

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT ACT — SPECIAL PURPOSE ACCOUNTS

Statement

HON DR STEVE THOMAS (South West — Leader of the Opposition) [6.24 pm]: It gives me no pleasure to rise tonight to point out the complete lack of accountability this government applies to question time and the lack of answers we receive, and the arrogance of the government that refuses to answer fairly simple questions. If I were that government, I would be embarrassed by the lack of performance. I will raise a couple of issues tonight. First and most importantly, I received an answer to a question today that is a follow-up to a series of questions on special purpose accounts. On 6 April I asked —

(1) As at 4 April 2022, how many special purpose accounts are currently operational?

...

(3) As at 4 April 2022, what was the balance of all current operational special purpose accounts?

That question was not answered that day because the minister could not find the answer. He found the answer the next day, 7 April. The answer states that as at 4 April 2022, there were 24 Treasurer's special purpose accounts and in part (3) it states that as at 4 April 2022, the balance is \$19.1 billion. In question without notice 346 on 10 May I asked for a breakdown of those special purpose accounts, which the Minister for Emergency Services supplied. That was fine. Having examined that, I asked why the digital capability fund, the softwood plantation expansion fund and the climate action fund, which were all announced in the September 2021 state budget, were not included on the list. The list says—I am happy to provide a copy of it—that it is “as at 4 April 2022”. Why were these funds left off? The answer was that the list of the Treasurer's special purpose accounts provided in Legislative Council question without notice 346 on 10 May 2022 was at 30 June 2021. I asked how many accounts there were as at 4 April 2022 and what was the balance as at 4 April 2022. That answer came back. I would give the government a little slack on this if the answer had just said that there were these many accounts, and this was the balance. But that is not what the answer says. The answer to question without notice 295 provided the next day, 7 April, states that as at 4 April 2022 there are currently 24 Treasurer's special purpose accounts and as at 4 April 2022 the balance of that is \$19.1 billion—as at 4 April. Why did the answer come back then to give me the balance as at 30 June 2021?

I followed that up and I asked specifically why there were missing accounts in that area. I asked quite specifically today in questions without notice whether any of the accounts referred to in question without notice 524—the digital capacity fund, the softwood plantation expansion fund and the climate action fund—existed as at 4 April 2022. I would like to know whether the Treasurer, who is the Premier, in my view accidentally, or deliberately, misled the house. This is an answer provided by the Treasurer. He was asked specifically what accounts existed at a certain date and what was the balance. He responded by saying that at that date the accounts were “24 of these and the balance was this”. I then asked why accounts were missing. He came back and said, “Well, as it turns out, the answer was provided as at 30 June.” He says in his answer that it was as at 4 April 2022. He says in his next answer that it was as at 30 June 2021. I would have thought that a fairly simple question that could have been answered was, “Why is there a difference?” Why is there a difference in the answers that the Treasurer provided in two questions so close together? Surely that would be fairly simple: Did these accounts exist as at 4 April 2022 when I asked the question? Were they still coming? They were announced back in September last year. I thought that would have been a fairly simple answer.

Do members know what this government does—this government that committed to a gold standard of transparency back when it wanted to become the government? Part (5) of the question today asked whether any of the accounts existed. The answer, with arrogance dripping from it, was that the Premier had addressed my inquiries in relation to the Treasurer's special purpose accounts on multiple occasions as well as in the budget estimates process and that if I had any further genuine questions, the Premier would endeavour to provide a response. There is a genuine question: did these accounts exist at 4 April 2022 when the Premier provided an answer as at 4 April 2022? If they existed, why would the Premier not say that yes, they existed? If they did not exist, he is completely exonerated. Surely he would say that they did not exist at that point; that the government announced them in September 2021 but did not put them together until May 2022. It has been a bit tardy and the shadow Treasurer would go, “Oh well, you're a bit tardy, but whatever.” It could have been pretty simple.

The refusal to answer the question and provide the information is arrogant in the extreme. It means that this government has something to hide because it cannot answer the question. Tomorrow, I will ask a follow-up, which will be a very similar question. It has already been lodged that I intend to ask a question that says quite specifically: “Did the digital capacity fund, the softwood plantation fund and the climate action funds exist as at 4 April 2022; and, if yes, when were they opened?” Do members think I can get an honest answer out of the government of Western Australia—the Treasurer who would be the Premier—or is this another one of those “just ignore it” cases? When it gets uncomfortable, when they do not want to give us the answer, they display their arrogance in full force and just come up with the kind of rubbish that I received today. Let us see whether there is a little courage of their convictions. If I were the minister who had to give that response, I would be ashamed to give it. I actually miss the

Minister for Emergency Services because, on occasions, he will say he is not satisfied with an answer and will send it back to get a better one. I do not blame the parliamentary secretary who gave the answer; it is not his fault. He gave the answer he was given to give. He is probably not in a position to go to the Premier who is the Treasurer and say, “That’s pretty poor. I’d actually prefer to give an answer.” I was pleased today because he missed a bit of an answer yesterday, but followed it up today and it was very good. He is trying to do an honest job and I appreciate it. It is pretty hard though when the answers he gets given are the kind of arrogant filth that we heard today.

There has to be a better answer to parliamentary questions because we are suffering the contempt of a Treasurer who seems to think that he is above and beyond Parliament. I asked a second question today around the jobs created in the Collie Futures fund. I asked this question in September last year and the Minister for Regional Development provided me a fulsome answer, including the jobs that were expected to be developed. Even though I thought there was a lot of money for very few jobs, at least I managed to get an honest answer. I asked exactly the same question six months later—today—and I got a similar list of projects but, guess what? Any reference to jobs or how many jobs were expected to be created were very carefully removed. When I asked six months ago, I got jobs created to date and anticipated jobs. The minister was not ashamed to tell us exactly what the answer was then. Part (3) of the question today was —

What new full-time, part-time and casual positions have been created within each project funded in (2)?

There was no answer; there are no jobs. When this government is ashamed of its performance, it just does not answer the questions. Let us try to pick up the standard a little bit.