

*Select Committee into Cannabis and Hemp — Final report —  
Medicinal cannabis and industrial hemp in Western Australia — Motion*

Resumed from 29 November 2023 on the following motion moved by Hon Lorna Harper —

That the report be noted.

**Hon SHELLEY PAYNE:** It is great to have an opportunity to continue some of my comments from the last time that we dealt with this report a couple of months ago. Again, I would like to thank the members of the Select Committee into Cannabis and Hemp for their work on this report: Hon Dr Brian Walker, Hon Lorna Harper, Hon Matthew Swinbourn and Hon Jackie Jarvis. I think the last time I spoke on this report I talked about the cannabis side. In the seven minutes that I have now, I want to talk briefly to the research that the committee did into industrial hemp in Western Australia, because that is also an important part of the committee's work. I particularly want to note recommendation 16 that talks about the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development and its investment into research in the industrial hemp industry. The finding encourages us to continue to provide financial support for that research and refers to the future opportunities for industrial hemp for food production, particularly in relation to plant-based diets. We all know that hemp seeds are highly nutritious, so a lot of this work was great.

I want to talk about some of the government initiatives to support the hemp industry and its development, particularly through the difficult time of the COVID pandemic. I hate to mention the word "COVID", but during the COVID pandemic, a lot of great initiatives helped a lot of small businesses.

The first one that I want to talk about is the Access Asia business grants that the government began in 2021, during COVID, to help our small businesses maintain their competitiveness in Asian markets and contribute to our economic recovery. I want to talk particularly about the money that was given to the Vasse Valley hemp farm. It was given \$10 000 through this program to help get its product into Asian markets. Members might have been to the Margaret River markets and seen Vasse Valley's products available now. If members have not tried them, I encourage them to try them. The hemp hearts, salad sprinkle, hemp seed oil and dukkah that it makes are great and can be added to some food products.

Some members might remember that last year's Plating Up WA, which Hon Jackie Jarvis launched, was done through the Buy West Eat Best program. It is great to know that hemp hearts were on the menu during the Plating Up WA program, which was held at 60 venues throughout Western Australia that served up Western Australian produce. It was the first year that it was extended internationally to Singapore.

Another program that helped the hemp industry is our value add investment grants. This was something else that came through in 2021 as part of the COVID recovery program. One company, Margaret River Hemp Processing, got a big grant of \$399 000, a funding boost for its hemp processing facility. A user of its products is Hemp Homes Australia, which builds houses in Margaret River. That was another great initiative of the ongoing value add agribusiness investment attraction fund that helped a lot of our businesses, alongside hemp businesses.

Another initiative I want to talk about is the regional economic development grants, which I have talked about a lot. The grants have done a fantastic job in our regional communities to help economic development and diversification and to bring jobs to the regions. The grant program has helped a number of companies trying to start up in the hemp industry, starting in 2022 with round 4. In round 4, Hemp Squared, which is a hemp lime block manufacturer, received \$100 000 through the program to support it to start commercialising its hemp building blocks. The grant helped it construct a new shed and purchase a pneumatic block press and some other equipment. Hemp Squared participated in a five-month business incubator program, the Harvest Accelerator agtech program. That great business development program has been running for a number of years and is supported by the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development. It was a great program for Hemp Squared to participate in, helping it in all aspects of its business development, including marketing, business planning, and looking at other companies and how they started up. I was pleased to go to the launch of the final program, at which Hemp Squared staff talked about what they had learnt through the five-month program and how it had helped their business start and develop.

Round 5 of the grant program also helped one of our hemp processors, Harvey Hemp, which received \$50 000 for scaling and expanding its project. I want to mention that it was great that the committee visited Harvey Hemp and heard some of its concerns about the processing it is doing. The report contains some recommendations about how we can further support Harvey Hemp with hemp processing to sell some of its products in other countries where recreational cannabis use is legal. That was great for round 5.

For round 6, we also supported some of the hemp businesses. Just quickly, because I am nearly out of time, a \$70 000 grant went to the Cannabis Botanical Distillery. Members who have been to the dam in Denmark know that they can buy ginger beer made of hemp. That funding will help scale up the distillery's manufacturing capability from 3 500 litres per annum to 35 000 litres per annum. I encourage members to visit that distillery.

**Hon Dr BRIAN WALKER:** First of all, I thank the members who spoke in my absence during the last session when I was taken down by COVID. I appreciate the help. I also thank Hon Shelley Payne for her response.

The first thing I want to say about the report, *Medicinal cannabis and industrial hemp in Western Australia*, is that I am immensely proud to have been a member of the Select Committee into Cannabis and Hemp and I am also immensely proud of the members of the committee. The highest standards of behaviour were required, for a number of reasons, but mainly because we were talking about a topic that is very sensitive, which is the idea that cannabis is something to be laughed at, disregarded or criticised in some way as being an illicit drug. Some people believe that the medicinal use of cannabis is often a cover for using cannabis in the wrong way. The committee members who were on board had never experienced cannabis before and were required to deal with a difficult topic, including the barrier that the use of medicinal cannabis is somewhat of an unknown quantity. The members were required to have open and receptive minds while facing potential attacks against them. Therefore, the highest standards of behaviour were required. I thank my fellow members, Hon Matthew Swinbourn, deputy chair, and Hon Jackie Jarvis and Hon Lorna Harper. The behaviour they exhibited in our long search was admirable, and I am proud to be associated with them. That was very important because had we not exhibited such standards, the reputation of this report could have come into disrepute, and that is patently not the case.

The challenges that we had to face were to keep an open mind and be able to research this topic at its deepest levels. A challenge for me, as members can well imagine, was that because I am a proponent of cannabis for medicinal use and for decriminalising all drugs because of a variety of very sensible reasons, I had to be sure that I did not put my own thoughts foremost into this report and overreach and make a determination beyond the capability of the committee. Rather, I had to remain open, clear and unbiased about the facts. Removing my perception of bias was one of my successes. I also thank the committee members for holding me back at times. The findings contained in this excellent report are a clear, balanced, fair and very exciting highlight of my political career, at least, and we can truly say that the report is groundbreaking. It sits in parallel with the report of Hon Fiona Patten of Victoria, who did a similar report on recreational cannabis.

This inquiry was a learning curve. There is a lot of stunning information in it that I will go through in a moment. The learning is still going on. Just today, I learnt more about the use of cannabis in treating ADHD and autism. To digress, I deal with this in my clinical career quite a lot. I have had a lot of success in managing autistic and ADHD patients by using cannabinoids. Today I learnt even more about its benefits and, in some cases, the possible risks of using cannabis were brought home to me. I can say that one of the recommendations of the report is to do more research. More research is, of course, always needed. We have just scratched the surface of the science of cannabis.

The committee received 81 submissions, which is quite a lot. I regret that some venerable bodies did not choose to make a submission, but that is part of life. The committee undertook some visits, including with members of United in Compassion. I make very clear the immensely good work that Lucy Haslam is doing. She is the mother of a young man who was dying of bowel cancer and was in great pain. She was the leading light in New South Wales for recommending that cannabis be prescribed as a medicinal substance for managing palliative pain, and that work is ongoing.

We also visited the south west. We mentioned a number of areas that have received financial benefit from the government, and we saw exactly what they are doing there. Just the other week, I was in Margaret River again to visit Margaret River Hemp Co. I looked at one of its hemp paddocks, which is used for building houses, and visited a hemp house, once again admiring its absolute perfection in nature. The stunning thing we discovered then is that if we were able to banish the red tape and have full use of the plant, an industrial hectare of hemp, if used completely, would be worth about \$23 million. In comparison, a hectare of wheat is worth about \$700 or \$800 a hectare. That was stunning information. The Select Committee into Cannabis and Hemp also had the great privilege of travelling to Europe to visit the Czech Republic and Germany, and also to Israel. What struck us in all of these areas—the south west, Europe and Israel—was the amount of scientific effort going into the development of cannabis as a medicinal and social product that can very much improve outcomes, compared with alcohol. As a medical practitioner, I was also struck by Israel's intention to identify individual cannabinoids and terpenes that could be tested on individual diagnoses to construct a valid, medically observed treatment plan or approach and the components of a healing herb could be used to manage quite major diseases. In fact, one thing we got from, I think, Dr Yuval Landschaft, who is in charge of the medical cannabis movement at the government level in Israel, was that they are using this form of cannabis to treat ovarian cancer. I thought that if this was just one part of our approach, what a wonderful tool we would have for use in the future, and there are many other uses we could find as well. I found that very interesting.

Much as it had been admitted from those who did not contribute before, some admissions mirrored part of the problems. Maybe I should not be surprised, but one of the contributions was from the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia, which was remarkable in its inability to provide any solid information beyond bias. The concept that there are major issues regarding fly-in fly-out workers and their safety at work using medicinal cannabis was roundly rebuffed as prejudice and ignorance, yet it continues to this day. I understand that Rio Tinto's zinc operation has now made clear in its new alcohol and other drugs handbook that it will not tolerate medical cannabis, even if it greatly improves patient outcomes or improves their ability to work without impairment. The bias there shines through. That was one of the things that the committee identified as one of the barriers to use of

medical cannabis. We saw a number of barriers there; the closed minds and anti-scientific approach to what we are dealing with, and the assumption that cannabis can be used only as a drug, has to be thoroughly banished. I think the committee did an excellent job in making that very clear.

We went on to discuss what cannabis is as a plant. It was demonstrated that something with over 100 cannabinoids, and terpenes as well, has the potential to derive, again, huge amounts of revenue, simply from growing a plant, whether for medicinal uses or industrial uses. Just the other day, I was talking with someone who came to me for medical cannabis, who has a company—I will not give any names because it is sensitive for the Australian Defence Force—that creates housing for electrical motors, which is bulletproof and bombproof. It is very useful for the Australian Defence Force. That housing is made from a combination of hemp, Kevlar and carbon. Here we are seeing the innovative use of a plant that could greatly enhance the ability of our armed forces to be protected in areas of great danger—one of over 20 000 potential uses for the plant. I think what disturbs me is the understanding that because of our ongoing prejudices, we are still not seeing investment in an area that would give so much benefit to our society. I am deeply hopeful that our current Minister for Agriculture and Food, who was a member of that committee, will bear this in mind when looking at further investment in hemp, especially in the south west.

[Member's time extended.]

**Hon Dr BRIAN WALKER:** Indeed, going on from this is the concept that with hemp as an industrial hemp product, we could move into markets with our partners in Asia and further afield, with great benefit to our economy, perhaps even overtaking our iron ore export economy, which reflects on a debate we have had in this house today.

I found it very interesting to read in the report that according to international law, cannabis is still a prohibited narcotic. I am interested in this because “narcotic” is a medical definition. Cannabis absolutely fails in every respect to merit the definition of a narcotic, and yet our laws are predicated upon the assumption that cannabis is a narcotic. From that assumption derive the laws that are making it so difficult to access the use of this plant either socially or medically, therefore inhibiting our ability to derive serious profits from industrial hemp. As politicians, are we able to medically define something, even if that definition is a false definition? Let us call it a lie. On that base lie, we now have international laws that are severely hampering the potential for countries to develop their own economies. As a committee, we did not go into this at all, but the evidence speaks for itself, when reading the report and the definitions and descriptions we have given. I think that this is another part of our groundbreaking report. We ought to point out that lies have no place in law.

Moving on from that, it was fascinating for me to discover that in Western Australia, the Department of Health has described a cannabis leaf as a schedule 9 drug. A schedule 9 drug is a drug for which no medical use can be found. This leaf, which has no measure of any higher function effect, has purely food properties. For example, four leaves made into a green smoothie would make an excellent treatment for COVID or for enhancing people's wellness on a regular basis and is certainly far tastier than kale in a green smoothie. I think that it has been described as a schedule 9 drug due to an abundance of caution on the part of people who believe or have bought into the concept that cannabis is an illicit, dangerous drug. I can see where they are coming from, but that concept has no basis in science whatsoever.

That led us on to the concept that we really ought to follow the advice of Hon Wayne Martin that after five years, we should take some action and revisit the Misuse of Drugs Act, as has been promised, because people are suffering. I hope that our report goes some way to helping ease people's burdens so that they suffer less.

Another main issue in the report—I am sure that members were expecting this—is tetrahydrocannabinol and driving laws. The government has given its response to our report, and I am very thankful for that. Most of the recommendations we made have been agreed in principle. The recommendation we made for THC and driving was that these laws should be revisited and rewritten. A working group has been formed, and I thank the government very much for its promise that there will be a good scientific look at the concept of THC and driving. I note that in today's paper there is mention of the world's first program for assessing driving impairment. This is a fantastic idea for the ability to test the safety of not only roads, but also drivers on the road, and not just for cannabis but for other drugs and also sleep impairment.

Again, this is groundbreaking. I think WA is leading the way in this. I hope this gets carried on into the THC driving working group. I have high hopes for that. We might, perchance, follow in the footsteps of Germany, the country we visited back in November 2022 and with which I was very much in love. Those carefully crafted laws are now coming into place to allow a society to develop in which medical cannabis and, indeed, recreational cannabis can be used and in which the safety of all is considered. As Hon Burkhard Blienert said in a discussion I had with him in Germany, they are protecting the health of minors—I am not talking about coalminers; I am talking about children. That makes eminent sense for me.

In the few minutes I have left I will go on to talk about industrial hemp. We need to go on to industrial hemp because that is where the vast majority of income from hemp could be derived by our government. Medical cannabis is quite

a small part of the potential benefits to our society and government. On the one hand, the wellness benefits that medical cannabis can provide to people is very important because people will begin to contribute better to society and to our gross domestic product, but, on the other, industrial hemp has a multitude of uses. The ability to use every part of an industrial hemp plant is severely curtailed by our fear of THC. As we all know, THC has caused not one single death. As a dangerous drug, we have to say that it is nowhere near being a problem. People have argued that if we gave industrial hemp to animals to eat, they would have THC in their bodies and that we should not eat that meat because we would get high. A question I posed in Parliament some months ago was: how many whole cows would we have to eat to get one high? I have not counted it, but having to ingest three cows in one sitting to get one high puts the point very clearly that the fear of feeding industrial hemp to animals is grossly oversauced. We ought to take a clear look at this, especially in view of the vast benefits that we, as a society, could gain from using a plant that has so many uses, ranging from pet bedding to making materials that can be sent into space as part of high-end scientific developments.

Hon Shelley Payne mentioned hemp as a food. Again, I could not encourage this more. I mentioned earlier the concept of using four cannabis leaves as part of a regular green smoothie. When I visited the hemp paddock, I sampled some of the leaves just to find out how fresh and healthful they were. I note, of course, that these leaves contain the acid form of the cannabinoids; they have not been heated. The leaves can be put into a juicer and used as part of a regular healthy diet. The leaves contain omega-3, omega-6 and omega-9 oils. They are a healthy supplement that could be used by everyone to their benefit. Indeed, the evidence is such that it could be used as a way to prevent and treat COVID. We are also looking at whether it could be a treatment for long COVID. How many thousands or millions of dollars could be saved by society if we used a health food rather than expensive drugs with little effect?

One area that the committee looked at was the issue of regulations and red tape. The abundance of red tape is making it difficult for people to access both medical cannabis and industrial hemp products. This is one area in which the government could take an active part in this process, by regulating honestly, openly and without fear of THC. It could reduce the regulatory and red-tape burden to allow a potentially innovative industry to arise that would take a forward-thinking approach to using a natural material that can grow abundantly. Hemp has the added benefit of transforming topsoil from a depth of a few centimetres to a metre and a half. It can also change the quality of topsoil and its microbiome, making it suitable to use in all areas. From a farming point of view, that would enable greater yields of wheat, canola and lupins. It would also enable a transformation of the water supply to our rivers and lakes. Of course, it would also have an effect on the microclimate. That is to say nothing of the potential for the industrial woods that we could create. Rather than chopping down trees, we could perhaps use this as a substitute to make very high-quality wood materials. It has the added benefit of being able to be harvested three or four times a year and can capture carbon, the price of which would substantially add to our state's financial bottom line.

**Consideration of report postponed, pursuant to standing orders.**