

OLD THEATRE LANE, CLAREMONT

Grievance

DR D.J. HONEY (Cottesloe) [10.02 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Energy and I thank the minister very much for taking it. My grievance relates to an extended power outage that occurred in Old Theatre Lane, Claremont, on Tuesday, 18 June 2019, which lasted almost 30 hours and left numerous local businesses significantly out of pocket.

Old Theatre Lane is a picturesque shopping precinct in Claremont, and is home to approximately a dozen family owned and operated small businesses. These small businesses include a barber, jewellery store, bakery, optometrist, cafe, bookshop, travel agent and dentist, among others. Other surrounding businesses affected by the outage include the local pet store and a yoga studio.

As the minister would be aware, in this current economic environment small businesses in Western Australia are doing it very tough and need all the help they can get to stay afloat. This is why I was disturbed when I learnt that an underground cable fault, which originally occurred at approximately 11.00 am on Tuesday, 18 June, took Western Power until 3.00 pm the following day to repair. That is some 28 hours, over two trading days, during which these small and family operated businesses were unable to operate.

I was lucky enough to be joined by our new federal member for Curtin, Celia Hammond, when I visited the affected businesses during the outage. Celia and I took this opportunity to talk with local business owners, who were all extremely concerned over the trade they were losing as each hour passed. As the minister can imagine, employees and customers also suffered considerable disruption as a result of the outage. One of the most concerning examples relates to the losses and disruption suffered by the wholesale bakery. The entire contents of the bakery's fridge were lost, extra costs were incurred in the clean-up and disposal of the goods, and produce that had already been put into equipment was lost. The bakery lost a day's trade on Tuesday and Wednesday and the bakers had to work excess overtime hours on Wednesday in order to fill the Thursday deliveries. In the meantime, the bakery's small business customers had to seek alternative supplies or also lose customers and business. As the minister can imagine, this is a challenging scenario for any small business and more so for owner-operated businesses.

Another example is that the local pet store. Staff had to physically wedge open a powered door, simply to gain access to their pets so they could be fed and watered, which, fortunately, they were able to do. The store also suffered significant pet food spoilage and so had similar issues to those I mentioned experienced by the bakery. I might say that staff were taking exotic pet food back to their homes to try to preserve it.

The local yoga studio had to turn away 40 customers over the two-day period. The jewellers' security system failed due to the repair work taking so long that the battery backup failed, and staff had to remain on the premises to protect the shop.

The upstairs dental practice was also a concerning case. It had patients attending all the way from Yallingup and Bunbury, who were unable to undergo their procedures due to the outage. One can just imagine a patient coming all the way from Yallingup to Perth, only to be told they cannot undergo their operation due to a power outage that had lasted two days. Just as concerning, and something that I doubt many members would realise, is that many dental preparations have to be stored at four degrees Celsius or below. With the failure of the fridges, the preparations went above that temperature and were irreversibly damaged. The preparations had to be disposed of and replaced at full cost, which can run into thousands of dollars.

Another alarming issue that was brought to the attention of Celia and I was that the reason for the lengthy delay was due to Western Power having available only one specialised underground repair crew able to respond to these types of emergencies in these sorts of instances. I was surprised by that. In fact, the foreperson on the crew told me that they covered the whole metropolitan area for all underground power faults. Moreover, we were advised that this meant the repair crew could not work through the night, due to overtime limitations and work break requirements. Hence, this is the reason that a simple cable failure resulted in a prolonged power outage and disruption to so many businesses, as I have outlined.

I fully support the state government's underground power program and the retrospective underground power projects initiatives; however, having only one underground specialised cable repair crew available to attend to this outage is very concerning. I do wonder what would have occurred if there had been a second outage in the local area or, in this case, as it was put to me, in the metropolitan area, because it would have been very difficult to cope with it.

Another concern from businesses, which is surprising, is that the Western Power website did not inform business owners that there was an outage, nor did any onsite officers from Western Power speak to any affected businesses to advise what had happened or give an estimated time of repair. I understand that the affected businesses are compiling a joint application to Western Power seeking compensation for the outage. However, to make matters

worse, even this has been difficult due to portal issues within Western Power's website, which was inaccessible after the repair was effected. I am not sure whether it is accessible now, minister.

In conclusion, I urge the minister to ensure that Western Power fixes the issues with the Western Power website. It is important that there is a proper emergency notification procedure to affected businesses and homes, which includes regular updates of likely time of repair. The businesses were asking Celia and me for information because they could not get information from Western Power, and Western Power was not providing any updates to the businesses. It is appropriate, given the website is down, to assist the businesses in submitting their applications for compensation and to ensure that Western Power has the capacity to effectively and efficiently resolve underground power outages across the metropolitan area. I was surprised that given Western Power had only that single crew available, as it was put to me by the foreperson of that crew, and it does not have the capacity to bring in other suitably qualified contractors. I fully understand that repairing underground cables is a highly specialised task, but I would have thought that Western Power would have the capacity to bring in other contractors to continue that important work. I look forward to the minister's response to this grievance. Thank you.

MR W.J. JOHNSTON (Cannington — Minister for Energy) [9.48 am]: Firstly, the information the member provided is wrong and I do not know why he did not contact me directly.

I want to congratulate the Western Power crews on their performance and repair work. I understand that small businesses have suffered an inconvenience, but let us understand what occurred. An underground power cable shorted out. This is an engineering problem. Had it been overhead cabling, it would have been easy to repair because we could have seen where the fault was. But it was underground cabling and, therefore, to effect the repair, there had to be an excavation. As I said, I fully appreciate the inconvenience, but as the member knows, having come from an engineering background, we cannot change the laws of physics. I think it is extraordinary that Western Power's workers were able to achieve such a rapid reconnection of the underground power. I remind members that when there were underground power outages in Auckland, New Zealand, under the privatised model there, the power for central Auckland was out for several months. The fact that Western Power, as a state-owned enterprise, had the available work crews to get on to this job so quickly and repair it within a day is a remarkable achievement. Western Power does not have only one underground power crew available in the metropolitan area. I am not quite sure why the member thinks that. As I said, if he had spoken to me —

Dr D.J. Honey: That is what the foreperson told me.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: I did not interrupt the member for Cottesloe. I do not know why he is interrupting me. There are 56 overhead fault crew members in the metropolitan area and 16 underground crew members in Western Australia. There is always capacity to call in specialised underground network contractors. An emergency response team specialises in cable fault repairs. There is no question that this was very inconvenient for the businesses involved, but the cause of the inconvenience was not a failure on the part of Western Power. I hope that when the member provides *Hansard* to his affected constituents, he points out to them that the only reason I am able to reply to him and explain what happened is that Western Power is in government hands. Had it been sold, the member would not be able to do this grievance. The member would not have been able to come in here and ask for accountability from the government on this matter.

As I said, I am happy to come out and meet all the affected businesses in the member for Cottesloe's community, because I think it is important for them to fully understand and appreciate the true story rather than the story that the member has provided to them. It is very important that we understand the extraordinary difficulty in providing electricity to people. In Western Power's coverage area, it has a 99.93 per cent reliability outcome; that is, 99.93 per cent of customers have supply available to them, which means that 0.07 per cent of customers are off power at any one time. That is an extraordinarily high achievement. Of course, if a customer is without power, like I was last year, there is no question of the inconvenience and the difficulties for someone operating a small business or a family person with children. No-one can underestimate the complexities of dealing with a power outage in modern life. We can all remember when Colin Barnett was the Minister for Energy in the 1990s and the entire power system in the south west of the state blacked out because there was —

Mr Z.R.F. Kirkup: You're talking about the generators that the former Labor government —

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: No, I am talking about —

The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms S.E. Winton): Thank you, members! Let us be reasonable.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Again, the Liberal Party cannot handle me pointing out its failures. The whole of the south west of the state was blacked out because of fog coming in and tripping the high-voltage transmission system. People could not even leave their houses because they could not open their garage doors. Nobody doubts the problems when there is a power outage. What was the cause of the power outage? An individual underground cable that had been there for 10 years shorted out. To repair the cable, they first had to identify the location of the fault. Had it

been an overhead wire, that would have been very easy. Because it was an underground system, there had to be an excavation to identify the fault. Despite the complexities of the work, within a day, the fault had been repaired.

As I said, if I had been running one of the businesses in that area, I would have been very, very concerned. I hope those businesses have business continuity insurance because that, of course, is their best opportunity for recovery of their losses. The risk for them is that because this was an underground fault, there is no evidence of negligence on behalf of Western Power, so they are unlikely to receive compensation from Western Power. This was not a planned outage. There is, of course, a generator subsidy program that Western Power runs for planned outages, and it can usually do workarounds to make sure that small businesses continue to be supplied during planned outages. I have had to deal with that in my own electorate. I know that the member for Riverton grieved to the former minister about those issues. But this was a technical fault on the line. It was repaired as fast as possible. There are plenty of crews, and there has been no reduction in staffing levels since the change of government. I know there was a very, very significant reduction in staffing levels at Western Power under the former government, but we have not reduced those staffing levels. I look forward to coming out and meeting those affected businesses so that they can hear the actual story about what has occurred.