helen Morton’s ministerial statement announced —

... the way infrastructure and services are delivered to Aboriginal communities in Western Australia. The Minister for Regional Development and I are co-leading these reforms and reporting to the Aboriginal Affairs Cabinet Sub-Committee, which is chaired by the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. Since the reforms were announced, the Minister for Regional Development and I have travelled throughout the Pilbara and Kimberley, engaging with Aboriginal organisations, traditional owners and community representatives. Despite the vast differences across the regions, there has been one strong, consistent message from Aboriginal communities—that is, the status quo is unacceptable.

The minister then outlines five points —

... first, that children are safe and nurtured; second, that children receive a quality education; third, that young people have a pathway to employment and adults are meaningfully occupied; fourth, that connection to culture, country and kin is maintained; and, five, that at the end of this process communities have certainty about their future.

There is no reference to the fact that many of these communities have substandard drinking water. I would have thought that issue was one of those five priority points. The Minister for Regional Development and the Minister for Child Protection might have brought that up at some point during their —

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Hon Helen Morton: About houses and water and sanitation—there’s everything under the sun that could have been brought up. It’s contained in those five comments anyway.

Hon DARREN WEST: I do not see any links to water.

Hon Helen Morton: If you can’t see the relevance, I am sorry but you cannot see it; there’s nothing I can tell you.

Hon DARREN WEST: My point is that there is no reference in these five priority areas to the provision of safe drinking water; none at all, not in this statement. I have read this statement all the way —

Hon Helen Morton: Try very hard to use your imagination; but you can’t.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Let us have one member making a contribution at a time.

Hon DARREN WEST: I am trying to make the point that bringing on this motion may perhaps change relevant government members’ and ministers’ approach to the real priorities in many remote Aboriginal communities. I know it would be easier for us to throw our arms in the air and say “Let’s close them; it is going to be too costly and it’s too hard.” I do not think that is the right approach, but suggesting that safe drinking water is not a priority is not the best way forward.

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order, members! Hon Darren West has the floor.

Hon DARREN WEST: I note a statement by the Premier—following changed circumstances in federal government funding, which I hope will be reviewed now that we seem to have a somewhat more compassionate Prime Minister—that 150 remote Aboriginal communities will close. I know there was talk about concern for all the five points that the minister made in her ministerial statement, which are all valid, worthy and important points, but this motion specifically refers to the provision of safe drinking water. I think it is significant that safe drinking water did not crack a guernsey in the minister’s statement.

The threat to close 150 remote Aboriginal communities has created a lot of uncertainty, distress, anxiety —

Hon Helen Morton interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order, minister! I have just rechecked my list, and I notice you have not made a contribution yet, but there is still one hour and 11 minutes to go, so you never know, there is a chance, but not from where you are sitting at the moment.

Hon DARREN WEST: Just to be sure, there has not been a change to the government’s position on the closure of remote Aboriginal communities, because there has been a suggestion by the government and certainly by the Minister for Regional Development that that policy may be under review. The other day I asked a question in the house after the passage of the Constitution Amendment (Recognition of Aboriginal People) Bill 2015, and it would appear from the Premier’s answer that there is no change in government policy and these remote Aboriginal communities are still under the threat of closure from their own government.

I refer to a press release put out in May by the Leader of the Opposition, Hon Mark McGowan, which states —

In yet another example of his chaotic and confused approach to government, Colin Barnett has changed course again—this time on his plan to close 150 remote Aboriginal communities.

The Premier has finally admitted what everyone else knew—that his sudden declaration last November to close down 150 remote communities was poorly considered and rash.

This backflip follows many other unfortunate episodes of mismanagement and chaos including his back down to forcibly merge local councils ...

I will not go into those backdowns. Mark McGowan describes the Premier’s treatment of people in remote Aboriginal communities as “chaotic and disrespectful” and states that he has caused “unnecessary anxiety and stress for many people.” We are all over the shop on this issue of the future of remote Aboriginal communities. This all comes back to the provision of services and the cost of providing them to remote Aboriginal communities. The Minister for Agriculture and Food has just had to duck out on urgent parliamentary business. He also represents the Mining and Pastoral Region where the majority of these communities are located and I take on board the comments he made in which he said it would be nice for remote Aboriginal communities to have access to fresh drinking water. He said it would be nice. I do not think they are very wise words for a minister of the Barnett Liberal–National government to say. I do not think it is very appropriate to say it would be nice.

Hon Simon O’Brien: Hang on; he did not say that. You know he did not say that. Put it in the context of what he said.

Hon DARREN WEST: Honourable member —

Several members interjected.

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The PRESIDENT: Order, members! If somebody feels they have been misquoted, there is an opportunity within the standing orders for people to ask that something be done about it, but I think the contention here is that somebody else was misquoted. If that is the case, other members have the opportunity to say it when they rise to speak.

Hon DARREN WEST: Thank you, Mr President. Honourable member, I will certainly check exactly what was said in *Hansard*, but I think I will find that I am not incorrect in my assessment of what the minister said. He said it would be nice.

Hon Simon O'Brien: Every time you get to your feet you're a disgrace.

Hon DARREN WEST: Everyone is entitled to their opinion, honourable member. I accept that Hon Simon O'Brien has an opinion of me and I am not concerned at all about that opinion of me, but I did not think a person of his experience who has been in Parliament as long as he has would resort to such language, but it is his prerogative.

As I was saying, I think it is a bit easy for government ministers to say that communities having access to a basic human right would be nice—that is, drinking water of a quality and standard that bodies such as the World Health Organization expect. The fact is that many, many of our communities—I will get to the Auditor General's report later—do not have access to safe, fresh drinking water. That is what this motion seeks to address and I hope that members opposite can accept the fact that we are talking about a motion and that we would all like to see improvement in this area, but more than just token improvement and more than the government just saying it is a bit hard and that it might close the communities because it is unable to see its way clear. We want more than the government saying that it has funded plenty of projects and done plenty of things, but it cannot see its way clear to fund a basic service to everybody.

Hon Paul Brown: I thought the motion said “all Indigenous communities”, not “many”. I thought it said “all Indigenous communities throughout the Mining and Pastoral Region”.

Hon Sue Ellery: Are you going to make a speech too?

Hon DARREN WEST: Absolutely; I look forward to being corrected in the formal manner, member.

Members may recall the time in the early 2000s—I think it went back earlier, but certainly in the early 2000s—when the then member for Pilbara, Larry Graham, was hell-bent on finding a way to set aside an amount of mining royalties to fund projects and services in the north. The argument at that time was that given that the Pilbara in particular was producing much of these royalties, a certain amount should go back there. There was certainly sympathy for that argument. That was then followed up by the member for Victoria Park, Ben Wyatt, who, when he entered Parliament, wrote an excellent discussion paper that I still refer to often. That paper extended that idea and called for a section of mining royalties to be spent in remote Aboriginal communities. From that the regional investment fund evolved and then the royalties for regions program, which is a good program, although poorly managed, and we supported that legislation in 2009. The concept of taking a percentage or a bucket of money, for want of another phrase, from mining royalties to spend on remote Aboriginal communities is nothing new; it just has not happened.

As I said earlier in my contribution, I think governments further back than this one can perhaps shoulder some of the blame for that. Given that the concept was first generated in 2006 or thereabouts and the government changed in 2008, there was perhaps a short window of opportunity for the previous government to take some steps in this direction, but there certainly has been a greater opportunity for this government to have done something in the last seven years about drinking water in remote Aboriginal communities. The current government had the opportunity to step up to the plate and say it had the capacity to fund this when it looked like funding for those communities from the commonwealth was under some sort of threat. The government could have said it had a regional program with money that was not always spent by the department and so it could step up and make some of these drinking water supplies safe, at the very least. That would have been a better course of action. Some of this could have been done on a very small scale and reasonably cheaply through a small treatment facility and another tank. On a larger scale it would be more expensive, but this government certainly has the capacity, the funding mechanism and the scheme in legislation to be able to do this. However, it has chosen not to and I do not understand why. Closing the communities is the easy way out.

The other thing I refer members to is a press release from Ben Wyatt that came out a week after the one from the Leader of the Opposition that I quoted earlier. For those who are not aware, Ben Wyatt is an Indigenous man who is the shadow Treasurer and the member for Victoria Park. The press release is titled “Auditor General slams Barnett's management of remote Aboriginal communities”. It goes on to discuss the Auditor General's

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report, which I will get to later in my contribution. The take-home message that Ben Wyatt, member for Victoria Park, wishes to give is —

- New report finds Barnett Government failed in provision of services to remote Aboriginal communities
- Department of Housing fails basic management and accountability measures
- Barnett Government must stop blaming Aboriginal people and take responsibility for its own failures

Ain't that the truth. That is exactly the view from members of those remote Aboriginal communities and many of the organisations that represent those communities: the government is ready to blame everybody but itself for the lack of provision of services. I note from the agriculture minister's contribution that there are issues from time to time. When he made his contribution earlier he talked about putting a square-mouth shovel through the floor of the liner, I presume, of a tank and the measures that could be taken to fix that. There will be issues and outages from time to time, but the fact is that many of these communities do not have fresh, clean drinking water in the first place to fix the tank, because the water is substandard and fails health tests.

In the press release, Ben Wyatt went on to state what the Auditor General found, and I will go into more detail on that. Ben Wyatt is quoted as saying —

“This report shows the Government has done a terrible job at managing services to these communities and it must take responsibility for its own failures.

“It shows the Aboriginal people are being blamed for the Government's failure to do its job.

How easy is that? The press release continues —

“Mr Barnett declared that many of these communities had failed and has constantly tried to place the blame on the Aboriginal people. This report shows he has failed to get his own house in order and has failed in its provision of service to these communities.

“The Government has failed to get the basics right. It doesn't even know which communities should be involved in the program or how much its own assets are worth.

There clearly has been a lack of priority placed on this by the government, a lack of care and, above all else, a lack of responsibility. Being in government comes with a certain level of responsibility, and I think the provision of basic services such as fresh, clean drinking water for all Western Australians, no matter where they live, would be somewhere near the top of a government's priorities, but it appears not to be.

Ben Wyatt's press release continues —

“My message to the Barnett Government is simple—get your own house in order before you go around critiquing Aboriginal people living in remote communities.”

They are fairly strong words, but I think they are warranted because the evidence before us, when I get to the Auditor General's report, certainly backs up and validates those statements.

The government has failed. I think it is time that was accepted. Then the question becomes: what is next?

I also refer to an article by Phoebe Wearne in *The West Australian* on 7 May 2015, around about the time the Auditor General's report was tabled, entitled “Remote water area fails quality test”, which states —

The State Government has failed thousands of Aboriginal people by not delivering safe water to dozens of remote communities, WA's peak Aboriginal health body says.

An Auditor-General's report into power, water and wastewater services to 84 remote WA communities found drinking water at 68 failed to meet Australian standards.

So the water quality in 68 communities, according to this article, failed to meet Australian standards. The article continues —

At least one community failed a drinking water quality test every month in the two years to June 2014 because it had E. Coli bacteria or Naegleria microbes, which can both cause fatal illnesses.

Two communities had levels of nitrates deemed dangerous for adults and four exceeded safe levels of uranium in their water.

Auditor-General Colin Murphy, who visited 27 remote communities for the audit, said power and water supplies to the communities were generally reliable.

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Drinking water quality was by far the biggest concern.

“In every month of the two-year period that we looked at, at least one community failed to reach Australian standards,” Mr Murphy said.

“The risks are really high. These are not minor issues of taste or cloudiness. There are actually serious health risks.”

Aboriginal Health Council of WA chairwoman Michelle Nelson-Cox said the report was a damning assessment of the Government’s performance in looking after people.

Is it not of the people, for the people and by the people? Apparently it is not. The article continues —

She said many West Australians were led to believe problems in Aboriginal communities could be solved only by closing them but the report suggested the biggest danger to health in them was the water the Government had to provide.

I refer again to the five key planks in the Minister for Child Protection’s ministerial statement: that children are safe and nurtured; that children receive a quality education; that young people have a pathway to employment and adults are meaningfully occupied; that links to culture, country and kin are maintained; and that at the end of this process communities have a surety about their future. The Auditor General disagrees, and so does the Aboriginal Health Council of WA chairwoman. The article continues —

“The State Government is obligated to provide and maintain safe drinking water to Aboriginal communities but has failed in this very basic task,” Ms Nelson-Cox said.

The report, which comes as the Government formulates a plan for WA’s 274 remote communities, also uncovered poor oversight and co-ordination of a Department of Housing program that opened it up to overpaying for services.

“Poor contracting —

We have talked about this before —

means Housing is not getting full value from the program manager and its \$1 million-a-year fee,” the report said.

Housing Minister Colin Holt said his department accepted the findings and would implement the report’s recommendations as part of the transition when Federal funding for municipal and essential services ran out on June 30.

He said water quality had improved in some communities and was tested monthly with bottled water provided when required.

That is okay, because when people drink bottled water it will be safe, provided it has not been out in the sun and opened. But what about the water that is, for instance, running down drains, on ovals or sprayed around? There is still unsafe water in those communities. The article continues —

He said the report highlighted difficulties in providing services to such remote areas and long-term reforms were needed.

I think that this all points to an attitude that it is a bit too hard for the government and that we might close down the communities instead. That is what I interpret from reading that article and from the minister’s response. I look forward to the minister being here next week, and I might point out this article to him and see what he has to say about that.

That now brings me to the Auditor General’s report, which I am sure many members have looked at. But before I do that I point out that all this happened when the state was booming like never before, during the once in a generation—probably even less regularly than that; the once in history perhaps, but hopefully not—mining boom, when the state was awash with money, yet somehow we still managed to lose the state’s AAA credit rating and plunge the state into record deficit and debt. This all occurred at a time when record royalties and record income were coming into the state—the state was awash with money and booming—yet we could not find it in our charter, our mantra, or at least in our hearts, to deal with unsafe drinking water in 68 of the 84 communities that were looked into in this report. That is another failing of the government. It is not as though we were facing times as we are now, when the money has gone and we do not want to talk about it; when the state is facing a \$2.7 billion deficit and will be facing a \$36 billion debt at the time the people have their say on the government’s performance. It is not as though we have been through tough times over the last seven years; there has been money, but all of it has been spent on the government’s priorities. The government’s priorities have included a sports stadium that most people in remote Aboriginal communities will never come and see and most people in regional areas will never come and use. The government’s priorities have included Elizabeth Quay that most people in regional areas will never come and use and certainly most people in remote

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Aboriginal communities will never see. The government's priorities are more about those projects than they are about the basic human right of providing safe drinking water in remote communities.

We have had the boom of all booms. We have had money thrown around on all kinds of projects, both in the city and in the regions. We have more sport centres than ever before. We have all these projects that are worthy projects in their own right, but certainly, in my mind, they are not as big a priority as providing safe drinking water in all communities for everybody, not just for those living in country towns, the city, outer metropolitan areas or regional centres—I mean everybody, including those living in remote Aboriginal communities. Choosing to live in Aboriginal communities is not a lifestyle choice. It is where people live; it is country; and cultural links go back 40 000 years. I want to correct what the Minister for Agriculture and Food said and say that many of those people settled in the locations where they are now, not in 1991, as the minister suggested, over 40 000 years ago, and more than 1 000 generations of people of the same culture and blood have lived on that country, so we should at the very least provide them with basic human services.

I turn to the Auditor General's report and the accompanying documents, including his media release, which reads —

AUDITOR GENERAL FINDS IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED TO PROGRAM WHICH DELIVERS ESSENTIAL SERVICES TO REMOTE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

The Auditor General has tabled a report into the delivery of power, water and wastewater services to 84 remote Aboriginal communities and found that while power and water service were reliable, drinking water quality often falls short of Australian standards.

From that I read that the services are there, they are generally reliable, the infrastructure is there, but it is just the actual water that comes out of the tap that is missing. So we have fallen at the final hurdle; we have failed to either filter or treat drinking water to a standard expected in the western world. The press release continues —

Today's report focused specifically on the Remote Area Essential Services Program and the 84 communities across the Kimberley, Pilbara and Goldfields that it covers.

I note that other communities were not investigated, so even more than 68 communities could have been found. For instance, no reference is made to the Gascoyne or midwest region, in which Aboriginal communities can also be found. It goes on to state —

“We visited 27 remote communities as part of this audit, and can appreciate how their remoteness directly affects the complexity and cost of supporting them,” ...

We can all do that. I will hand that to the government; there are some issues around the distances and the remoteness and some difficulty in accessing many of the communities. Nonetheless, we live in a wealthy society and money has been washing over the state for the past seven years, so I think this should have been a priority before now.

Hon Jim Chown: Were those communities operating more than seven years ago?

Hon DARREN WEST: That is something that I cannot tell Hon Jim Chown. I look forward to his contribution; perhaps he can correct the record. When he bounces to his feet after I have finished, he will be able to correct the record on that, because clearly he has a little more knowledge than I do of how long many of these communities have been in existence, so I look forward to being furnished with that information at the end of my remaining 15 minutes.

I will return to the Auditor General's media release.

Several members interjected.

Hon DARREN WEST: I am quoting much of it, Hon Dave Grills, from the Auditor General's report. If he is suggesting that the Auditor General's report is not factual, I think there might be a bit of an issue with that. If he wants to get up and put on the record that he thinks that much of the Auditor General's report is incorrect and that much of what I am quoting is not factual, I would welcome that. But I do not think he will do that.

Several members interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Liz Behjat): Order! Hon Darren West has the call.

Hon DARREN WEST: I am sorry if I have picked out the wrong member, but I thought I heard someone say that it was not factual either.

Hon Paul Brown: I'm quite happy to take credit for it; that's okay.

Hon DARREN WEST: Either way, whoever made the comment, I would welcome —

Several members interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Order! If the member on his feet did not invite the interjections, there would be no conjecture about who made the interjection.

Hon DARREN WEST: I make the point that if anyone is suggesting that the Auditor General's report is incorrect, that would be good information to have on the public record. It would be welcomed on the public record that a member of the Legislative Council thought that the Auditor General got it wrong. I look forward to that. I do not expect to hear that, but if someone feels strongly enough and wishes to take credit for that comment, may they get up and say their piece, because there is plenty of time left in this debate to do so.

Several members interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Order! Hon Darren West is the only one with the call. If those members who are interjecting have not made a contribution thus far, they can get the call afterwards.

Hon DARREN WEST: I return to the Auditor General's media release. It states —

“However, there are clear opportunities for improving this Program that should be addressed in the short term.”

I know that the minister, Hon Col Holt, is away on urgent parliamentary business, but I look forward at the next sitting of the house when he continues his remarks to hearing about the government's plans, if indeed there are any, for how these clear opportunities to improve this program can be addressed in the short term. I look forward to the minister outlining for us very clearly in his remaining time what the government will do about this, because ultimately this is all about the result. Yes, we are critical of the government for failing to act in this area. The Auditor General supports that critique and criticism of the Liberal–National government's failure to act, and many others also support that critique and criticism. I look forward to seeing the solution. The problem has been clearly pointed out by both the opposition and the Auditor General, and by Aboriginal groups, but we are now focused on what might be the solution to this problem. I certainly look forward to a good outcome from this government, but I will wait and see. The media release goes on —

“For example, Housing could improve its delivery of services to these communities through better coordination, both internally and with other agencies that are also working in these communities.”

“I also recommended that Housing should improve water quality and take steps to ensure that Service Providers' testing of wastewater systems complies with contractual requirements, and I'm pleased to see that Housing has already acted on the second recommendation.”

It seems that the Department of Housing has pulled the contractors into line and is making sure that they are doing what they are paid to do, presumably, and are meeting their contractual requirements. That is a good start. That is for wastewater. I certainly look forward to seeing what actions the minister will take on providing clean, safe drinking water and water going into the premises. The media release continues —

“What may take more time is my recommendation for Housing to clarify with government the roles and responsibilities for essential services previously provided by the Commonwealth to remote Aboriginal communities, both those inside and not within the Program.”

We get back to this question again. Last week the Premier categorically refused to rule out the closure of communities. I fear that, rather than picking up the challenge and making the communities right and providing safe drinking water, this government will just close them down because it is easier.

The Auditor General's report “Delivering Essential Services to Remote Aboriginal Communities” is available on the website. It goes on and on. I have a copy of the report with me and I will read through the key findings of the Auditor General's report, which I will need to move to because I am quickly running out of time.

Hon Helen Morton: When are you going to start saying something?

Hon Simon O'Brien: Would you like to seek an extension? We'll all give it serious consideration.

Hon Helen Morton: You've got 10 minutes left and you've said nothing so far.

Hon Sue Ellery: Really? If you want, let's go have a cup of tea or something.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Order! The member's time was still running then, so show him the courtesy of letting him finish his 10 minutes.

Hon DARREN WEST: I think the last 30 seconds typifies one of the failings of this government. Even the Auditor General's report is not enough to say that the government has got this wrong and it needs to change its approach. Even a report from the Office of the Auditor General of Western Australia is not enough for this

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government to say that maybe it had better have another look at the way it is doing business, rather than taking its “We know best, we’re born to rule, we’ll do as we damn well like and we don’t really care what anyone thinks” approach. I think the last exchange across the chamber points that out loudly and clearly to everyone. I know that our Hansard reporters do a wonderful job at capturing what is said in Parliament, so I look forward to reading that exchange in *Hansard*.

Hon Jim Chown: You’re the only one who does.

Hon DARREN WEST: I look forward to reading Hon Jim Chown’s contribution. I recently read his inaugural speech. What a fine speech it was.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Order! Let us stay focused on the motion at hand.

Hon DARREN WEST: I will return to the key findings in the Auditor General’s report, which I know will not make easy listening for members opposite. The report states —

The supply of water and power to communities is generally reliable. On average, interruptions to community power and water services have occurred twice a year since July 2011, which is similar to services provided in cities and towns. Service Providers respond to around 90 per cent of service disruptions within 24 hours, exceeding their minimum contract targets of 75 per cent.

In terms of providing water, we are okay. It continues —

Drinking water quality often does not meet Australian standards:

This is the second paragraph of the key findings in the report. The three dot points that I think are very significant state —

- 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.

It is therefore not happy reading. In a First World country, which is one of the richest jurisdictions per capita in the world, a report like this comes down. The report continues —

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.

Although we are focused on safe drinking water going into a house, we also need to be mindful while we are at it of the water coming out of the house. The report continues —

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.

It goes on to refer to the poor contracting arrangements. We have perhaps talked more about Homeswest maintenance contracting, but I think we are all familiar with poor contracting arrangements. The arrangements have become a bit of a “blame everybody but me” set of circumstances with double handling and confusion between the department, the tenant and the contractor, which we talked about before.

The report goes on to refer to the context of the audit focus and scope. I do not have time to go into great detail on that aspect but members opposite can find the report on the Office of the Auditor General website. The Auditor General’s conclusion is significant. It 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 ... 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

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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.

I think that is all code for “asleep at the wheel”. The department is not really keeping up its end of the bargain and not servicing the requirements of many of these communities.

Finally, the Office of the Auditor General provided us with a briefing on the report, and I will touch briefly on some of the points that I have not already mentioned in my speech. I thought it was important to get to the audit conclusions and the findings before I ran out of time, so I will refer to a couple of other key points. By way of background, the Remote Area Essential Services program covers 84 communities, and there is a map of them in the report. Communities vary from single families to around 600, and populations fluctuate. Repair and maintenance of power, water and wastewater services cost \$30 million in 2014–15. That is quite a lot of money. The commonwealth funded capital works, fuel and municipal services at a cost of \$28.5 million in 2014–15, and that will cease in June 2016.

The big question is: what will happen to those communities? It is significant that as early as two weeks ago the Premier failed to categorically rule out closure of those communities. That is the discussion that this government needs to have—I could go on and on with this report, but I have only a few minutes left—to give some certainty to members of those communities. Some communities are quite large, as was pointed out, and some are quite small. It may be that there will be a natural attrition in some of those communities and that some members of those communities will choose to leave of their own undertaking and not be forced out. However, it is not helpful to have this threat of closure hanging over the communities in which people live. As I said, it is not a lifestyle choice. People can live wherever they like as far as I am concerned, and we should be providing services to them all. I am starting to struggle here a bit, Madam Acting President.

Several members interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Liz Behjat): Order! The member is having difficulty with his throat and his voice at the moment. It was not an invitation for members.

Hon DARREN WEST: That small rest was very helpful; thank you, Madam Acting President.

I have touched on the focus and scope of the report. There are some statistics and some graphs in the report that members can check for themselves. However, essentially this is a damning report. The Auditor General of the state has deemed that the government is not doing its job and that people in 68 communities are drinking unsafe water. That is why it is a very important motion that Hon Stephen Dawson has brought before the house. He brought it before the house, I note, two years ago when it was listed as a motion worthy of discussion. It is still as true today as it was two years ago. I note that Hon Stephen Dawson may have been somewhat prophetic when he foreshadowed this Auditor General’s report coming into Parliament two years —

Hon Helen Morton: Did you say “prophetic” or “pathetic”? I couldn’t hear.

Hon DARREN WEST: I said “prophetic”.

Hon Sue Ellery: If you want to see the definition of that, look in the mirror!

Hon DARREN WEST: Yes! Ha, ha!

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order!

Several members interjected.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order, on both sides! Hon Darren West has one minute and 19 seconds to go.

Hon DARREN WEST: Yes, “prophetic” as in predicted.

Hon Stephen Dawson foresaw a problem two years before the Auditor General wrote his report. It is a good result from a new member of Parliament who went out, saw what was happening in his electorate and understood what was going on. It was an issue about which members opposite, after four years in government, had no idea. Two years later, the Auditor General said as a matter of fact that Hon Stephen Dawson was right and that not enough had been done to rectify the situation by providing safe drinking water for all Western Australians in remote Aboriginal communities.

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It is probably time that the government did something about this. It is time that some funds from royalties for regions, or one of those funding avenues that the government has at its disposal, went to those communities to lift the quality and standard of drinking water in those communities, because it is important. It is a basic human right. This is a First World country and we should be doing better. We will do better once there is a change of government. However, this government has another two years to do something about this and I look forward to seeing some significant changes over the next two years.

HON JACQUI BOYDELL (Mining and Pastoral) [2.37 pm]: I thank Hon Stephen Dawson for bringing the motion to the house. It is an important motion to the electorate of the Mining and Pastoral Region that we both share. It also gives us an opportunity to talk about some of the support mechanisms that this government has actually provided to remote Aboriginal communities. It also gives us the opportunity to talk about some of the struggles there—there is no doubt about that.

Hon Darren West made quite a few comments. One was that in government there is a level of responsibility to act to support the people we represent. That responsibility also lies in opposition. There is a responsibility in opposition to bring to the house legitimate, responsible argument, and there is a responsibility on Hon Darren West as a member of the opposition to hold government accountable. Absolutely he should do that and I welcome that, but he should do that with some degree of fact and honesty. There is so much he has missed in this remote community argument that it is hard to plug all the holes in his speech about it. It is clear that he has not followed the debate on this issue. I can tell him that royalties for regions money is going into remote Indigenous communities. There is \$150 million in the regional reform agenda, and money prior to that has gone into remote Indigenous communities. There is only one reason that it is now an issue for Hon Darren West. He referred to a time prior to 2006 and the discussion on royalties for regions when the National Party brought that policy to a state conference. The reason that it is now an issue for Hon Darren West is that he thought it was a good idea at the time and he might have had a discussion about royalties from regional communities being returned to those communities. I applaud that conversation, but he never had the guts to do it. This government has had the guts to do it since 2008. The only reason it is important for the member now is that he is using it as a political football. I think that is disgraceful. I have said before in this house that the member is the only person I know who continues to use the language of the remote community closure argument. What he is doing is actually to the detriment of Aboriginal people who are on board with the regional reform agenda.

Hon Darren West: That is what the motion is about; it is about water.

Hon JACQUI BOYDELL: Exactly. The member is missing the point when he continues to harp on about the statement around the five points that were important on the regional reform agenda not covering water. I am sorry, but they do because water is an essential to ensure that we improve peoples' quality of life. To belittle that statement or the facts stated by the government about what is important for the remote reform agenda is shameful; shame on the member for bringing that to this house because that is one of the most —

Several members interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Liz Behjat): Order! The member on her feet made no interjections during anybody else's contribution. I have been listening very closely since I took the chair. Would other members on both sides of the house give her the courtesy of letting her make her contribution without interjection.

Hon JACQUI BOYDELL: Thank you, Madam Acting President. Aboriginal leaders and people who live in those communities want to take part in addressing the risks and in the ownership of managing the royalties for regions program and the regional reform agenda for Aboriginal communities. Everybody I have spoken to about that in those remote communities agrees that they do not want the status quo to continue. We are acting on what the people in those communities want to see occur. In all my experience dealing with the Aboriginal people and remote communities, it is the first time that I have seen a joint, combined effort of government and that leadership, and the people in those communities wanting to enforce change for the people who live there. This is a unique time for them to do that. The supply of better quality water to those communities is one way that we can do that. Of course it is included in the agenda; I would have thought that goes without saying, but clearly not. Although the motion refers to the Mining and Pastoral Region, I know that every member of this house agrees that people who live in Western Australia deserve a quality water supply. We all agree in principle that, as members of government and opposition, we support that. However, the argument itself needs to have some context around geography and infrastructure, and communities themselves. Hopefully, I will bring some balance back to the argument this afternoon by exploring some of the challenges that were raised by other members of the house quite legitimately.

I think we all agree that it is our responsibility to work hard to ensure that government implements the necessary reforms in this area, not only for water, but also for remote community reform in general. I welcome that because we are here to improve the living standards of all Western Australians. The debate so far, particularly

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the contributions last week by Hon Stephen Dawson and the Minister for Housing, Hon Col Holt, who is currently absent from the chamber on parliamentary business, were varied and insightful. I think they created good debate in this area and I look forward to the Minister for Housing's continued contribution when he returns from urgent parliamentary business. When he moved the motion in the house, Hon Stephen Dawson referred extensively to the Auditor General's report into the delivery of essential services to remote Aboriginal communities, which was issued in May this year. The report provides a performance review, I guess, of how well the Department of Housing delivers power, water, wastewater, and repair and maintenance services to select remote Aboriginal communities through the remote areas essential services program.

I will take a moment to discuss some of the report's findings; members have mentioned many of the findings today and last week, which highlight the opportunities to make improvements within that system. Firstly, I note that the Auditor General found that the supply—we are talking about the supply of water and power to communities—is generally reliable. I think that is important to note because, in the vast majority of cases, services were being administered as required. As my colleague the Minister for Housing, Hon Col Holt, pointed out in his reply to the house last week, if services were not being delivered as required and people did not have access to an adequate supply of drinking water, they would not be living in those communities. That simply has not occurred; people are living in those communities and they are happy to continue to do so. It is important to note that point in this discussion. The fact is that this government has delivered good outcomes for Aboriginal communities and towns. Unfortunately, the vastness of the state provides some unique challenges and the system sometimes fails—absolutely, there is no doubt about that, especially in the context of supplying water to small communities. Water supply is often affected by fluctuating occupancy levels in those communities and local water sources are often poor. Sometimes the number of people in those communities fluctuates when people visit them for cultural and legal activities; they might not visit there for 12 months and then return for a short period. Yes, it is a struggle. How can any government continue to make sure that infrastructure is in place in a community where there might be 50 people for a period of six weeks in every 12 months? Indeed, there are a range of challenges in providing drinking water to some Aboriginal communities, and the Auditor General acknowledged in his report that the remoteness of communities directly affects the cost of supporting them.

Other challenges extend beyond infrastructure and are unavoidable, such as groundwater quality, which has been discussed in the house previously. It is also important to note that the Housing Authority is not responsible for every Aboriginal community in WA. Rather, it is responsible for the delivery of the remote areas essential services program that was the focus of the Auditor General's report. I think it is good to have some clarity around that. The remote areas essential services program now has an asset value of about \$760 million across those Aboriginal communities, which are the communities that the state government is responsible for. Those communities received significant investment into essential services throughout the duration of that program. Many people who live in those communities are thankful for that and would tell members that that is definitely the case. Despite some of the challenges that members have talked about in their contributions and that I have cited in my contribution today, this government has made major progress in the provision of essential services to remote communities within my electorate, the Mining and Pastoral Region. There has been continuous improvement in water quality through upgrades to water treatment systems in those communities. Between 2010 and 2013 in particular, the Water Corporation provided infill water and wastewater services to six Aboriginal town-based reserve communities.

There have been other infrastructure upgrades, such as the provision of smart meters, which those communities asked for, waterwise education initiatives, and education and engagement on billing and debt management. The reality is that strategic and long-term reform is required to address the disparity between the living standards of Aboriginal people in remote locations and those of the rest of the community. That has absolutely been identified, addressed, talked about and commented on. We acknowledge that as a government. That is why there has to be reform in that remote community space. The people who live in those remote communities agree with that. They want to take ownership of it and they want some direction in changing the landscape in which they live. That is why, in listening to that argument, this government earlier this year announced the regional services reform program with the aim of providing more efficient and well-coordinated services to Aboriginal communities.

Hon Stephen Dawson interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon JACQUI BOYDELL: We cannot ignore the fact that people living in those Aboriginal communities want reform. We can continue to play the blame game and say, "He said" or "She said" but we cannot ignore the fact that the people who live in those communities want to take ownership of the problem. They want change from the status quo. Water supply services to those remote communities is a given. I thought that would go without saying. It is part of the regional services reform program. I am very proud of this government's action in that space. I am glad that the honourable member mentioned the media statement from the ministers involved in that

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program. The reform of that agenda has been an exciting time for Aboriginal people and their communities. If we take the time to meet with those people, we see that they feel some level of excitement and they want to see some change. Therefore, we have to deliver on those reforms. Those reforms are aimed at ensuring that investment in services is effective and provides the best chance for outcomes for the people who live there. There is no doubt that the provision of water is an integral part of that program. The sustainable provision of essential services to remote communities continues to be a major challenge facing federal and state governments, regardless of political orientation. It is a challenge because of remoteness, the natural environment and some of the issues that we are dealing with in those communities. Because it is a challenge does not mean that the government should ignore the community to make some change in that area. That is what this government is doing through that reform agenda.

I guess we could argue that the rationalisation of services is occurring. I think that is what members of the opposition are trying to argue. One of the quotes I heard today was that it is about funding. It is not about funding; it is about trying to find and provide a better way for people to live in remote Aboriginal communities. The provision of water services is definitely one of those areas. It is a conversation that we need to have and sometimes, as leaders of communities, we have to have uncomfortable conversations. I am sure that there will be many more of those to come but with the outcome being some change to the status quo.

I will conclude my remarks today by stating that I do not support the motion. I support the government's regional reform agenda. Some real tangible movement in that space is seeing realistic and real engagement with Aboriginal people in their communities. I look forward to it being rolled out. It is supported by some really serious funding through the royalties for regions program—\$150 million at the moment. In concluding my remarks, I want to emphasise that the provision of safe drinking water to Indigenous communities is a priority of this government and it will remain a priority through the reform process. For the most part, as I have said today, we have been successful in delivering a reliable supply of drinking water to most communities. It is incumbent upon us as members of the government to continue to work hard to improve those services, and of course it forms one part of the overall picture of the regional reform agenda. I look forward to seeing that roll out and I look forward to the people who live in those Aboriginal communities and their families seeing some real change in the lives that they are leading. I thank the member for bringing the motion to the house. It is an important motion. I look forward to further contributions.

HON ROBIN CHAPPLE (Mining and Pastoral) [2.56 pm]: I again thank Hon Stephen Dawson for moving the motion. Having lived and worked in those remote communities over many years, maybe even generations, and having been with the person who put the water bore in at Kintore many, many years ago, I know that water has always been a significant problem in remote communities because of either the method of supply or the standard of water. I am reminded at many places that I have been to that the water bores were literally pumping out of the ground non-stop in the early days. At a place called Ilbilba we visited the water bore of a community as part of our maintenance program and found the whole valley full of water because the windmill had been going and there was no management of the water facility, so the valley had literally filled up with water. On other occasions, the provision of water was very, very limited and very restricted. In some locations in the early days, we used a classic railway donkey pump, which involved a water bore and a two-handled process for the provision of water. In the main, most communities now have dedicated water supplies. Unfortunately, in some of them, the structure of the location of those water supplies has not been done very efficiently because of the closeness to sewage farms and the like.

The Auditor General report titled “Delivering Essential Services to Remote Aboriginal Communities”, dated May 2015, identified that about 15 per cent of the state's Aboriginal population, or about 11 400 people, lived in 274 remote communities across WA. Three-quarters of those communities were permanent, with the rest seasonally or occasionally occupied. An agreement between the commonwealth, the state and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission to provide housing services to eligible Aboriginal communities was signed in December 1997. These services include the provision of power, water and sewerage under the state-funded remote areas essential services program. Housing began managing the program on 1 January 1999, and provides drinking water to 91 remote communities. This comes from the Department of Health's paper titled “Drinking water in Western Australia”. Part of the program involves maintaining and monitoring water quality according to the “Australian Drinking Water Guidelines”, as required by the Department of Health. Drinking water is sampled monthly by service providers who are contracted by the Department of Housing.

As we know from a recent WA Auditor General report, the quality of drinking water often falls short of Australian standards. I am mindful that about three or four years ago—I think it was in Bangor—with the help of a local mining company, a water filtration system was placed in that community to remove the high level levels of uranium. One of the problems we have is that through the area south of Newman down towards Kalgoorlie across to Cosmo Newbery and over towards Pia, the ground system has high levels of uranium due to the very

nature of the erosion of the continent over the past 15 billion years. We have ended up with a very high level of uranium going through that area. As we know, uranium is soluble in water, so we need to manage those areas significantly to ensure that uranium does not get into the water column. Most of that area is what we call calcrete and in places such as Nowthanna, the uranium is visible on the surface; it is not even underground. The uranium gets there by transmission in water, so the uranium in the water column is quite a common occurrence in not only remote Aboriginal communities, but also a number of the larger communities in those areas.

The Auditor General's report identified that uranium was a problem. Tests detected either *E. coli* or *naegleria* microbes in at least one community in every month in the two years to June 2014. In 2014, 14 communities recorded nitrates above the safe level for bottle-fed babies under three months of age. One of the recommendations of the audit was that by December 2015, the Department of Housing should have determined how to improve water quality in remote communities to meet Australian drinking water guidelines. We know that many of the communities, through the operation of health, provide bottled water to juveniles, young children and pregnant women in the community. One wonders about the economics of continuing to provide bottled water to those communities as opposed to fixing the substantive problem of *E. coli*, uranium and heavy metals in the water. Some of the work that Dr Randy Spargo has done in remote communities in the past 30 years to ensure that the communities have proper water supplies is to be commended. It is unfortunate that Dr Randy Spargo recently had to leave Jigalong and is no longer operating there, which is a shame to many of the communities to which he provided an incredible service. Quite clearly, it is important that the provision of water through the original agreement established by the state and federal governments in December 1997 be maintained by the government.

The Australian government's National Health and Medical Research Council identifies that the greatest risk to consumers of drinking water are pathogenic microorganisms. The council promotes the following Australian drinking water guidelines —

Protection of water sources and treatment are of paramount importance and must never be compromised.

Disinfection is the single process that has had the greatest impact on drinking water safety.

...

Disinfection will kill all bacterial pathogens and greatly reduce numbers of viral and most protozoan pathogens. Combined with protection of water sources from human and livestock waste, disinfection can ensure safe drinking water.

... disinfection can ensure safe drinking water. ... All waterborne disease outbreaks are avoidable.

It makes a number of points about the delivery of essential services to remote Aboriginal communities. The provision of safe drinking water, in my view, should be paramount. The "Australian Drinking Water Guidelines" state —

In Western Australia, drinking water quality management is a shared responsibility between the Water and Rivers Commission (WRC) and the Water Corporation of Western Australia (WCWA). The WRC is responsible for administration of catchment and source protection legislation; the WCWA is the major licensed drinking water supplier responsible for the collection, treatment and distribution of drinking water to consumers. Other key agencies in the supply of drinking water are the regulators, including the health authority, which provides interpretation and guidance on potential health impacts of drinking water quality.

A variation to application of the Framework that is proposed by Western Australia is to apply the Framework at the state level using a whole-of-government approach, with each agency responsible for implementing the Framework within its areas of control and consulting with relevant partnership agencies. This approach requires a high level of commitment by all agencies, clear definition of accountabilities and responsibilities within the Framework, and increased communication and coordination of planning and management activities.

At this point I highlight that one of the fundamental problems in remote communities is the lack of coordination. I have been repeatedly told that on many occasions an agency will go to a remote community to do some work on, say, a bore or a pipeline—it happens to be a contractor that is doing the plumbing or that sort of work—only to find that the electrical components of the plant need isolating or fixing. That individual contractor then returns 1 000-odd kilometres back to the regional centre, and the following day an electrician or someone such as that goes out to do that individual component.

Hon Peter Collier: Where's this?

Extract from *Hansard*

[COUNCIL — Wednesday, 23 September 2015]

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Hon ROBIN CHAPPLE: This has been at Kunawarritji, Kiwirrkurra, Parnngurr, Tjuntjuntjara—a whole range of places.

This happens in other areas, too—for example, in plumbing and in health. I am mindful of some houses being fitted out at one of the communities. The plumbers did the sewerage and the visitors came to use the houses.

Debate adjourned, pursuant to temporary orders.