

SYNERGY — CUSTOMER DEBT

292. Dr D.J. HONEY to the Minister for Energy:

I have a supplementary question. Why does the minister continue to ignore the plight of struggling Western Australian families who cannot afford his ongoing electricity price increases?

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON replied:

It is interesting. When the rebates that have been provided by this government are taken into account, the cost of electricity in Western Australia is down over the life of the government, as opposed to the 97 per cent increase when the member for Cottesloe's party was making the decisions. We have not doubled the price of electricity—that was you. The cost of electricity on the east coast is going up by 50 per cent over two years. It is going up by 2.5 per cent in Western Australia. It is true that the average debt has risen. That is because the number of people in debt has fallen. Because of the decision of the government to give out two rebates to all Western Australians, those with small levels of debt were eliminated. Unfortunately, it has meant that the people who are still in debt are the ones who have large debt.

Dr D.J. Honey: It is coming to the same level, though.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: No; the member does not understand mathematics. It is just simple. If all the small debts are eliminated, the debts that are left are the large debts. It is a factor of mathematics. We have introduced case management. There are 4 500 people who have case management whereby they engage directly with Synergy and they work together to reduce their energy consumption. We still have the hardship utility grant scheme, which we have reformed. The former minister showed great leadership to make sure that people got HUGS. It was not just given to Synergy customers. Now we make sure that they get financial counselling. If they have not paid their electricity bill, they probably have not paid other bills, and they might even be using payday lenders. We want not just their electricity problems dealt with, but the whole of their problems dealt with. The leadership shown by the former minister was amazing, and I know it is being continued by the new minister.

We have the Keeping Connected program. So long as people keep connected with Synergy and pay some contribution towards their bill, they will not be cut off; they will not be disconnected. We have a new hardship disconnection process. There can be as many as 117 touchpoints for somebody on their pathway. We have the household energy efficiency scheme, because the average customer in hardship uses almost 50 per cent more electricity than the average customer. If they can reduce their energy consumption, they will not get into hardship. People think that those in hardship are the people on fixed incomes. Actually, they tend to use a very small amount of electricity and they are very rarely in debt to Synergy. In fact, I personally know of people on fixed incomes who, because of the credits from the government, owe nothing and have not been paying a bill to Synergy.

We have a sophisticated understanding of this system. I will tell the member what we are not going to do. We are not going to introduce nuclear energy in Western Australia. I want to quote David Littleproud from 28 April. He said —

I firmly believe we must urgently consider other options.

He went on to say —

It's time to have a constructive, honest and mature conversation about the long-term solutions such as the emerging small modular nuclear reactors ...

Do members know what he said on 7 August? This is the National Party. This is what David Littleproud said on 7 August —

... I hope that we can —

Point of Order

Dr D.J. HONEY: I have a point of order.

The SPEAKER: I will take the point of order without interruption.

Dr D.J. HONEY: The answer the minister is now moving on to has nothing whatsoever to do with the question I asked.

The SPEAKER: Member, I think that is a matter of opinion. Minister, you have answered quite extensively and I would like the opportunity of allowing one more question today.

Questions without Notice Resumed

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: I will just sum up here. On 7 August, he said —

... I hope that if we can as a Nationals start that conversation now we've got our coalition partners signed up to it ...

In other words, the Liberal and National Parties want to introduce nuclear power, the most expensive form of electricity, which will push up everybody's costs and push more people into hardship.