

**APPROPRIATION (CONSOLIDATED ACCOUNT) RECURRENT 2013–14 BILL 2013**  
**APPROPRIATION (CONSOLIDATED ACCOUNT) CAPITAL 2013–14 BILL 2013**

*Estimates Committee B Report — Adoption*

Resumed from an earlier stage of the sitting.

**MR C.J. TALLENTIRE (Gosnells)** [3.40 pm]: I am very keen to make some comments on the proceedings of Estimates Committee B. Committee B enabled us to look at the budget papers relating to a range of portfolios. I was involved in the consideration of the water portfolio, agriculture, lands, the WA Land Information Authority, the new Department of Parks and Wildlife, the Department of Environment Regulation, the Botanical Gardens Authority and the Environmental Protection Authority. I would like to comment on the way this process unfolded and will begin by saying I second some comments made earlier about the chairing by the member for Forrestfield. I think he stepped into that role in a very considered way, and that was good. Some comments were made about the chairing of some hearings that could be looked at with a view to improving that chairing process so that there is better analysis of the budget. That is what it is about. After all, the budget estimates process is about careful analysis of the budget. The process that allows for extensive questioning from the government diminishes the overall aim of exploring the detail of the state budget. Often questions asked by government members are responded to by ministers in a fashion that suggests the minister was well aware of the question; ministers even had written answers they could read from. I do not think that is productive. Indeed, there were examples in which it was clear that the answer was recycled information because it was almost identical to the comments presented in a media statement. That is just not helpful.

However, I thought the responses from the Minister for Water, who also covered the agriculture portfolio, were quite candid. He was clearly confident with the portfolio he was dealing with and could give considered answers and, where necessary, delegate to the senior bureaucrats, the director general and directors from the various agencies he had with him. That was a useful process. Bearing in mind the Minister for Water was representing Hon Ken Baston, the Minister for Agriculture and Food, it was very important that we could ask questions directly of Mr Delane, the director general of the Department of Agriculture and Food. I have known Mr Delane for a number of years and I know he is a very earnest and considered man and is well across the details of his portfolio. However, I was disappointed to find that he was not able to explain elements of the agriculture budget in the estimates hearings. When we asked questions on notice, answers came back that more or less repeated the answers given in the estimates hearing. I refer particularly to questions about the budget for the Commissioner of Soil and Land Conservation. We asked what the total budget was and how many FTEs the commissioner has. We were told during the hearing that the details of the commissioner's budget had not been determined, but that the commissioner's budget for 2012–13 was \$585 000. Through the supplementary question process, we learnt that the budget for 2013–14 had not been allocated to the project but was anticipated to be at a similar level to the 2012–13 budget allocation. Even with the benefit of extra time, the Department of Agriculture and Food was unable to tell us the budget allocation for this very important service. It is a service that relates to the preservation of our natural resource, our soil assets. It is part of the agency that monitors land degradation and seeks to ensure that we do not suffer massive soil loss and, therefore, our agricultural base. I was disappointed to hear that the commissioner's budget was likely to be similar to that of previous years, but there is no detail yet so the commissioner cannot do any strategic planning. It is especially relevant considering the Department of Agriculture and Food is one of the few agencies that has had its overall budget boosted by \$26.7 million in just one year. It has increased from \$191.8 million to \$218.5 million. That is great. Of course, we want to see agencies doing better from the budget. But, with that, we should be able to see where the money goes. It is extremely disappointing that we could not be told how a vital service that underpins the viability of our agricultural sector will be funded. From a process point of view, it is a problem that the Department of Agriculture still does not know, bearing in mind the hearing was held on 20 August and I received this supplementary information in the last few days, and it does not tell me anything more than we learnt on 20 August. That is extremely disappointing. It does not tell me anything about the number of FTEs or the sorts of projects that will be undertaken or what the priorities are for that service. It is quite telling. With a budget of, roughly, \$585 000, we are talking about five FTEs, bearing in mind they are people often located in regional areas. They need to travel over extensive areas. They have responsibility for not just the agricultural region but also the pastoral region and cover massive areas, usually in four-wheel-drive vehicles. It is extremely disappointing that the agency is not seeking to bolster the commissioner's budget such that we can identify areas of increasing degradation and work out programs to remediate problem areas.

I also put to the Minister for Water questions about the funding arrangements for the various catchments. This was a question to the minister in his role as the Minister for Water overseeing the operations of the Department of Water. I wanted to know what the investment level was at a catchment scale, recognising that anything to do with natural resource water management should be considered through that prism of catchment management. I

was told that it is not done on a catchment scale but through a regional approach. I could understand a regional approach if the regions were amalgamations of catchments but that is not the case. Those regions are essentially administrative but they relate somewhat to catchment boundaries. That was disappointing. That was confirmed by the provision of supplementary information to the estimates committee. I will go into that in more detail later.

I want to turn to an issue that is very important when we consider the processes around the various committees. This would apply to both Estimates Committee A and Estimates Committee B. I am talking about machinery of government changes. Naturally, from time to time, we find a need to reorganise the machinery of government sometimes by repositioning services within agencies or amalgamating or disaggregating agencies. That is fair enough. Normally those changes are done because there is a view that a greater efficiency can be achieved by disaggregation or amalgamation. I am thinking in particular of the situation with the former Department of Environment and Conservation being split into the Department of Parks and Wildlife and the Department of Environment Regulation. That split meant that we were analysing a budget that was quite comparable with the DEC budget of previous years, but there were some essential differences. I object to the fact that extra time was not allocated us.

I offer this recommendation from my observations of the operations of Estimates Committee B: when machinery of government changes are implemented, additional time should be given to the analysis of the budget of the new agency structure. That is critical because it was claimed from the outset that the new agency structure was done for efficiency reasons. If we do not have the time to analyse that, that is not fair or reasonable. We have some work to do to ensure that it becomes part of our practices that if the government of the day decides to implement a machinery suite of changes, those changes are subject to more in-depth scrutiny than the normal scrutiny that takes place for each portfolio area. Of course, we have a standard practice that is rolled out each year in which environment, energy, education and health get so many hours allocated to them; all the agencies have a fairly standard allocation of time. If there has been a dramatic change in an agency's structure on the basis that it will give us extra efficiency, extra time should be allocated so committees can tease out the facts and see what benefits there have been. Otherwise we have the ridiculous situation of changes being made without the opportunity to test them.

Even with the limited time we had in Estimates Committee B, we attempted to test what had happened with the changes in the move from DEC to DPaW and DER. One area that was of particular interest related to the staffing levels of a former DEC service that was split across DPaW and DER. In previous years there was the service heading "Environmental Sustainability and Climate Change". The combined figure for that service was 85 FTEs in 2012–13, but when we looked at the figures presented in the budget papers that we were given just a few weeks ago, the figure had dropped to 75 FTEs. The numbers did not add up. We asked the agency about that. Dr Byrne from the Department of Parks and Wildlife, who manages all things accounting at the agency and does an admirable job of that, said that the discrepancy could be accounted for by the fact that —

Each service includes both back-office functions and front-line services.

We have suddenly had this revelation that some of these people are not working in the area of environmental sustainability and climate change, as was previously indicated, but they are doing back-office type work. That would account for the discrepancies. It is a revelation because it shows that sometimes the FTE levels that we are given are not applicable to the work that the service area might suggest is what the community would expect. That is disappointing. It really gets back to the point that we need to analyse the figures that are presented to us very carefully, especially when we have had machinery of government-type changes.

There are many other areas that Estimates Committee B got into that I want to talk about. In the time available to me, I want to conclude by talking about the issue of the shielding that was apparent in some of the hearings. I accept that the Minister for Environment is a new minister, whereas the Minister for Lands and the Minister for Water, experienced ministers, were candid; they did not need that shielding. It was apparent that the Minister for Environment was shielded and also made the mistake of reading his answers. That does not enhance the quality of debate in this place; it simply absorbed time such that members became frustrated and it degraded the quality of the debate. The Minister for Lands and the Minister for Water were helpful. I am certainly keen to continue to work with the Minister for Lands on issues around pastoral lease renewals. He and I might have slightly different views but I think the debate that we had in the chamber in Estimates Committee B was productive. He understands my position on the issue and knows that he has to work with the industry to help it accept that a big suite of changes are in the offing as we move to the deadline of 30 June 2015 for the current lot of pastoral leases. Parliament can work really well when we have ministers who are prepared to be cooperative, open and candid with members and seek the benefit of their questioning and their wisdom.

Question put and passed.