

**INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES — DRINKING WATER**

*Motion*

Resumed from 23 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 COL HOLT (South West — Minister for Housing)** [1.08 pm]: Thank you for the opportunity to continue my remarks from two sittings ago when I made some preliminary comments in the debate. I am sorry that I missed last week's debate, but I have read *Hansard*. I was away on urgent parliamentary business, and I have visited quite a few Aboriginal communities since that time, including Tjuntjuntjara, where I was when debate was continuing. I will come back to that at some point and talk about that community.

I notice that a great deal of the debate to date has focused on the Auditor General's report "Delivering Essential Services to Remote Aboriginal Communities". I think I said previously in my opening remarks that this is about continuing improvement. The Auditor General has obviously focused on some of the negatives in supplying safe drinking water to our remote communities. That is what the Auditor General should do, because it shows we need to make continual improvements and it raises the issues that we need to focus on solving.

I think we should take some time to focus on some of the positives occurring in remote communities that are addressing the issues around a safe water supply. It should be acknowledged that the government is providing safe drinking water to remote communities and that the Housing Authority responds quickly to any water quality issues as soon as they arise. But that does not happen all the time, and we do not always meet the "Australian Drinking Water Guidelines". There are some valid reasons for that that I will touch on—I have touched on them previously.

We should recognise that some positive things have happened on these issues since, and during the investigatory period of, the Auditor General's report. The repairs and maintenance of infrastructure in remote communities is a complicated, longstanding issue that successive governments have tried to resolve. It is not a new issue for us. We know how vast our state is, and great distances are involved when people want to live in our remote communities. I have previously mentioned Tjuntjuntjara, which is an hour and a half's flight east of Kalgoorlie—it is a long way away—and supplying the necessary infrastructure to support a community of around 17 houses and about 200 people is quite a challenge. That is just one of the contexts that we have to look at this debate within.

I think it should be recognised that any sustainable solution around central services—water is obviously one of those—will require a significant investment over a long period to meet all the needs out there. That is not only to upgrade, but also to meet the ongoing day-to-day, year in, year out maintenance issues that keep coming along. We all know systems have to be maintained no matter where people live, but remote areas have extra challenges and it takes extra resources and investment to do that. I think it should also be noted that the retraction of funding from the commonwealth government that has been well publicised has created a new challenge for the state government in this space. It removed funding from municipal services and the remote Aboriginal essential services program, and that has meant we have had to pick up the cudgel and provide greater funding. That will need to happen into the future.

I want to report on some of the one-off capital allocations that have been agreed with commonwealth agencies in response to urgent capital needs over the last four years to provide a snapshot of what is happening out there. Those allocations totalled \$18.8 million in the first year, \$3.4 million in the second year, \$6.6 million in the third year, and \$10 million last year. The money was spent on replacing capital essential service items such as water tanks, a power station and water treatments systems. I will name some of those in a minute. In the absence of adequate commonwealth funding, the state has provided additional allocations from the royalties for regions program of \$12.15 million for priority water treatment projects and another \$10 million for the Jigalong essential services pilot project, which we talked about not that long ago in this house, to support essential service capital works over the past three years. Investment has been made.

Some of the improvements since January 2014, around the time of the Auditor General's investigation, include the installation of 20 new chlorine disinfection systems and the upgrade of five more; 23 new water tanks, with a further three in progress; the replacement of four tank roofs; the replacement of 13 water tank liners; the installation of two new reverse-osmosis water treatment systems; and the installation of one new pH water correction system. The Auditor General always refers to the failures in the system. If those infrastructure improvements had not happened, there would probably have been more failures, and we are addressing them as they come along. There has also been an annual water tank inspection and cleaning program that was instigated through the repair and maintenance program to ensure and improve water security and quality. All those improvements and upgrades to the old infrastructure have had a positive impact on water quality, resulting in

improved water disinfection, water security and water treatment systems in Aboriginal communities. That was most recently noted by the Department of Health and the Advisory Committee for the Purity of Water. I must say that I did not know too much about that committee, so for those who do not know, the Advisory Committee for the Purity of Water is a non-statutory interdepartmental committee that operates under the chairmanship of the Department of Health. Amongst other functions, the advisory committee provides advice to the Ministers for Health and Water on protecting, monitoring and managing drinking water quality and fosters inter-agency co-operation on related matters. That committee recently acknowledged the efforts and improvements that have happened within this space.

I will refer again to the Auditor General's report because that was the focus of most people's contributions, and rightly so. Hon Stephen Dawson put a very timely motion on the notice paper to keep this issue on the agenda. The Office of the Auditor General found —

The supply of water and power to communities is generally reliable.

And when service disruptions occur, service providers respond to around 90 per cent of them within 24 hours, exceeding their minimum contract targets of 75 per cent. Again, I think that is a pretty good record considering the distances and remoteness that those responders have to cope with. I reckon if I have a broken tap at home or a failure, it takes me a lot longer to get a plumber in the south west. Of course, failures of this magnitude need to be responded to quickly, and they are exceeding the contractual targets now, so they are keen to do that.

Fundamentally, many of the water quality issues are due to environmental factors, and therefore some communities, because of where they are and where their water sources are located, I will not say will always have a problem, but keeping that water supply at a correct standard presents some real challenges for us. Communities located in areas with high nitrate and uranium levels will require significant capital investment to address those water qualities. Having visited quite a range of Aboriginal communities, I know that the communities have not always chosen to create a community on a reliable, fresh water source because that is not necessarily the driving factor. Sometimes it is much more about where they feel comfortable in their traditional lands. I think Tjuntjuntjara is a great example of that in that those people are actually from the Maralinga area; they have relocated into Western Australia, into the eastern, eastern, eastern goldfields, and they have found an area where they are very comfortable, but the challenge is that there is no reliable water supply of the standard required. We need to solve that problem.

The Department of Housing made some initial responses in the report. Housing stated that it will continue to comply with the recommendations of the Department of Health to provide alternative water supplies when possible. Housing will continue to manage ageing infrastructure to an operational standard, and maintain services across the program according to the priority needs and the greatest risks. That commitment has been made. Although conversations with the commonwealth about additional funding to address infrastructure issues will continue, I think the permanent, long-term solution to ongoing water quality risks will be borne by the state. Although we would love the commonwealth government to provide some funding into these areas, there will be a continuing fight from the Western Australian perspective because I am not sure the commonwealth quite understands some of the challenges we deal with in remote communities given the distances involved.

Also, obviously, the Department of Housing has accepted all the recommendations from the Auditor General and is working to implement some of those recommendations. I will touch on where the department has got to because some of them had some time bounds on them, around December. Although we are not there yet, some progression is being made towards them and I will touch on those in a minute.

Since the time of the Office of the Auditor General's review, there has been continued improvement in water quality testing. Coupled with the investment in water treatment systems, which I talked about just then, with the chlorine disinfection systems and new water tanks, there have been some vast improvements already, some while the Auditor General was doing his investigation and others since then. Recommendation 2 states —

- by December 2015, take steps to ensure that Service Providers' testing of wastewater systems complies with contractual requirements

I had better check that; I might have made a typo in my notes. My response here states that Housing can confirm that by March 2015, testing had already complied with current contractual requirements. I will touch on some of the testing around E. coli, which was another point made by many people in this house in response to this motion. In 2011–12, for E. coli testing, the compliance rate across the program was 95.18 per cent. Five per cent of the time it failed; 95 per cent of the time it was compliant. In 2014–15, the compliance rate had improved to 98.03 per cent. From five per cent down to two per cent is a marked improvement in the failure rates, but 98 per cent compliance is going well. It does not necessarily mean that we are getting it 100 per cent right, and that should be our aim. However, we are moving in the right direction. In July 2015, only one community failed the E. coli test out of the 91 that were in there. Again, that is a good outcome. As of the end of June 2015, the

Pilbara region achieved, over 14 consecutive months and testing of 580 samples, a level of 100 per cent compliance. The goldfields region achieved in 12 consecutive months, with over 300 samples, a level of 100 per cent compliance for E. coli. It is a good outcome and we are moving in the right direction.

**Hon Stephen Dawson:** Are these only in those 80 communities?

**Hon COL HOLT:** Because these are at-risk communities, yes. That is what our water testing is responsible for.

I note that one of the other recommendations was about the eligibility of communities in this, and that is probably an issue that we should talk about. I will give my views on it today.

**Hon Alanna Clohesy:** What about the Naegleria?

**Hon COL HOLT:** I have not got any of the information in front of me but there are two different sorts of those things. I will keep going and if I have missed something, maybe the member can put another question to me. There have been some problems with the results of E. coli testing for the Kimberley region. The results have been impacted negatively by a small number of communities that recorded the majority of noncompliant tests. A number of factors have caused this. The Pilbara and the goldfields are going well for E. coli testing. There is a bit of a problem with the Kimberley based on some scenarios. One community, as noted in the Auditor General's report, initially refused to allow the installation of a chlorine disinfection system to address the microbiological problems. This is a community trying to fix its water quality issues and it does not want the upgraded system. However, through negotiation with the community, it has accepted the system and it became operational on 31 May 2015. Until that point, that community still had some water quality issues. Additional factors experienced in the Kimberley can result in failures in the compliance test. Sometimes communities have a very small population and are not occupied during the wet season, so it is hard to get samples taken and good readings when no-one is there. Ultraviolet disinfection systems are run intermittently to save on fuel. The community decided to potentially turn off its power system that runs the ultraviolet systems. Again, that is in the smaller communities. Sometimes the sampling people are not collected so that they can go out to the community. There have been occasions when they have flown into the airstrip and no-one has come to collect them. Accessibility issues around the wet season, and people coming into and going out of those communities, really puts a strain on the testing of the quality of the water. That may well be one of the reasons for the failure of the tests or the noncompliance there. They are all challenges that we need to overcome.

These factors led to a disproportionate number of microbiological failures due to no testing. In the 12 months to April 2015, six communities, representing eight per cent, accounted for 37 per cent of the microbiological failures due to these factors. This percentage is too high; it should be closer to zero, or as close to zero as we can get it. When we look at six communities failing continuously, they are the ones we should be concentrating on to fix the system and get it right. As I said before, some of the investment has already been made in a large number of communities, and we are getting 100 per cent compliance in the Pilbara and 100 per cent compliance in the goldfields because we are making those investments. Obviously, we need to keep investment going and focus on some of the communities that are failing for one reason or another. Some of it is about not getting a sample done. We need to try to fix that as well.

I will talk about nitrate levels. Fourteen communities have levels of nitrate, which is a naturally occurring chemical, above the 50 milligrams per litre recommended threshold for bottle-fed babies under three months old. A lot of points were made about this in this debate previously. That is a risk for bottle-fed babies under three months of age. These communities have nitrate levels checked on a monthly basis. Bottled water is made available for bottle-fed babies in these communities immediately. In fact, most communities in the state—Hon Stephen Dawson may be able to back me up on this—generally drink bottled water anyway. It is the rest of the time when there is no bottled water supply that we need to address.

**Hon Stephen Dawson:** But, minister, they do not always get it supplied, and that was the point I made.

**Hon COL HOLT:** I know they do not, but generally, if there is an issue such as that, it is responded to very quickly. It is challenging out there. Sometimes it is not even reported in time and sometimes the sampling does not come in, and then the remedial action comes a bit later than it needs to be and should be. Again, we are making the investment and will continue to make the investment.

Five communities also recorded uranium in the water. Two communities have had treatment units installed to remove that uranium—again, another investment is being made. Two communities have an average level below that set by the “Australian Drinking Water Guidelines” in 2011. Sometimes, if there is a service outage, there might be a slight increase. However, these are reported to and monitored by the Department of Health, and we need to get the outage back online. The fifth community has a very limited supply of potable water and there is no spare capacity to waste any water through a treatment system. There is a good supply of hypersaline water that is approximately 40 per cent saltier than sea water, which is a great deal. This is at Tjuntjuntjara, which is the community an hour and a half's flight east of Kalgoorlie. That community is camped on a hypersaline mound

of water that has uranium in it. There is no spare capacity for that community to do anything about it in the short term, and we need a serious investment in it. There are also some challenges in that community around power infrastructure. If we want to improve the water treatment processes and the water treatment plant, we will have to build a larger power supply into that as well to cope with it. I have to say that when I went to Tjuntjuntjara, I was really impressed by the people there. The local leadership is getting a great deal of support from the Aboriginal corporation, with people coming to work with that community. The local leadership people are really dedicated to that community. They see it as part of their future; they see it as part of their homelands. They are very keen to overcome these issues, obviously, because they see a future in that community. But the community is also instigating some of its own mechanisms to try to address it. It put in a membrane filtration system as a trial but, unfortunately, it did not work so it has to go back to the drawing board to determine its other options. It has to become, and it is becoming, a water-wise community because it does not have water to spare. It is a shame because it is a dusty area and it would be great if the community could have lawns, gardens and vegetation but it has no spare water. It is a big issue and it will take a large investment to fix it.

**THE PRESIDENT:** Order, members. Sorry to interrupt, but I welcome to the Legislative Council public gallery students and staff from Girrawheen Senior High School. It is always terrific to have students here who are interested in Parliament and public affairs. Welcome to the Legislative Council.

Members: Hear, hear!

**Hon COL HOLT:** Welcome.

I will go back to recommendation 1, which states —

**Housing should:**

- **by December 2015 have determined how it can improve water quality in remote communities to meet Australian Drinking Water Guidelines**

This is ongoing work. The Department of Housing has started scoping the capital works as a basis for any future funding bids, which will then prioritise work according to need and budget.

I turn to the initial preliminary estimate of the capital investment in water treatment units and chlorinators required to meet the standard. Currently, 44 communities operate without a chlorination system. An upgrade to a chlorination disinfection system costs \$180 000 per upgrade, which equates to \$7.92 million, and the upgrades would require ongoing costs of \$10 000 per annum. There are 44 communities that do not have one, but they do not often fail some of the tests. What is being done now is adequate, but obviously we would like to move to a chlorination system to futureproof and fail proof some of these communities. In addition to those 44 communities, there are two communities with elevated turbidity; 33 with elevated total dissolved solids; 39 with high levels of hardness; 16 with elevated chloride; and 15 with elevated sodium. The various treatment options required to address these could cost an estimated \$22 million. The ongoing annual repair and maintenance of the water treatment units may require \$50 000 in the mix. As I said earlier, we have already done a lot of that, but obviously more needs to be done. This is a scoping document and it is about scoping what needs to be done as recommended by the Auditor General. I talked about the water treatment units and whether we build new ones or upgrade the existing ones. They will require greater power efficiency and output so power upgrades will be needed to work with those processing plants. It is estimated that the 44 communities will need between 20 and 40 per cent more spend to upgrade their power supplies to cope with that extra pressure, which equates to between \$5 million and \$10 million.

There is no doubt that some of the communities will need a new bore and a new water source, which may be quite a few kilometres away. I remember going to the Ngalingkadji community, which I referred to in an earlier speech, and seeing its challenges. It will get a new bore—it could be located some distance away—that will be piped back to the community. Between 20 and 40 per cent of those communities require a new water source and it will cost between \$9 million and \$18 million to keep pace with the needs of those communities. Scoping has started. We know that it is not acceptable that the water quality in those communities fails from time to time. We need not only remedial action, but also long-term solutions.

Recommendation 3 states that there must be a review of the contracting of the program management and services. This has already been done. In the immediate term under the current contract, Housing has made improvements to the management and reporting processes. The contract will be re-tendered next year. The recommendations from the Auditor General's report will be actioned into that tender document going forward so that there are clear lines of responsibilities and roles about who is meant to be doing what.

Recommendations 4 and 6 refer to the clarity of roles and responsibilities of the commonwealth and state governments. This report came out when the federal government was removing some of the funding options. Recommendation 6 suggests an improved coordination of services to remote Aboriginal communities between

housing and other agencies. We touched quickly on the regional services unit. In my mind, that is its role. It will be an interagency unit that brings all this together and works with the communities to address their needs and priorities. Housing has to be a part of that; indeed, I think all members of the house recognise that Housing is an important player in our communities, let alone in our remote communities. Housing well and truly plays a role. Grahame Searle, the former director general of Housing, is heading up that unit, which is a great thing because he brings a wealth of knowledge about not only housing provisions, but also essential services provisions. I think he will do a splendid job. He has a massive job ahead of him, but he will do a great job. He is committed to it. We have started the process of addressing these longer term issues that have remained unsolved over many years. We are doing it in a better and much more coordinated way.

I refer to recommendation 5, which states that we must ensure that communities' eligibility for program services is subject to regular review. Page 26 of the report refers to the eligibility criteria. The first is population—there must be a normal population of at least 50 people. Second, the residents must be permanently occupied; that is, 75 per cent of the normal population should reside there for nine months of the year. Third, at least five domestic dwellings should be established with power, water and wastewater systems. Fourth, land tenure should be sorted out. The last one is incorporated groups. Communities should be incorporated under relevant state or commonwealth legislation. Another one is special circumstances. The report reads —

Communities that do not meet all the above criteria, but can demonstrate good reason why they should receive maintenance funding, may be considered for addition to the maintenance schedule. Good reason may include:

- demonstrated environmental health risk
- proximity to other serviced communities
- special needs of residents (e.g. aged population).

I have a problem with this. The Auditor General says that these things should be checked regularly to determine whether or not communities are eligible, but there is catch-all eligibility criteria right in the middle of it that allows one to argue a point above and beyond or outside the other criteria. It is strange. What are the criteria? Either the communities meet the other eligibility criteria or they make a special case based on a whole range of things. That is probably a fairly sensible approach, I would have thought, but I am not sure why the AG can pull around the criticism of needing to review it more often to determine who is in and who is out, because in actual fact they could all be captured. If we left out the eligibility criteria and just took population criteria and eligibility, we would knock out about 25 communities. I understand that there are good reasons that we do not do that. It is sensible to me, but I am not sure why the Auditor General focuses on those sorts of recommendations in the report because we have the system to capture it. I assume it is about the review of the criteria. I am not sure how to review the criteria. Remember what we are debating is the supply of water to remote communities.

**Hon Sue Ellery:** I suspect that, from the Auditor General's point of view, how do you audit something that is so open-ended? That is effectively what he is saying.

**Hon COL HOLT:** I think that is right. What I am saying is that our debate is around water supply in remote Aboriginal communities. I understand that this is only a section of a program that delivers to a certain number of communities. But we are talking about water supply to all communities; indeed, the motion is about all communities, not just the ones identified in the AG's report.

**Hon Ken Travers:** That's true.

**Hon COL HOLT:** That is true. In fact, it should be a catch-all criteria, and we should be addressing and presenting the communities' need for good quality water. That is the direction the broader discussion should go when discussing all remote communities and reform—that is, how to use a black and white and then a catch-all criteria to meet the needs of every remote community in the state. That is a challenging outcome and a challenging objective to which we should all strive.

I thank Hon Stephen Dawson for the motion. It is a great opportunity to put a focus on meeting the needs of people in Western Australia no matter where they live. I think some improvements occurred even while the Auditor General was doing the report, and that improvement will continue. However, there are some serious environmental challenges as well as challenges as a result of the location and remoteness of those communities. There are some challenges, and we have always faced those challenges in regional Western Australia. As long as I am the Minister for Housing, I will be doing my utmost to meet the needs of those communities.

**HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Leader of the Opposition)** [1.41 pm]: I want to make a few comments on the motion. I am pleased that I was able to hear the second part of the Minister for Housing's contribution. I thank him for the advice he provided the house on the measures that the government has taken to address not only the issues raised in the Auditor General's report on delivering essential services to remote

Aboriginal communities, to which members have referred and to which I will also refer, but also more broadly; so I thank him for that. I am going to touch on some of the issues the minister identified in which action has already been taken to address those issues in some way. I think that it is still worth doing because there are two elements to what the Auditor General has said about the Remote Areas Essential Services program to provide safe drinking water to communities, so I will come back and talk about that.

The minister made a point about the clinical impact of the failure to make sure that the RAES program has provided for safe drinking water for remote communities, and he raised a range of technical issues about testing. Indeed, the minister identified in his response an array of technical reasons, including the topography and geography of the land, for why the program mentioned in the Auditor General's report has been difficult to deliver, and indeed the challenges that face anybody who tries to provide safe drinking water to remote communities, whether they are inside this particular program or not. On the one hand, there are the technical issues; but, on the other hand, another element of the Auditor General's report goes to governance, oversight and coordination. In that sense, the technical stuff is irrelevant because it does not matter what program is being developed—whether it is about safe drinking water to remote Indigenous communities, a literacy program, a public transport program, or programs on myriad other public policy matters—the Auditor General found serious management issues not with the particulars of the program but with what I think reflects on poor leadership. The Auditor General found that in the two years before the report was issued there was a failure of leadership in this matter. Contracting was not being oversights properly and the program was not being managed properly. That is not about the technical aspects of what is on the ground; that is about the leadership of the organisation, and, ultimately, the buck rests with the minister of the day—who I note was not this minister. It is about a failure of leadership.

In relation to this particular issue, the Auditor General's report on pages 6 and 7 states —

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

It goes on to state —

Poor contracting means Housing is not getting full value from the Program Manager and its \$1 million a year fee. The Program Manager is contracted and paid to supervise the Service Providers. However, at times this has not happened and instead the Service Providers deal directly with Housing.

Poor oversight means there is a risk that Housing may have overpaid for services. Self-reporting by Service Providers, a lack of inspections by the Program Manager, and inconsistency in invoice and job order descriptions have created this risk. In 2013–14, invoices for all unplanned maintenance and repairs in the Program totalled \$14.7 million.

I want to stress again that that is a failure of leadership and governance matter and it really does not matter what the program is—it is irrelevant that it is about Indigenous communities that need safe drinking water. I do not mean to be flippant or to undermine the issues facing those communities, but the report states that senior levels of the organisation and ultimately the minister of the day have paid no attention to this program and no-one made it a priority to make sure that the program was being implemented properly. That is a serious allegation, and almost as serious that lives have been threatened because people, including babies and young children, are drinking unsafe water as a direct consequence of those technical difficulties. I think we need to focus on what the minister's report states and not on what the department is doing around the technical issues. We need a commitment from this minister for adequate leadership and management of these programs. The components of the Auditor General's report are as damning about that as they are about the actual technical elements.

We know that in respect of the technical elements in the two years to June 2014 that the key findings of the Auditor General were that power and water supply are reliable, but water quality often does not meet Australian standards; that water quality at four out of five communities failed to meet microbiological quality standards; that the microbes that were found can cause life-threatening illnesses; and that 80 per cent of communities failed drinking water tests.

The "Response from the Department of Housing" can be found at page 9 of the Auditor General's report. It is interesting when it states —

While the Department takes appropriate action to address identified short term water quality risks including the supply of bottled drinking water to affected communities, a permanent solution to long term and ongoing water quality risks is outside the scope of RAESP —

That is the particular program —

and will require significant investment. In this regard the Department notes the unilateral withdrawal of the Commonwealth from its historical funding role.

The language of that first statement, that the “Department takes appropriate action”, is interesting. The Auditor General found that it did not take appropriate action, so I do not know how the department can make that statement. However, I am concerned that that response reflects a bit of the silo mentality in the bureaucracy. The department could have said, “But it is now a priority for the Department of Housing to pursue better interagency arrangements to address these issues and it is now a priority of the Department of Housing and the Minister for Housing to make sure that there is a cross-government response to these issues.” But the Department of Housing’s response does not state that. It states that within this little program it is doing the best it can—even though the Auditor General has found that it is not—and it is not its responsibility to fix the issue more broadly, and, by the way, please note that the commonwealth has taken money away. We have noted that the commonwealth has taken money away; however, I note that that money did not go immediately. Did the department announce that it was two or three years?

**Hon Stephen Dawson:** Two—\$90 million over two years.

**Hon Helen Morton:** I thought it was three.

**Hon SUE ELLERY:** So the department basically gave notice that within a two-year period that money was going to be withdrawn. I think that was an outrageous decision, and I am not condoning that decision at all. However, it is a bit disingenuous for everyone to now act as though that money was withdrawn on the day the commonwealth announced it, because in fact the commonwealth gave the government two years’ notice that that money would be withdrawn.

There is long and irrefutable public health and scientific evidence about the serious risks to life as a consequence of poor quality drinking water. Report after report after report in Australia has noted that despite the sophisticated and highly developed public health infrastructure in our cities, towns and regional centres, we have not managed to work out the logistics for the supply of good quality drinking water to communities that are sometimes just a few hundred kilometres from towns and regional centres. Sometimes those communities are much further away than just a few hundred kilometres. However, the living conditions in communities that are right on the edge of a town and the living conditions of communities that may be just five kilometres down the road are often like chalk and cheese.

I want to touch on the report after report after report that has been done on how we can do this better. What used to be called the Telethon Child Health Institute and is now the Telethon Kids Institute—that very august organisation that does a lot of very good work—has regularly published over the years a survey titled “The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey — The Health of Aboriginal Children and Young People”. One of those surveys—I am not sure of the date, but I suspect it was done a few years ago—identifies the drivers of Aboriginal child health and states the following —

Aboriginal child health is inextricably tied to processes of human development and growth. Moving from better quality information to relevant and achievable Aboriginal child health policies demands understanding and commitment to this. As a result, any policy framework for Aboriginal child health (indeed, the health of all children) needs to influence several principal resource domains for child development:

It goes on to state that the first of those is —

- the physical environment (ie housing, clean water, sanitation and nutrition) to meet the basic necessities of living

It goes on to state in respect of the physical environment —

All Australians should have access to satisfactory living conditions. These conditions include appropriately maintained and safe housing, clean air and drinking water, suitable food preparation and storage facilities, heating and cooling, effective sewerage, safe removal of waste and control of pests. Within this volume the data show that significant levels of over-crowding exist, especially for families living in isolated areas.

The report goes on to indicate that this and other aspects of housing and community infrastructure and their relationship to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and families will be the subject of ongoing work by the institute.

I want to refer now to a report produced by the Productivity Commission steering committee for the review of government service provision. The report is titled “Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2014”, and it states at point 10.2, under the heading “Rates of disease associated with poor environmental health” —

- From 2003–2007 to 2008–2012, after adjusting for differences in population age structures, the death rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians from diseases associated with poor environmental health decreased by 20 per cent —

That is a good thing. However, the report goes on to state that that was still 1.7 times the non-Indigenous rate. Those figures are for New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory combined.

The report goes on to state that nationally in 2012–13, hospitalisation rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians for diseases associated with poor environmental health were the highest for intestinal infectious diseases, influenza and pneumonia, and bacterial disease. Two of those diseases—intestinal infectious diseases, and bacterial disease—were directly related to the provision of safe drinking water. The report also states that the rates for all selected diseases were higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians than they were for non-Indigenous Australians, and that the rates were higher in remote and very remote areas than in non-remote areas for all disease types except lung disease.

The report states also —

From 2004–05 (2008–09 for intestinal infectious diseases) to 2012–13 for NSW, Victoria, Queensland, WA, SA and the NT combined, hospitalisation rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians for most selected diseases increased, particularly for intestinal infectious diseases and bacterial diseases ...

The rates increased. So, we are not making it better; we are making it worse. That is particularly concerning.

I turn now to an article in the Australian Indigenous Health *Bulletin*, volume 15, No 2, of April 2015–June 2015, titled “Environmental health challenges in remote Aboriginal Australian communities: clean air, clean water and safe housing”. The article states in respect of contamination of drinking water —

The WHO estimates that about 1.1 billion people around the world are drinking unsafe water. Furthermore, the majority (88%) of diarrhoeal disease in the world is attributable to unsafe water, sanitation and hygiene, as is approximately 3.1% (1.7 million) of all deaths annually .... Diarrhoea and related gastrointestinal (GI) illnesses continue to be one of the most important causes of morbidity and mortality, especially amongst young children .... A portion of this illness is due to exposure to contaminated water, as a result, for example, of poor water quality, limited access to water or hygiene practices ...

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

The report states also —

A further case in point is W.A., where almost half (49%) of the remote Aboriginal communities have untreated drinking water and 52% are without regular monthly testing of water quality ...

Those are fairly damning figures. I do not think the house needs me to spell it out, but I feel the need to do so anyway, that we are talking about a situation that, as a consequence of poor leadership and poor coordination, has directly fed into the statistics that show that children are being hospitalised, and, indeed, are dying, from diseases as a consequence of our failure to implement the programs that look after water quality safety in remote communities. That is a damning indictment. I am pleased with some of the reports that the minister gave us that suggest that things are improving. I hope that the group that this government has set up to rectify the damage that was caused by the Premier with his thoughtless remarks about closing Indigenous communities will take on board a broader cross-government approach to this issue. I know that that group has said that its key priorities are child safety and education. However, I hope it will take the broadest possible view of child safety, because, if it does that, it will also be looking at housing and the provision of safe drinking water. If they really focus on only a very narrow interpretation of those portfolios, this issue will not be addressed. With all due respect for what the minister has said, the Department of Housing will continue to have an attitude of, “We just look at this

little bit; it's not our responsibility to fix anything broader than that", and nothing will change. I really hope that things do change.

**HON PETER COLLIER (North Metropolitan — Minister for Aboriginal Affairs)** [1.59 pm]: I would like to make a few comments on this motion, particularly in response to comments made by Hon Darren West and Hon Sue Ellery in respect of the reform process the government has engaged in with regard to remote Aboriginal communities. In respect of safe, reliable water supplies to remote Aboriginal communities, Hon Col Holt was very expansive and articulate in explaining what has been done and what will continue to be done, while acknowledging that a lot of the hard work is still in front of us. I would like to focus on the provision of water supplies in those remote communities in a very holistic way, in the sense that it is just one part of service delivery in remote communities. To assume that we can treat the supply of safe water to remote communities in isolation is naive in the extreme; but it is also extremely naive to assume that safe water supply to remote communities is not part of the reform process. Hon Darren West appeared to imply throughout most of his contribution to this debate that somehow the government was focused only on child protection and, dare I say it, the social reform process as opposed to economic service provision and delivery. That is simply not the case, and I want to clarify that now.

The whole point of the regional reform process in Aboriginal communities is to ensure that we do things differently, as has been identified by Hon Sue Ellery. I think we all, collectively, see eye to eye on that, and that is why I want to spend a couple of minutes explaining the process. I understand Hon Stephen Dawson would like a few minutes for his right of reply, so I will not take up my entire time. Suffice it to say that the regional reform process for remote communities commenced not long after the last election in terms of developing the framework. It commenced with the establishment of a cabinet subcommittee, which I chair and which consists of several ministers, primarily from service delivery portfolios but also housing, represented by Hon Col Holt and, where appropriate, other ministers. The whole point of the exercise is to look at remote communities in, as I said, a generic sense, and to look at service delivery, which includes water supply, electricity supply, housing and roads et cetera, within the communities. It also includes service delivery in terms of child protection, education, health and training, to ensure that there are educational opportunities for children and employment opportunities post-education. At the same time, it is a priority that those communities are safe, nurturing environments for children and safe environments for the entire community.

That is what I wanted to immediately clarify—that we are not ignoring the significance of reliable water supply to remote communities. That is part of the reform process. That is what the cabinet subcommittee started work on with regard to service delivery in those remote communities, and we did an enormous amount of work. We did a case study in Roebourne and it was identified that there was a significant amount of wastage of opportunity. That was not because of a lack of money; there were millions upon millions of dollars going into Roebourne, but with limited positive outcomes, and that covered a whole raft of government departments. We then looked at the process in terms of making sure that we did things differently, and the governance structure changed, and that is where the reform process went and developed over the ensuing six to 12 months.

I take on board comments by Hon Sue Ellery and the Premier with regard to the proposed closure of remote communities, and I emphasise yet again that there was never, ever any intent to go out there and close remote Aboriginal communities, *carte blanche*. That was never our intention whatsoever. The intent, of course, was to make sure that we did things differently. It would take a very, very brave person to say that the status quo should prevail; that the service delivery is working fine; that there are no issues with abuse; that water supplies are plentiful and pure; that the educational facilities provide an opportunity for every child; and that there are health and dental facilities. They just do not exist, so we do have to do things differently. As a result of that, the cabinet subcommittee developed the regional services reform program, which covers all areas of the reform process. We have established already the strategic regional advisory councils, which are composed of representatives from the local areas and communities and members of local and state government, and they will establish, in a much more coordinated fashion, a framework for governance and service delivery within those communities.

In addition, there will be the district leadership group, which will comprise not-for-profit organisations, Aboriginal service providers, commonwealth government representatives and state agency representatives. Again, we are at last getting to a point where there is much more coordination between government services.

That has always been the intention of the exercise, and it unfortunately has not been done in the past by successive governments. In the past the intent has always been very honourable in terms of providing avenues and services for Aboriginal people, but it has not been done in a coordinated fashion. We have very frequently seen the silo approach within government departments, and perhaps the Department of Water and the Department of Housing et cetera have not been as coordinated as they possibly could have been. In the area of education, for example, there may not have been coordination with regard to child protection, health and a raft of other opportunities that were necessary for the seamless transition of the child from birth through to post-education and employment.

That is what the reform unit is all about: it is literally about reforming the way in which we govern service delivery within those communities. It is a holistic and much more coordinated approach to ensure that we do things better in those communities. Ultimately, the communities will be a part of the process of determining that service delivery, which is why we have the advisory councils and the district leadership groups. The reform unit is now pretty much established; that work has been done and it will be rolled out over the next six months and beyond.

Having said that, I will wrap up to allow Hon Stephen Dawson to make some comments. I just wanted to clarify the point that water has not been ignored as part of the reform process. The delivery of water supplies, like all other service delivery, is a key component of a much more coordinated government approach to service delivery within remote communities, and that comes from the regional services reform program.

**HON STEPHEN DAWSON (Mining and Pastoral)** [2.07 pm] — in reply: I appreciate all the contributions that were made by members across the chamber to debate on this motion. I particularly appreciate the work of the Minister for Housing, who arranged to make a contribution at a later sitting of the house because he was going to be away from Parliament on urgent parliamentary business. I appreciate it because I know the minister takes this issue seriously and understands that it needs to be fixed.

The debate tended to focus on the Auditor General's report on delivering essential services to remote Aboriginal communities, but of course notice of this motion was given long before that report was delivered. I guess because that report came out recently it tended to be a focal point. I have to say, however, that there is an issue with the regional services reform program in that it delivers services to only a finite number of communities in Western Australia. In fact, according to the Auditor General's report, the number of communities is 84; in 2007, 91 communities accessed that service. Regardless of that, the fact is that there are about 274 remote Aboriginal communities in this state and about 190 of them do not have access to this program. Figures on the Department of Aboriginal Affairs website indicate that about 100 of those remote communities do not get any government services, so let us leave that 100 aside. That leaves 174, which means that 90 communities are not getting access to this remote area essential services program. I hope there is an opportunity to relook at those communities to work out who is part of this program and who is not. I hope, too, that the government takes the opportunity to talk to the new Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, who is more sensible than the last guy, to see if this money can be reinstated and that municipal services can be funded in remote regional Western Australia.

*Division*

Question put and a division taken with the following result —

Ayes (10)

Hon Robin Chapple  
Hon Stephen Dawson  
Hon Sue Ellery

Hon Adele Farina  
Hon Lynn MacLaren  
Hon Martin Pritchard

Hon Sally Talbot  
Hon Ken Travers  
Hon Darren West

Hon Alanna Clohesy (*Teller*)

Noes (19)

Hon Liz Behjat  
Hon Jacqui Boydell  
Hon Paul Brown  
Hon Jim Chown  
Hon Peter Collier

Hon Brian Ellis  
Hon Donna Faragher  
Hon Nick Goiran  
Hon Dave Grills  
Hon Nigel Hallett

Hon Alyssa Hayden  
Hon Col Holt  
Hon Peter Katsambanis  
Hon Rick Mazza  
Hon Robyn McSweeney

Hon Michael Mischin  
Hon Helen Morton  
Hon Simon O'Brien  
Hon Phil Edman (*Teller*)

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Pairs

Hon Samantha Rowe  
Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson  
Hon Kate Doust

Hon Mark Lewis  
Hon Ken Baston  
Hon Martin Aldridge

Question thus negatived.