

POLICE — CLIMATE ACTIVISTS

Statement

HON DR BRAD PETTITT (South Metropolitan) [5.43 pm]: I rise tonight to talk about an issue that many of my constituents have raised with me and perhaps in some ways is difficult to talk about. It is the police's treatment of some members of our community in recent times. I am talking about climate activists in our community. I want be clear that I am not alone in talking about this; it is certainly a trend that human rights groups and non-government organisations have been talking about. It is a trend not just in WA and Australia; it is a global trend. I raise this issue because I do not want WA to go down this path. I want to be clear at the start of this member's statement that this is not an attack on the Western Australia Police Force, which, in my experience, has many good, hardworking people doing a very good job. In my time as Mayor of Fremantle, I had a very good relationship with many members of the police force. But we have seen a particular group of police engage in what I see as overreach. The danger of that is that it can undo the confidence the broader community has in our police force as a whole and our democratic process. I think the right to protest is very much at the heart of a good democratic community, which is something I will come back to at the end of my statement.

This issue happened pretty recently. It goes back to 2021 when Rosa Hicks' home was raided by Western Australia's counterterrorism police, literally over some chalk painted on an overpass just a stone's throw from here. She was one of six people arrested after washable chalk paint was used to write on a pedestrian bridge between here and Woodside's headquarters to protest the \$16 billion Scarborough gas project. Two weeks after that, in August 2021, the officers of the state security investigation group, otherwise known as the state's counterterrorism police, raided the home of Rosa Hicks and other activists in the early hours of the morning. Why was the raid conducted then? Rosa Hicks was not even involved in applying the paint. It was chalk anyway. She arrived after the protest had started. Magistrate Matthew Holgate threw out the case on the grounds that it had no legal basis, and WA police was ordered to cover Hicks' legal costs. Sophie McNeill, the Australian researcher with Human Rights Watch, described the decision in Hicks' case as a sensible outcome to an overzealous prosecution.

That was 18 months ago. Unfortunately, we have seen more of these kinds of things happening. I think that most fair-minded people would define the conduct of police actions recently as having overreached when engaging in similar tactics when they have searched people's homes, taken them to jail, often kept them in jail overnight and seized their personal belongings like phones and laptops, often for weeks on end. I will read out some testimony from some members of the community about what happened to them when they engaged in peaceful protests. I suspect that many members would be aware of the protests that Joana Partyka was involved in. She spray-painted a piece of perspex at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, and her house was turned upside down for doing that.

I will read a statement she gave to me. She said —

At the point my home was raided by the police, my criminal charge matter in relation to the art gallery action had been resolved in the judicial system—I had been convicted and paid the large fine handed to me.

The subsequent raid on my home and seizure of my property by the state security unit—which is deployed for serious matters including counter-terrorism—is baffling, unjustified and clearly demonstrates how desperate the state government is to cover up their dependence on and capture by Woodside and big fossil polluters.

This entire experience has left me feeling quite vulnerable. I had six large police officers in bulky bulletproof vests force their way into my tiny apartment —

Anyone who has met Joana knows that she is a very petite woman. I can imagine six officers coming in. She goes on to say —

where they rifled through every single one of my personal belongings. They stood there reading through my private thoughts in my diaries, searching through my dirty laundry hamper, and non-consensually filming me for their own records, and I couldn't do a single thing about it. It was violating and dehumanising, and I'm not quite sure I've processed it all.

Taking six police to raid someone's home who had paid their fine for doing something nonviolent does not cut it. Her experience was similar to someone else in the community. Trent Rojahn also wrote to me. He said that the police —

... entered my home, read my charges and arrested me from my living room. At the time, I did not have my mobile phone on me, they asked if I had one and I said "no comment". They then aggressively threatened to raid my house if I did not produce it. They gave me no warrant or grounds to seize my phone. Out of fear of a raid, I produced my phone which they took. I then spent almost 3 hours in a cell before being able to return home. About 6 weeks later and I have still not had my phone returned to me and have no explanation as to why that is the case.

It has scared me quite a lot. The idea that uniformed police can turn up any time, enter my home, aggressively take my property, without producing a valid legal means to act, is terrifying.

I agree. I think it is unacceptable. Of course, more recently we had the case of Violet Coco. Many know that she was made quite famous because of her protest on the Sydney Harbour Bridge. She did a peaceful direct action here at WAPOL, which also landed her in jail overnight. Interestingly, the next morning when she appeared in front of Magistrate Matthew Walton, he said that she appeared to hold “legitimate personal beliefs”. He also said —

“It is noble and commendable people have strong personal views,” ...

“It’s a fundamental tenet of Western democracy ... a functioning democracy ... it should be supported.

“You don’t have to go too far abroad to see the restrictions on personal freedoms and activism.”

Coco was ordered to pay \$500 in damages. I have one final example in which three others were detained after the Woodside annual general meeting, one of whom is a mum of three and someone I know from Fremantle, and kept in jail overnight. A colleague of one of the people arrested had their home raided at Murujuga and their SD camera card seized even though they were not part of the protest. This is a concern. There is a pattern here of excessive treatment of peaceful protesters and it worries me. Democracy is based on peaceful protest. The fact that women can vote is based on peaceful protest. In fact, some of the suffragettes actually were not that peaceful, but their protests were essential. Protest is an essential part of a democratic society. It enables social progress, it holds governments accountable, and it is the backbone for many of the positive changes that we have seen in not only environmental protection, but also women’s rights and of course workers’ rights. I am concerned that this heavy handling of protesters by—I will say again—a small part of the Western Australia Police Force is problematic and does not pass what I think is a reasonable way of acting.

What these protesters are protesting about is entirely legitimate. Every credible climate scientist on the planet is begging the political leaders in this place to stop new coal and gas projects. In WA, we do not have science-based legislated emissions targets, and we are still seeking to expand the gas industry. I understand why people are protesting; in fact, I admire it. In some ways, they feel it is the only way that they can try to bring the very big issues to the government’s attention, and that is why peaceful protests are very important.

We need to enable peaceful protests, and we need to keep this overreach towards peaceful protesters by police in check. I do not think it is good enough, and it is a trend that I am concerned is happening all over the world. It is certainly not something that belongs here in Western Australia. This place has been built on democratic principles and free speech. I raise the issue here by hoping to shine a light on this disturbing trend. I hope that in doing so, it is reversed and stopped because I think that we are a better state than that.

House adjourned at 5.52 pm
