

FORMER MINISTERS — PRIVATE ENTERPRISE APPOINTMENTS

Statement

HON DR BRAD PETTITT (South Metropolitan) [5.36 pm]: I will touch broadly on an issue. It is probably a broader issue than what was seen, I think, in many circles as an explosive revelation from the former WA Environmental Protection Authority head Dr Tom Hatton when he publicly said this week what many of us already knew and suspected—that he had been pressured to pull back on environmental guidelines that the EPA had drawn up in 2019. It was pretty well known that that was probably the case. As Premier Cook said, there was no hiding it from even former Premier Mark McGowan himself when he did that. It highlights some broader questions that are worth raising in this place. Many years on, we do not have environmental guidance for greenhouse gas emissions. That guidance would have been very good for this state. It would be fair to say that some of those tougher regulations were exactly what the state needed, but perhaps, more fundamentally, the issue I want to comment on today is that there is a sense now that the independence of the EPA has been compromised. That led to quite a few calls this week, which I think are a concern. To take one example, Greenpeace and others are now saying that Woodside's North West Shelf should not be assessed by the Western Australian EPA anymore, but that it should be done federally. Greenpeace put out a statement this week asking Tanya Plibersek to undertake an independent assessment of that project. This is a really big issue. Greenpeace Australia Pacific's head of energy transition, Jess Panegyres, said —

“There are now serious questions being raised about the independence of the WA EPA. In light of the perception of compromised independence and the staggering emissions from this project, —

The North West Shelf —

we believe it must be subject to an independent Federal assessment. Decisions this big cannot be left to a body that's former chief has alleged is subject to serious interference,” ...

To put this in context, North West Shelf is a huge project. It is actually WA's oldest and most polluting gas plant, but if it is extended, it will be WA's biggest new fossil fuel project, operating until 2070 and contributing 4.3 billion tonnes of emissions. Just to put that in context, that is all of Australia's emissions times about nine years. It is a staggering amount of new emissions. Of course, we now have a real concern that the independence of Western Australia's EPA has been compromised; I must say that it has very good people on it and this is no criticism of them. Greenpeace is not the only one raising this.

That brings me to a more fundamental point that I want to raise. In 2019, when the phone call was made, Ben Wyatt was still Treasurer. He retired in 2021 and went straight onto the board of Woodside. Of course, Mark McGowan, soon after resigning, went onto the boards of BHP and others. That revolving door between the companies that this state regulates and the EPA, whose independence is now under question, puts really big question marks at the heart of the state. We should be about to undergo the biggest transition in energy in a century as well as in the kinds of projects we should be approving if we are going to meet any of the climate goals. How do we do that with confidence, with science and with an evidence-led approach when there are serious accusations around the independence of the key organisation that should be offering independent, frank and fearless advice around decisions? It confuses the line between the Parliament, ministers and senior jobs in companies like Woodside and BHP, because it is the job of the EPA and Parliament to make sure that they do the right thing. If we do not get the separation right, we will come back to the very things we have been debating around donations, revolving doors and cooling-off periods. We need to get all those things into legislation as soon as possible. If we do not do that, there will be real concerns. It will start to jeopardise not just confidence in the decisions that we make as a state, but also all of our futures.