

APPROPRIATION (RECURRENT 2023–24) BILL 2023
APPROPRIATION (CAPITAL 2023–24) BILL 2023

Cognate Debate — Motion

Leave granted for the Appropriation (Recurrent 2023–24) Bill 2023 and Appropriation (Capital 2023–24) Bill 2023 to be dealt with cognately.

Second Reading — Cognate Debate

Resumed from 13 June.

HON DR STEVE THOMAS (South West — Leader of the Opposition) [1.15 pm]: I thank the President for the opportunity to make another appropriation speech. I know that members around the chamber, but particularly those opposite, very much look forward to appropriation speeches and the opportunity to reflect upon the government's economic management. It is not even Thursday, President, and it feels as though we are starting the week on too positive a note! However, I shall try to keep my exuberance down to a limited level and potentially not take the full allotment of time available to me.

A member interjected.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: Would the member like me to use the full allotment of time? I am sure that is possible. Members cannot see who I was looking at at the time.

Hon Stephen Dawson: Name and shame them!

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: Name and shame—who do I want to get rid of from the Labor Party the most? Now, that is not the question. Hon Kyle McGinn should not invite it; that is just ridiculous!

The PRESIDENT: Order! Let us focus on the question before the house, shall we?

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: I thank the President. Yes, it is easy to get distracted.

Let us run through some of the baselines since the budget, and then I want to talk about a few issues of substance. In the first instance, the government, having predicted in its budget last year a \$1.6 billion surplus for 2022–23, generously raised it to \$1.8 billion in the midyear review in December last year. It then announced a \$4.2 billion surplus in the budget back in May. We have to be a little careful, because it was announced by the then Premier who was the Treasurer as well at the time, and we have new people in all those positions who have not had much opportunity to impose themselves upon the budgetary process. However, as I have said publicly, the then Premier who was the Treasurer had to announce a \$4.2 billion surplus, but, at the same time, as we are well aware in this house, hid a number of things away. I think he was actually embarrassed at having two massive budget surpluses in a row—\$5.8 billion a couple of years earlier and \$6 billion the year before—and finally having to say, “Yes; we have another massive multibillion-dollar surplus.”

As it turns out, he probably could have relaxed a bit, because Queensland broke the Western Australian records on the basis of coal exports with a \$9 billion surplus that financial year. However, I think the Premier who was the Treasurer was a little embarrassed about his plethora of wealth coming in from a range of sources and having to announce another multibillion-dollar surplus. In a year when it was not necessary, he once again held over dividends from government trading enterprises of another \$1.2 billion. If the government saves \$4.2 billion in surplus, and has to add \$1.2 billion in retained dividend earnings from GTEs, it is actually a \$5.6 billion surplus. Funnily enough, it is not significantly different from the \$6 billion budget surplus of the year before, which at that point was the largest budget surplus in the history of any state in Australia. When taking into account the government's hidden stuff, once again the Premier who was the Treasurer had a massive amount of money.

It is sad. I know members opposite will be disappointed, but I suspect the era of Scrooge McDuck budgets has passed us. I suspect that next year the same comparisons will not be able to be made, because I think corrections will slowly come into play. The average in Western Australia is a four-to-five-year period and it has been four and a half years now. As members will know, February 2019 to now, a bit past February 2023, is just over four years. We are now four and a half years into the boom period. I suspect that the boom has another year to run; that is probably all we will get. Once again, we had a massive budget surplus based on iron ore royalties and the GST correction. We still have those discussions around the GST. I do not want to repeat much of what I said in my budget speech, but there have been a few developments.

I went and listened to the federal Treasurer, Hon Jim Chalmers, at a lunch yesterday. He once again said that the GST deal will not be changed. The federal Treasurer presents very well, but he did not say much yesterday. He came to Western Australia and effectively told us what Western Australia does. I thought most people in the room probably knew that already! He is not a bad fellow, but if he is potentially aspiring to leadership and the Prime Ministership, he might need a new speechwriter. He came along and told us that Western Australia is a mining state and how much it generates, which I think everybody kind of knew. That was a bit of free, gratuitous

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advice for the Treasurer of Australia. I am sure his staff will pick that up and take it on board, except for the poor old speechwriter, who might be out on his otherwise. It was probably not his best work, but he at least came back and said that the GST deal will remain. I think that is probably true. He obviously did not mention that the GST deal was put in place by the previous Liberal government—that would have been one step too far—and that various Labor governments to date had resisted doing that.

It was ultimately put in place under Mr Morrison as Prime Minister who, as Treasurer, had instigated the review. I am sure that members opposite are incredibly grateful to the former coalition government in Canberra for the work it did to deliver the GST fix, but it will be interesting to see it go forward.

Hon Kyle McGinn interjected.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: Listen to this bit; this is important. Do not encourage me, says the Leader of the House!

The question is, of course, how this will go forward. Members might have read the *Intergenerational report 2023* that recently dropped. I mean, the previews are always out in the media first. Again, I do not think this document said an enormous amount considering what it cost to produce. It probably did not tell us a lot of new things, but it did demonstrate what Treasury had said previously—that is, that nobody is expecting another budget surplus, except the accidental one that Hon Jim Chalmers tripped over on his way into Parliament House last financial year. There is not supposed to be another one until the 2060s. Forty years down the track, we will be looking at 40 years' worth of budget deficits. I suspect that the GST arrangement will not change under Labor, not because it would not like to change it but because, firstly, it would not be worth the political pain in Western Australia to undo the work done by the previous federal Liberal–National government, and, secondly, the federal government will effectively have budget deficits for as long as it exists anyway. If there are going to be budget deficits, it will not be worth the cost of topping up the no-worse-off agreement with the other states, if that is extended beyond its current life span in a couple of years' time.

According to Treasury, Australia will be looking at having fairly significant budget deficits for the next 40 years. I take some comfort from that. It is probably not worth any future government significantly changing the GST deal to correct an imbalance in their own budget books because, according to the intergenerational report and last year's Treasury predictions, they are going to be so out of balance for 40 years that it will not matter. I suspect that might be the saving grace for the GST deal staying in place for Western Australia. That might become important, because I think we are coming to the end of this boom. Obviously, the GST deal underpins us when we are in a boom. I think we are towards the end of the biggest boom that Western Australia has ever seen. As we correct, the GST will correct as well, because the calculation involved is based on own revenues. If the 75 per cent floor is in place during the next boom, which it will be—it will go up from the current 70 per cent floor—that will be important for the investments of Western Australia. I think we can take some comfort from the fact that, a bit by accident, neither this Labor government nor future conservative or Labor governments are likely to undo what the previous coalition government did federally in underpinning the GST return for Western Australia because it will not be worth the political pain, especially if they have budget deficits anyway. I took a bit of comfort from that; I think that is important.

Of course, the GST deal caused some jealousy. The previous Premier who was also the Treasurer was very good at lecturing eastern states' leaders about what a good financial manager he was. We heard rumours that the Premier; Treasurer would be moving on. I thought the coverage was a bit too glowing, which is always a little bit hard to take. The media either love you or hate you. There is no need to reference where they put me, because we probably all know, but that does not matter! The highlight for me was the article in the daily newspaper written by journalist Joe Spagnolo, who I think is a very good journalist, who said that one of the issues was that the Premier; Treasurer did not think he got enough credit for his economic management. I thought that was fantastic. It is a good lesson for what we ultimately call the vomit effect. I am referring not to what the new Premier of the state referred to—dogs returning et cetera—but to what we call the vomit effect in politics, in that you have to say something long enough and frequently enough that it makes you feel nauseous to repeat yourself one more time, but the message that you are trying to get out there is just starting to get through. Politics is a long game, not a short game. The message that the financial situation of this government was more by luck than management had finally started to get through. The then Premier, who was in retirement mode, was a bit upset that that reality was starting to be recognised. I am really pleased, because I do not think anybody ran a harder campaign than I did to point that out through those years, much to the chagrin of those opposite, who took umbrage and, in a completely unruly manner, interjected on me when I made those comments.

The reality is that there was a lot of luck involved, identified, if nothing else, by the statement made by the then Treasurer, Hon Ben Wyatt, when I asked about iron ore staying above \$US90 a tonne. Bear in mind that this was the middle of February 2019, so four and a half years ago. Treasury's scripted answer for the Treasurer was that the prospect of it staying above \$US90 a tonne was "highly unrealistic". Obviously, we have had this massive boom and good times, with cash rolling into the banks, although not just through the iron ore royalties, which I think was

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\$10.8 billion last financial year. We are in August now and the price is still \$US109 a tonne. The predicted budget surplus of \$4.2 billion is interesting because it uses an iron ore price that I thought was overly optimistic. My projection for my budget figures was \$US107 a tonne; the government used \$US112. I thought that was unusual, because Treasury Corporation told us that the average over the 2022–23 financial year was \$US109. My estimate might be slightly low and the government's estimate might be slightly high. That is a complete reversal of three years' worth of debate in this place about iron ore prices going forward, so that is interesting. The government predicts a \$4.2 billion surplus, bearing in mind that the hidden \$1.2 billion is not included. The \$4.2 billion baseline figure in the budget is based on \$US112 and a bit a tonne, so I think it might be a couple of billion higher. My budget prediction in my pre-budget presentation of \$4 billion might yet come pretty close. I am going to try to beat the last budget, when I was \$19 million out on a \$6 billion surplus. I want to see whether I can get close to that, because there is no little joy in beating Treasury to estimates. It takes a lot of work, but, by gee, it is fun if you can manage it! I reckon I am going to get pretty close again this year. I think we are looking at a \$4 billion surplus, but bear in mind that \$1.2 billion is hidden. The \$250 million put into special purpose accounts is not hidden in the budget, but the government trading enterprise transfer is. Even if the government is down to \$4 billion, it will still be a \$5.2 billion surplus, which will be the third-biggest surplus in the history of Western Australia. There are a couple that fit in the middle, so it will probably make the top 10 in the history of Western Australia. It is still a massive surplus; the government has done very well.

I will give everybody a bit of background on how much money this government has in its money bin, in which it has fallen over its feet to land. When talking about the appropriation bill, we really need to focus on the expenditure rather than the income side, so we are more focused on precisely what the money is being spent on. The government is probably overspending on a couple of things and dramatically underspending on a couple of things.

I could spend a lot of time talking about the blowouts around Metronet but, for the most part, I am happy to leave that debate to my good friend Hon Tjorn Sibma. I simply make the point that the budget for Metronet has gone from \$3 billion to \$11.5 billion. The headline numbers are probably enough; I do not need to go into the intimate details. It is interesting that it is the only blowout. I tried to spruik an opinion piece on other blowouts in the state, which were fiercely resisted, mostly because they are in transport. It appears to me that the transport minister, who retained that portfolio and took on the role of Treasurer, seems to lead a gilded life in the media—no criticism allowed.

The other blowout that is really interesting relates to a project down my way called the Bunbury Outer Ring Road. It was also in the budget appropriations. The original estimate for that project was about \$700 million. The government is not bad at doing business cases. It does not often say what they look like, and it never releases them, so we cannot tell whether certain business cases are any good. I am still waiting for some tier 3 business cases that this government has promised twice and never delivered over a few years. I am not holding my breath for them. The government is about to do a business case on the Greenbushes rail line. I will not hold my breath waiting to see that either. It did one for the Bunbury Outer Ring Road. A few years ago, the current minister, who is also now the Treasurer, said it would cost a bit over \$800 million, which is fine. The current budget for that project is \$1.35 billion—a blowout of half a billion dollars on the watch of the Minister for Transport, Hon Rita Saffioti. That is \$500 million. I cannot get the media interested in it. I do not know whether this works in the Labor Party, but if anyone questions the role of the Minister for Transport, maybe they are drummed out of the Labor corps. Possibly, there is that much power involved, but I did not think that it would extend to the media as well. Nobody appears to be particularly interested in a blowout of half a billion dollars. The interesting thing about this blowout—\$850 million to \$1.35 billion—is that we can argue that the scope of Metronet increased and therefore the costs increased. Others who know the project better than I do would probably suggest that the government is still gold plating things that it cannot deliver, but that is okay.

In relation to the Bunbury Outer Ring Road, the specifications went down, not up. A project costed at \$850 million that blew out to \$1.35 billion—a blowout of half a billion dollars—had its scope reduced at the same time. Where there were to be flyovers, there will now be roundabouts. Not only that, in the past 12 months, we worked out that there will be roundabouts with traffic lights because the government cannot afford to finish the project with flyovers, as originally proposed. What a great outcome! At the same time as we will have this massive disruption to traffic flow, we have a blowout of half a billion dollars in the Bunbury Outer Ring Road budget. What an astounding piece of work! Well done, Minister for Transport!

All the members who go to my lovely south west for long weekends and visit the vineyards and the beaches—it is the best part of the state, so they are all welcome—will hopefully bring their wallets and purses with them and invest in local tourism. As they go down the Bunbury Outer Ring Road, as there will be no flyover, and they find themselves on a roundabout with a truck that is trying to move around it, and a set of traffic lights, they should just remember who to thank. Next time Labor members go down south, when the road is finally open, they should remember to thank the Minister for Transport, Hon Rita Saffioti, for holding them up on a roundabout—part of a project that blew out by half a billion dollars as the scope was reduced. That is the performance of the Minister for Transport,

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who is now the Treasurer. Interestingly, the two roles were combined, which is probably okay. When the Treasurer looks at the Minister for Transport, who had a \$500 million blowout on a project, now it is the same person. “Oh, you blew out your project by half a billion dollars. That’s okay; I don’t really mind”, to which the Minister for Transport says, “Luckily, I don’t really mind either.” I hope the government’s Expenditure Review Committee is having a good fierce look at this, but I suspect it might just be put under general project costs and it will not go down to that level. That is the standard that the government is now setting for its expenditure.

I do not intend to take my full time, but I want to comment on a couple of other key issues. In relation to the energy portfolio, every day feels like a Thursday. I have had enormous fun in the past few weeks. For six months, I have said that the government’s current transition plan is not working. There is insufficient investment in generation, transmission and storage. All those things are massively short. The government can use its own documents to look at this and work it out.

Like most members here, I like my statements to be accurate and I like to be right, funnily enough. I really like it when government reports come back and say, “You were right, honourable member.” I love it when I read a government report and think that I said that six months ago, and now we have a government report that says the same thing. I will run through a few of those that occurred in the past six months. I will tell members what happened. I think the former Premier believed all the media statements that were put out by the government, which is very dangerous. It has a mountain of spin doctors, and they are there for a reason. It would be really useful if the government took its own media statements with a grain of salt. I think the previous Premier actually believed the press releases that said that the energy system is perfect in Western Australia, until December last year when the Australian Energy Market Operator put out a report that said that Western Australia would potentially run out of gas. I think the then Premier had a virtual heart attack and said, “Holy mackerel, I believed our energy system was perfect to date and suddenly, we have a problem. I didn’t think we had any problems in energy.” What did he do? He did a couple of things. Interestingly, he allowed a committee to look into the domestic gas reservation system in Western Australia. That was a good move. I am not confident that it will look at all the things it needs to look at. What will happen after that?

Unfortunately for the government, we then got other reports. In May this year, the government put out a document called *SWIS demand assessment 2023 to 2042: A future ready grid*. Acronyms are always difficult. If we call it SWISDA, hopefully Hansard will not have a meltdown. Maybe it is better to call it the demand assessment. What did it say? It said that we need massive increases in transmission, storage and generation, to the point at which it thought that because renewables are unreliable, it would have to generate anything up to 50 gigawatts. That is 50 000 megawatts of electricity. It currently produces fewer than 10 000 megawatts. It needed a five-fold or six-fold increase in generation. It will also need 4 000 kilometres of powerlines and massive storage investment. During its transition process, the government announced that it would do some of these things. A year or so ago, when the government announced that it would close down coal-fired generation in Collie, there was \$3.8 billion in the budget for a transition. That is a drop in the ocean that cannot deliver anything like the transmission required. We will come to a bit of detail. Funnily enough, the figure of \$3.8 billion changed. The government announced that the project would cost \$3.8 million. That figure dropped to \$3 billion in the budget. The new Premier, Hon Roger Cook, said at a “leadership matters” breakfast this week that it would cost \$2.8 million.

I do not know whether he got \$2.8 billion and \$3.8 billion confused, but the reality is that it has dropped \$800 million, and if we believe the new Premier, it has dropped \$1 billion. We have lost one-quarter of the transition funding before we start, and that \$1 billion has been dropped from a wholly inadequate budget. If the government wants to get to a transition out of coal by the end of 2029, as it says it does, it will have to invest massively, but it is not doing that.

Of course, the government has its own report. Unfortunately for the government, at the beginning of this month, the Australian Energy Market Operator came out with another report. I think the poor old Minister for Energy needs to unsubscribe; it is probably not doing his ticker any good. AEMO came out with another report that says we need massive growth because we have a potential shortfall in electricity as well as gas. The government needs to invest in—guess what—the same things that the opposition has talked about. It needs to invest in generation, transmission and storage to make the system work. The experts in the field came back and said that the government needs to invest more to make the process work. Through the demand assessment, Synergy is saying that the state needs a massive increase in investment. The government’s own departments and AEMO are saying the same thing: we are likely to run out of gas and electricity. Gosh, the government is doing well. It is fantastic. We went from a point back in December when the former Premier thought everything was perfect to “Holy mackerel! We have to push the panic button by the middle of this year!” There have been, of course, a few changes to that.

One interesting thing is that I have publicly and repeatedly said that the way to transition is to use gas as a transition from coal so we can ultimately transition to renewables. That is not uncommon. I suspect that the Minister for Energy already knows where my policy will end up because I have not been particularly quiet about it. It may come as a surprise to members, but, as I keep saying, I am not overly shy. I think it is too important a discussion not to

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have in the public arena. Bear in mind that, ultimately, I think we have the same transition in mind: we will get to a renewable future. I am still committed to becoming net carbon neutral by 2050. I think we need and will have a renewable future in Western Australia. It will come. As it comes, the government or governments that bring it will need to keep the lights on and the air conditioners running, and do it at a price that consumers can afford. We were talking about the vomit effect a bit earlier; get ready for that one. Scrooge McDuck is out, and that is coming in. We need an energy transition that will keep the lights on, keep the air conditioners running and be at a cost that consumers can afford. We will hear that a million times. I will tell the government that so often that we will both feel nauseous by the end of the process. It needs to be an energy transition that does that, and the current transition does not and cannot deliver that.

We had a little announcement today, which has been very nice to see. Funnily enough, I put out a media release, and it might be the very one that brings down the government—you never know. It is simply a reflection of the fact that I am pleased to see that the federal and state governments are now agreeing with me. I think that is fantastic. The federal government announced that it would put \$3 billion into transmission in Western Australia. That is great because no current budget for transmission upgrades exists in Western Australia. If we look at the budget papers, we can see that the \$3.8 billion that became \$3 billion and is now apparently \$2.8 billion does not have any money for transmission in it. It is all based simply on additional generation and storage. This is good. For six months I have been saying that the transition component does not work. The government says, “No. It’s all okay. We don’t need any extra money for that. That’s all fine.” Today, the commonwealth and state announced \$3 billion. This money is not in grants, which would have been nice. It is in low-interest loans or shared equity that is coming from the Clean Energy Finance Corporation. Interestingly, most of it will end up in the north west in the graded system, which is fine because it is likely to go directly to industry. It will go not so much to the big industries and players that can manage their own energy demands but to the smaller players that want to get in. I think that is a reasonable outcome. Bear in mind that these are loans and not free handouts. The loans come with a reasonably low interest rate, but that is a useful thing.

Obviously, the south west interconnected system will probably miss out, and the government’s own data says that the south west integrated system needs 4 000 kilometres of additional transmission. Depending on whether the government goes to lower kilovolt-amps, the cost of that 4 000 kilometres will probably be well over \$1 million a kilometre if it is at 330 kilovolt-amps but upwards of \$2 million a kilometre if it is at 500 kilovolt-amps. That 4 000 kilometres would be between \$5 billion and \$8 billion worth of investment. It would mean spending more than the state government’s total budget just on that little bit of transmission component.

Most of it will be co-investment, I suspect, with industry. The solution for this government is that industry will ride in to save us. Industry will be the white knights on the white horses. No disrespect is intended; the colour is unimportant. Industry will be the saviour of this government when it rides in. In fact, the minister has frequently said that industry will pay for much of the expansion of the transmission lines and for some of the increase in generation because industry will ultimately be the biggest part of the increase in demand. That is great. What does that look like? It looks like privatisation by stealth. I think it is great. Well done, government. The government is privatising the electricity sector in Western Australia by stealth, and I agree with the government. If the biggest benefits will go to the private sector, the private sector should invest. The really interesting part of it is that if the private sector is being asked to build the poles and wires, who will own them at the end of the day? I do not mind if the private sector builds, owns and operates it; that is fine. In those circumstances, the government will have to have a state-level access arrangement through regulation so new players in an area can get access to a privately built, owned and operated transmission line. I think that is probably the perfect solution. What will this government do? Will it let the private sector run transmission lines or will it nationalise them? If the private sector builds them, will the government take them over and then charge the private sector for their use? What is it trying to do?

It will go to one extreme or the other, which I think is fantastic. I love to see a government that puts its credentials on the table. We will see either a Labor Party that will privatise by stealth the transmission of energy and Western Power in Western Australia or a party that has swung to the left. The communists will get the private sector to build it and then nationalise it. I cannot wait to see which of those outcomes this government puts in place. Is the government’s closet Liberals or closet right-wingers looking to privatise by stealth? Just quietly, that is the path I would go down. Or, is it at the other end? Are the communists in disguise looking to nationalise private investment? It will be really interesting to watch over the next little bit to see the final point here. I suspect that common sense might reign.

Not that the Labor Party has not privatised before, of course; the Labor Party privatised wind generation. The Labor Party has privatised some components of the energy system, and I think that we will see more and more of that. It is a very sensible approach. I think the privatisation approach of the current Minister for Energy is fantastic, and I fully commend him; that should crush his preselection if he runs again. I think it is a good approach, and I would be doing exactly the same thing. The government has an issue with energy and energy supply. It is not being handled well. The batteries that the government has announced will not come close to managing the system.

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The other really interesting thing that has come out of it is the generation component. Storage is simple; there is just not enough of it. Hon Dr Brad Pettitt is absent from the chamber on urgent parliamentary business, but during the estimates process even he suggested that to get the job done needs 10 times the government's intent for renewables—with 410 megawatts of wind capacity being the sole contribution to additional renewable generation outside what people individually put on their rooftops. Whether it is big wind farms or something else, he is right: the generation component is completely inadequate. Storage is even worse. The last government's expectation of the cost of batteries is very heroic or quite brave, but we will see. Let us say it costs between \$850 000 and \$900 000 a megawatt hour and see where that lands. It is still probably one-third to one-fifth of what will be required to get the job done.

I think the interesting part is in generation because whether we go to the demand assessment or the Australian Energy Market Operator report, there is not enough gas and there is not enough generation. Even the Minister for Energy had to acknowledge in the estimates process that it is likely that this government will build more gas-fired generating capacity and I think he is right. I am really pleased that he has come around to my point of view. I think industry and the opposition have pushed him and I am glad the Minister for Energy has seen the light. He has come around to our point of view. Having said there would be no more generation et cetera in the estimates process, the government said although a lot more gas generation might not necessarily be needed over the year, we will need more gas capacity when we need it. The government is therefore likely to build more gas capacity. That will be really interesting. That is exactly what it should be doing. If the government is going to close coal, gas is used as a transitional tool until it gets to a renewable future, in whatever time frame that is. It will not necessarily be the time arbitrarily decided in advance because they do not know how quickly it is going to happen. The minister is right that additional gas capacity will be needed. The *SWIS demand assessment 2023 to 2042* suggests 3 900 megawatts of additional gas capacity will be built across the whole south west interconnected system. Most of that will go to the private sector and will be run by the private sector. It might go along privatised power lines, President, in the new privatisation agenda of the Labor government. I hope it does not come out with the "Save Western Power" argument ever again because it has completely walked away from that path. The government has an issue that it needs more gas. Its own reports tell it that more gas generation is needed. The minister acknowledged in estimates that more gas is needed.

The funniest thing is that this government not only imported 103 000 cubic metres of coal to Collie—that should be the punchline by itself! I should not have to add anything after that. The Labor Party imported 103 000 cubic metres of coal from Newcastle to Collie. That joke should stand by itself but it gets worse because it did not work. The government had a madcap arrangement to keep the lights on by importing coal but the coal did not blend well and did not get used well. Of the 103 000 cubic metres of coal that came in, about three quarters has finally been burnt. It was supposed to keep the lights on in January and February this year. We are in August and a quarter of it is still left, waiting to go. Was there a bigger waste of time? I have asked how much it cost. The government's answer is that it might want to do it again so they cannot tell anybody. Holy mackerel! Please, Labor Party, please import another 100 000 tonnes of coal from Newcastle because I have had more fun with that than I have had with anything else. Please, if government members think they need to keep the costs secret because they might do it again, do it again. I would love to know the cost. I might have to wait for the 25-year rule, or whatever it is, to find out. It is a punchline by itself. It is absolutely hilarious. However, it gets worse. Not only did the government import 100 000 tonnes of coal from Newcastle to Collie, it announced a couple of weeks ago—it was a Thursday so, if we were going to have fun, it was the appropriate day—that it was going to extend the life span of unit 6 at Muja power station because they could not afford to shut it down in the original time frame. Wowzers, that was fantastic! It is shifting out so it will now close officially in April 2025. Gee, I wonder why the government needed to get it to April 2025? Hang on a minute, when is the next state election? It is in March 2025! The government announced an extension of the coal generator unit 6 at Muja that it did not need any more to a month past the next election date. Wow! If I wanted cynicism in action or if the government wanted to give me the best laugh I have had this year, it has succeeded. The government has extended the life of Muja 6 at Collie by six months to just past the next state election. If members opposite think this government has its energy transition policy right, just have a look at that. The government announced the closures but has to extend its life. I am nearly done. I am going to finish on this. This is what will happen. Under the current time frame and investment, those closures will have to be extended for years to come. I suspect, unless the government actually invests the \$15 billion that will probably be required to transition, we will see coal move out to 2036 and maybe beyond because it cannot be delivered. Additional gas will be needed. By 2036, that additional gas may well be in place because the government has finally acknowledged that it needs additional gas to see it through. That is great; the government might get that bit right. Billions more dollars have to put into storage and transmission, neither of which the government is currently doing.

Looking at the appropriation of this government, it is almost a shame that I do not have unlimited time because it is so much fun. This process is a mess. Government members believed for five-and-a-half years how well they were doing. Suddenly, everybody is telling them they made a mess of it and that they better pick up their act. Guess what? They better pick up their act. If the government privatises for the solution, I have no problem with that.

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I probably will not give them too much of a hard time over it in the years to come—or maybe I will! Members know the dying person in the water grasping at straws. In energy policy, government members are grasping at straws because it does not work. We will just sit here and watch. I think the crisis will be in 2027 not 2025, but if we get a massive heatwave through 2025, we might be in the position we were in 2008 when the Labor Party could not keep the lights on. I can see history repeating itself. Let us have a look at this. We will see where we get to. The reality is that the government has a mess to fix. Before government members start believing all their own press releases and positivity they say about themselves, their performance and expenditure of money has a long way to go. I think that is the message of this budget and the appropriation bills before the house.

HON NICK GOIRAN (South Metropolitan) [1.57 pm]: The consolidation of the Appropriation (Capital 2023–24) Bill 2023 and the Appropriation (Recurrent 2023–24) Bill 2023 before us authorise the expenditure of \$36 billion of taxpayers' money. From 26 June to 29 June this year, the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations facilitated the scrutiny of these requested appropriations of \$36 billion. That scrutiny has confirmed the Cook Labor government's continuation of the legacy of gold-standard secrecy. That scrutiny has exposed the Cook Labor government's arrogant aversion to accountability and has laid bare the Cook Labor government's wrong priorities. Here are some examples of this continued obsession with secrecy, aversion to accountability and disturbing misdirection of priorities that the hearings into the requested appropriations revealed. I will begin with the Department of Communities. Accurate and timely information to Parliament is not merely desirable; it is, in fact, essential. I quote some words from 17 March 2016 uttered in this place —

Accurate and timely information to Parliament and its transparent dissemination is essential. Secrecy, obfuscation, avoidance and inaccuracy, whether deliberate or not, and dishonesty, are in fact the enemies of our parliamentary democracy.

Those were the words of Hon Sue Ellery on 17 March 2016, yet on 28 June this year, there was not one episode of misinformation but a litany during a single hearing with the Department of Communities. I draw members' attention to page 25 of the transcript of Wednesday 28 June this year when the following exchange took place between the minister at the time who was representing the Department of Communities, Hon Jackie Jarvis, and I. I asked —

Minister, there are around 340 children in the care of the state at the moment who do not have a caseworker. We are going to get the updated figure on notice pursuant to the earlier undertaking. What is the number of caseworkers who currently have what I would describe as an undesirable case load—that is, greater than 15 cases?

Hon Jackie Jarvis replied on behalf of the government and said —

I have been provided with a very detailed spreadsheet which shows as at 2 June, there were zero with a case load of more than 15.

To which I said —

As at 2 June, there were no caseworkers who held a case load greater than 15.

Hon Jackie Jarvis said —

That is correct.

On 6 July this year, Hon Sabine Winton, the Minister for Child Protection, wrote to Hon Peter Collier, the Chair of the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations, and said, in part —

On page 25, in response to a question from the Hon Nick Goiran MLC and following receipt of information from the Director General, the Hon Jackie Jarvis MLC, as Minister representing the Minister for Child Protection, said, “*there were zero with a case load of more than 15.*” The answer should have been 77 caseworkers.

I repeat the words of Hon Sue Ellery on 17 March 2016 —

Accurate and timely information to Parliament and its transparent dissemination is essential. Secrecy, obfuscation, avoidance and inaccuracy, whether deliberate or not, and dishonesty, are in fact the enemies of our parliamentary democracy.

During the budget estimates, I asked about undesirable case loads. Keep in mind that these are our Western Australian workers who have responsibility for looking after children in care who cannot be in their own family of origin; they have been removed from that family by the state and given over to these caseworkers. I was trying to ascertain how many caseworkers had an undesirable case load, which is more than 15 cases. The undesirability was not being judged or determined by me but in accordance with the industrial agreement that the government has with those

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caseworkers. I was told by the minister, after taking advice from the director general, that the amount was zero. In actual fact, that was grossly incorrect; the answer was 77.

Although it is undesirable, at least in the case of those 77 caseworkers, a caseworker had been allocated to those children in the care of the state, but what about those without one? I will quote from the information provided in answer to a supplementary question to that particular estimates session. I asked about this issue at that time. I said —

If it is taken on notice, would we be able to be told how many did not have a case worker as of 30 June? We are talking about the number of children in state care who do not have a caseworker. I asked whether we would be able to have that information if it was taken on notice. Hon Jackie Jarvis said —

Yes, we can. So, we can take that on notice.

Then, having taken the information on notice, the information that was provided to the committee in a supplementary answer was —

The Department of Communities advises:

The data requested is not available as at 30 June 2023.

In other words, when a minister of the Cook Labor government says, “Yes we can”, that is to be interpreted by honourable members as, “No, we cannot.” They say, “Yes, we can”, but in actual fact, no, they cannot. Frankly, that is hopeless and it is no way to fulfil the duty of a responsible government. Sadly, as I promised, this particular hearing had a litany of these types of examples of those things that Hon Sue Ellery described in 2016 as the enemies of our parliamentary democracy.

Having dealt with undesirable case loads and having dealt with children who do not even have a caseworker, what about the unlawful case loads? Those who are familiar with this will know that under the industrial agreement, caseworkers are not supposed to have more than 15 cases per person, but they can, in exceptional circumstances, have up to 18. Therefore, it is unlawful to have more than 18 and undesirable to have more than 15. Having already dealt with the undesirable number of case loads and, even worse, the amount of children who do not even have a caseworker, I was pursuing the issue of unlawful case loads.

I will again quote from the answer that was provided as a supplementary question to the hearing on Wednesday, 28 June, 2023. One of the departmental officials is quoted in the transcript as saying —

A senior caseworker can carry up to 18 cases for a short period of time if they have the capacity to do that.

I then said —

That is right, but what about more than 18? If it is more than 18, it is unlawful, and that is what I want to know. Has that happened at any stage over the past month? I accept that it is dynamic and that you are working to the best that you can during the course of the day, but at the end of the day, has somebody had more than 18 cases on a particular day?

Hon Jackie Jarvis, the representing minister, said —

Noting that the data we have with us today is only updated monthly, I would ask that we put that on notice.

The government took that on notice. The information specifically taken on notice was —

Have any caseworkers over the past month had a caseload greater than 18 cases?

The response that came back was —

Data is not available for 28th June 2023. As at 7 July 2023, there were 69 case workers with more than 15 cases and 0 case workers with more than 18 cases.

We do not need to know, or particularly care, that on 7 July there were zero caseworkers with more than 18 cases. That is great. Do members know what that means? It means that on 7 July 2023, the government was complying with the law of the land. That was not the question. The question was: at any time during the course of the month has any caseworker had more than 18 cases? It is difficult not to draw the conclusion that after all this time and all those persistent questions about undesirable and unlawful case loads, no-one in government actually knows. What is the situation today, on 29 August 2023? Does any caseworker in child protection have an unlawful case load? Would anyone in government be able to answer that question?

Based on the history, I suggest that the answer is no; no-one would have any idea whether that is the case. The alternative explanation is that someone in government does know and simply does not want to fess up and say that over the course of the last month on this many occasions they have broken the law and have had caseworkers with unlawful case loads. Which is it? Instead, we get these enemies of our parliamentary democracy, as Hon Sue Ellery

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refers to it. Accurate and timely information to Parliament and its transparent dissemination is essential. Hon Sue Ellery did not say it was desirable, she said it was essential. I agree with her. Secrecy, obfuscation, avoidance, dishonesty and inaccuracy, whether deliberate or not, are the enemies of our parliamentary democracy.

I have dealt with the number of undesirable case loads and with children who do not even have a caseworker, and I have tried to get to the bottom of whether the department is operating lawfully. One would think that Minister Winton would want to know whether or not her department was operating unlawfully. The Parliament certainly wants to know and I certainly want to know. When these basic accountability systems in child protection are seemingly considered a hindrance by ministers and officials, the ones who suffer are the children in care, and in the worst-case scenario they literally go missing.

I quote from the transcript of the estimates hearings of that same day, Wednesday, 28 June, when there was this litany of examples. The exchange is on page 24 of the transcript —

Hon NICK GOIRAN: Since 12 July last year, the director general and the Minister for Child Protection were supposed to be getting daily updates with regard to any missing children. Has that been occurring?

Hon JACKIE JARVIS: Yes.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: Minister, do the daily updates include more than just how many children are missing in care and, more specifically, whether any are unaccounted for?

I pause there to inform and emphasise to future readers of this transcript that the language and the distinction between “missing” and “unaccounted for” is an invention of this government. It is not my preferred choice of language to describe one child as missing and another as unaccounted for. Good luck trying to genuinely reconcile the difference between “my child has gone missing” and “my child is unaccounted for”. Nevertheless, that is the government’s choice and the arrangement it has in place. Hon Jackie Jarvis went on to say —

I will ask the director general to respond.

He said —

The daily updates that both myself and the minister get provide a status update for missing children but it also explains when a child ceases to become missing and may move into another category. To the extent that they are either found or we receive information from third parties that would suggest to us that they are no longer at risk in the same way, they still may be unaccounted for, for example. But yes, we do get a lot of detail about those individual children on a daily basis.

Those who have access to the transcript will then see, peculiarly, footnote 1 inserted here. At the bottom of the footnote it says —

A letter of clarification about this part of the transcript can be accessed on the committee webpage.

If we spend the time to look at this letter of correction, suddenly, director general Mike Rowe, on 6 July 2023 had this to say —

On page 25 of the uncorrected transcript, the Hon Nick Goiran MLC queried the information included in the daily updates on children in the care of the CEO who are missing or unaccounted for. I confirm that the daily updates include information about children in the care of the CEO who are “missing” and “unaccounted for, not in contact”.

The transcript of the hearing continues —

Hon NICK GOIRAN: For example, as at today’s date, there are seven who are unaccounted for but in contact. That information would have been provided in today’s daily update?

Mr ROWE: It does come at the end of the day but yes, we can anticipate that they will be provided.

To be clear, the government has now invented three categories. There is missing children. There is this curious term “unaccounted for children not in contact”. In other words, they are missing; they are not in contact. I would think “unaccounted for and not in contact” a fair description of a missing child, but apparently this government can understand the distinction between those two categories. The third category is “unaccounted for and in contact”. In this hearing on 28 June 2023 I specifically raised these daily updates, which I have been calling for for years, and I am grateful they are now happening, with the director general and the representing minister and asked whether they included a child who was unaccounted for but in contact. On that day, the director general, Mr Rowe, thought that was the case, because he said —

It does come at the end of the day but yes, we can anticipate that they will be provided.

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Evidently, that was wrong, as per the correction. What confidence can we have when, for literally years, I have been asking the government to make sure that it is the stand-in parent responsible for these children who have been taken away from their families of origin? It is not safe for them there so the state has taken them into care. The government, as the stand-in parent, as the state, needs to know whether or not those children are missing. It needs to know whether they are unaccounted for. It needs to know whether it is in contact with them. Thankfully, about a year ago the government changed the system and made sure that the director general and the minister got daily updates about this, but there is no point in having daily updates if the director general does not even know what the daily updates do and what they contain. On 28 June, he evidently thought that they included a child being unaccounted for and in contact, but then had to correct the record. This is not some kind of technical matter that we could imagine of a director general with huge responsibility over this mega-department, with all of the expenditure and the people he is looking after, as well as children in care, not being across detail that no human could possibly be across. This is not that scenario. This is the director general and the minister getting a daily update. They get an update every single day to tell them whether a child is missing, how many are missing and how many are unaccounted for in contact and out of contact. If they were getting the daily update, actually reading it and, dare I say it, digesting it, they would be across this information. Yet again, on a multitude of occasions in one single hearing there was this behaviour that has been described as being an enemy of our parliamentary democracy.

Over the last 20 minutes or so were dealing just with the Department of Communities. Remember, the bills presently before us deal with expenditure to the tune of \$36 billion, and, at a glance, the sum for the Department of Communities listed in the recurrent budget is something to the tune of \$2.5 billion, if we include administered grants and subsidies. More than \$2 billion is a substantial portion—let us put it that way—but this is in the context of \$36 billion of taxpayers' money being spent. That is just the Department of Communities. What about the other departments?

I now turn to an exchange that took place on the previous day, Tuesday, 27 June, at a hearing with the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. I quote from a letter to the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations that I have a copy of, which is publicly available, signed by the director general, Emily Roper, on 30 June 2023. In this letter, the director general says —

During the hearing the following exchange took place

***Hon Nick Goiran:** Minister, so that briefing (regarding the independent review into Western Australia's COVID-19 management and response) took place approximately sometime in the last week or so. Did it result in a briefing note or some similar document being produced?*

***Hon Sue Ellery:** I am advised, no.*

It is a pretty clear opportunity to take advice. She gets the advice, then tells the parliamentary committee, “No.” It is presumably something that cannot be confused with, “Yes.” The answer is no. Director general Emily Roper comes along later and says, “Actually, two documents were provided prior to the meeting.” Once again, not only was it inaccurate information that was provided, but certainly it was not timely. By the time we get the opportunity to deal with this matter—it is now August—we could have had the opportunity to deal with this in June. As is the culture with regard to this particular government, where are these documents? It should not be difficult to comprehend that if, in a parliamentary hearing, someone has been asked about the existence of documents and that someone says, no, they do not exist, and in actual fact they do exist, firstly there should be an apology for having done that; and, secondly, the information should be produced. Is the Cook Labor government going to voluntarily provide this late information to Parliament? Is it going to do that? If so, when is it going to do that? Is it the case that having obstructed the hearing, presumably unintentionally, through the provision of inaccurate information, the government will now sit in some form of paralysed state and not provide any information to Parliament?

Hon Sue Ellery, the Leader of the House, on 17 March 2016, said —

Accurate and timely information to Parliament and its transparent dissemination is essential. Secrecy, obfuscation, avoidance and inaccuracy, whether deliberate or not, and dishonesty, are in fact the enemies of our parliamentary democracy.

When representing the Minister for Health on 27 June, the Leader of the House tried to imply that, when it comes to the budget to deal with vaccine injuries and their investigation, it might be the responsibility of another department. Let us keep in mind that these vaccines were mandated and, in my view, in the instance of some Western Australians, coerced. The only time that I hear this government utter the word, “coercion,” is when speaking on domestic violence; specifically, the term that is used is “coercive control”. In my view, outside of that, this government demonstrates a reckless indifference to this act of bullying. What an absolute insult it was for those who suffer vaccine injuries to hear from the Leader of the House that not one cent has been appropriated to the research and investigation of vaccine injuries. That took place on 27 June, as reflected very clearly in the transcript.

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The Cook Labor government's show of contempt for COVID-19 vaccine injuries is, frankly, careless governance that undermines transparency, public trust and, ultimately, public health. Remember, however, accurate and timely information to Parliament is not merely desirable, it is essential. I acknowledge that the Leader of the House is not the minister in a primary capacity, but in a representative capacity, but four weeks after this hearing the director general of Health wrote to the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations on 25 July 2023 and said —

To the following question from Hon. Nick Goiran ... “Sorry. To be clear, I am only asking for the Health budget. I am not asking for any other agencies. Not a single dollar is being spent within Health’s appropriation towards the investigation or research of vaccine injuries?”

The Minister responded, “No, there is not.”

I provide the following information to correct the response:

“I would like to advise that in the case of serious adverse events following immunisation, practices undertaken by clinicians and immunisation experts as part of clinical treatment, such as assessing severity and causality, can be classified as investigations into reported vaccine injuries.”

It begs the question, that four weeks later, the director general finally decided to try to correct the misinformation given by the Leader of the House in a representative capacity. It was evidently wrong, but I still say it was misinformation, not disinformation, because I believe it was done unintentionally and not intentionally. The question then arises: how much is the appropriation towards investigation and research into vaccine injuries? We are about to pass the combination of bills that say \$36 billion of taxpayer money can be spent on various things, as detailed during parliamentary estimates, which are conducted by the committee whose responsibility it is to scrutinise these things. We specifically asked the question: how much is the health appropriation towards this?” We were told, “Zero.” There is nothing; not one cent, not one dollar—nothing. Yet, the director general sent a correction to the response. If he corrected a response, it follows that the response that was provided was incorrect, which is an enemy of our democracy, according to the Leader of the House. We are left with no information as to how much the appropriation is towards investigation and research of vaccine injuries. It was all well and good for the director general to come along four weeks later and say, “Actually, what Hon Sue Ellery told the parliamentary committee was wrong, and this is the actual answer”, yet he did not even answer the question. How much is the appropriation towards investigation and research of vaccine injuries? It appears that the answer is no longer zero but some other figure. Is the government going to tell us that? Will we get that information from the responsible minister in the reply to the second reading debate? If we were to go into Committee of the Whole House, which I hasten to add I have indicated to the minister responsible that it is not my intention to do so and I intend to comply with that commitment, would we get this information? Would we be told the actual answers, and not the false responses that we got during the parliamentary hearings? Do we simply shrug our shoulders and say, “Oh, well; that’s life. That’s life in the WA Parliament”? We invest time in a parliamentary committee that has specific responsibility to scrutinise the budget and wrong information is provided to the committee on multiple occasions. Ministers and public servants then write to the committee to acknowledge the wrong that they have done—no apology, mind you. I have not found one member of the Cook Labor government who has apologised. There is a culture there—that is a point for another day.

Is there not a responsibility and duty, having acknowledged the wrong, to correct it? I would have thought so, but, again, on the history, the pattern of behaviour is arrogant contempt for this process and, instead, it will be left to members of Parliament to persist before the information is finally extracted—seemingly begrudgingly and unwillingly. Meanwhile, seemingly at first instance, not one cent of the appropriation was set aside for vaccine injuries, but during the Department of Premier and Cabinet hearing, it was revealed that two providers had been contracted at a cost of \$3.5 million to get rid of expiring RATs. At that time, we had three warehouses full of them, costing \$19 700 a week to maintain. The Auditor General had something to say about this in the *Financial audit results: State government 2021–22: Part 2: COVID-19 impacts* report, in which she states —

An initial intention by Health entities to spend \$3 million on RATs for health workers and returning travellers rapidly evolved to purchasing \$440 million worth of RATs—around twice the cost of the Bunbury Hospital redevelopment. Along with the \$140 million spent by the Department of Finance on RATs, public entities spent the equivalent of 10% of the State’s 2022 operating surplus on diagnostic plastics without demonstrable evidence of clear, considered and coordinated planning or ongoing advice as to the necessity of the expenditure.

In other words, courtesy of no planning or communication between departments, the then government spent \$580 million, and we now have tens of millions of wasting RAT kits. In that context, victims of vaccine injuries were told at a public hearing in Parliament, “We are not spending a dollar on you people. We are not going to

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research and investigate these vaccine injuries. Not one cent will be spent. But we will spend \$19 700 a week to maintain these three warehouses full of RATs.”

I turn to the latest debacle involving the Department of Justice, specifically Corrective Services, and its evident lack of communication with WA police on the tracking of missing fugitives. At the WA police budget estimates hearing, it was revealed that return to prison warrants are managed by the rapid apprehension squad. The committee was told that this squad executes around 300 of the 800 warrants handled by WA police, and is notified weekly by way of an email from the Department of Justice. At the time, a mystery fugitive was at large in our community and had been on the run for more than 225 days. WA police would not say who this person was. To the best of my knowledge, the WA Police Force still has not told us who this person was. I might mention to members, pleasingly, that this missing fugitive, who had been on the run for more than 225 days, has now been captured. They were captured in July, I am pleased to report, but we are not to be told who this person is and what this person’s crimes were. They were out loose as a fugitive in our community for more than 225 days. The answers that finally came back confirmed that this individual has been recaptured.

Meanwhile, during that hearing, under no circumstances did WA police want to talk about Kiernan Donnelly, a violent sex offender who was also at large. Unbelievably, of course, members may recall that in answers to some previous parliamentary questions from me, we were told that despite the fact that Mr Donnelly’s whereabouts were unknown as far back as 6 February, it took until 13 April before the Prisoners Review Board decided to cancel his parole. Senior ministers in government need to take responsibility for this. The government does not want the people of Western Australia to know who these fugitives are.

Once again, misinformation was provided to Parliament. The Department of Justice was asked during budget estimates: how many return to prison warrants are currently outstanding? The department took the question on notice, and in its reply said that, as at 29 June 2023, there were six return to prison warrants. It is pretty clear. The Department of Justice was asked how many return to prison warrants were currently outstanding and took the question on notice. After the hearing, it came back to the parliamentary committee and said that, as at 29 June, there were six, so it is pretty clear.

Members can imagine my surprise when we returned from the winter recess. I asked police earlier this month, on 8 August 2023, how many return to prison warrants were outstanding. In fairness to all concerned, remember that the Department of Justice said that as of 29 June there were six return to prison warrants. I asked the question in August, so it is understandable that there might be some variance in the information provided. It was hoped that there would be fewer return to prison warrants because fugitives had been captured. Imagine my surprise to be told that there were 63 return to prison warrants outstanding! One might think: a lot of people escaped and were on the run between 29 June and 8 August, with a mass release of fugitives into our community in July. That is a possible explanation, but it is not the explanation. The explanation is that once again we have been provided garbage answers in response to estimates questions. Of these 63 return to prison warrants, one has been outstanding for 36 years, one has been outstanding for 25 years, one has been outstanding for 18 years, and multiple have been outstanding for 17 years. Some have been outstanding for 16, 15, 14, 13, 12, 11, 10, eight or six years—the list goes on. Obviously, when the department came to us and told us that there were six return to prison warrants outstanding as of 29 June this year, that was garbage. Clearly that was not the case!

What are members supposed to do with this? If provided with an answer to a question, the reasonable person will take that as the answer and assume that the answer is verifiably correct. If every time we ask a question we get an answer and have to assume that the answer is wrong, the entire system does not work; it is unworkable at that point in time. As I say, this is no trivial matter: we are talking about confirmed offenders at large in our community. It was quite unbelievable to be told in those hearings that the Prisoners Review Board and the Department of Justice, including the director general, simply have no idea how many of these fugitives are on the run. In fact, at a later hearing, when we had the police commissioner in, to the best of my recollection, he seemed to think that there were about 20 return to prison warrants outstanding. All of that was wrong! There were 63 warrants at the time.

Pleasingly, I think what has happened here is that the intense scrutiny and focus on this has made somebody somewhere in government wake up and go, “Far out; we had better actually have a list of these fugitives that we are supposed to be trying to track. We had better prepare a list, because this is getting seriously embarrassing that we cannot even answer these questions.” Somebody has not only prepared a list, but, thankfully, seemingly decided, “We had better try to track some of these guys down”, and the numbers have decreased. Over the course of this month alone, the numbers have decreased not once, but twice, when I have asked the questions. Remember, originally there were 63 outstanding, then subsequently I was told that there were 58 outstanding. That was when we last sat. The media got hold of this and asked some further questions, and the number reduced to the tune of 54.

We have not been told this in Parliament, however, as it would be asking far too much for a government minister to come in here and correct the record. We have this thing at the start of the day called statements from ministers and parliamentary secretaries. Would it be too much to ask for the Minister for Police, Attorney General or Minister

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for Corrective Services to instruct their representative minister to come in here and make a statement to say, “This is the situation with regard to this fugitives fiasco. We are grateful that this has been brought to our attention and we are now on top of this and these are the steps that we are taking”? That would be what a responsible government would do. Amongst various other things, it would keep me quiet on this topic because there would be nothing further to address. There are plenty of other things that I could move on to address. Having these dangerous offenders at large in our community cannot possibly be something that any member of Parliament is comfortable with, so let us collectively do something about it. We should be told who these most-wanted fugitives are. I cannot make a case for these people who have already been convicted of an offence. They have thumbed their nose at the parole system by either escaping from jail or from early release in some form. That is the calibre of person we are talking about here. I cannot make a case for the government to keep the names and crimes of those people secret from the people of Western Australia. There should be an obvious most-wanted list and we should all be able to identify and report them to police. I am going to continue to pursue this matter until such time as that is done.

In the remaining few moments that I have, I will indicate how disappointed I am that during our parliamentary budget estimates process in which we are responsible for scrutinising the budget, we had not just one episode, but a litany of episodes of inaccurate and untimely information. I have not even had the time to get through all of them in my file this afternoon. Hon Sue Ellery has previously said, and I agree with her, that these episodes are an enemy of parliamentary democracy. We expect better.

HON NEIL THOMSON (Mining and Pastoral) [2.42 pm]: It is timely to recollect and consider the very good advice of Hon Sue Ellery about the need for accurate and timely information to the Parliament. That is not only desirable, but also, I think, essential. I want to pick up on a specific matter during the committee process that resulted in some interaction with the Department of Treasury and the treasury portfolio. It resulted in some interaction with the Under Treasurer and the minister. I want to make sure that we are clear about the actual facts of the matter.

The single biggest issues currently facing Western Australians is the cost of living. It is a massive issue right across Australia. We have seen how inflation has been running at record levels for many years. Interest rates are sitting at seven per cent for mortgages and we have seen things like fuel costs having an impact on commuters, particularly in the regions.

I want to particularly focus discussion on page 316 of budget paper No 3. It contains a table that estimates impacts on a representative household. I raised some questions about this during the committee process. I felt that I was given an unsatisfactory answer. I did some further assessment of my own to try to understand what is going on. This table looks at the impact of government fees and charges on a representative household. There has been an increase of 2.4 per cent in terms of the headline impacts. I know that the Cook Labor government was at pains to present the virtues of that very low rate. I think it needs to be reviewed and reconsidered.

I want to really focus on the issue of stamp duty, particularly on general insurance. During that interaction, I was told that there had been no change to the methodology of this particular table. That is patently untrue and incorrect. I suppose when a member is on their feet trying to ask questions about this, they may doubt the information that they have had a look at to try to work out. However, over time I have had the ability to go back and review that process. I will outline some of the points in my response to debate on the Appropriation (Recurrent 2023–24) Bill 2023 to provide some background and try to put something on the record. Maybe we will get a clarification and a more accurate and timely table in the future on the cost of living, which concerns most people in Western Australia at the moment.

The reality is, if someone owns a home, they do not need to read the budget papers to realise that their insurance costs have gone through the roof. There have been massive increases right across Australia and Western Australia, particularly for people who live in the northern parts of the state. It is actually quite difficult to get insurance. For example, it is not uncommon for householders in Broome to have insurance rates around \$10 000. My insurance is over that; it is about \$12 000 and I think the stamp duty on that is about \$1 200. That is the situation. There is a lot of chatter on social media about it with people trying to find an insurer because it is often quite difficult to get insurance. This has been an issue.

Let us look at this table. I went over seven budget papers to try to ascertain whether or not my assertion that there was a change in methodology was correct. I thought I had maybe made a mistake during that interaction and I wanted to clarify whether I had. The stamp duty period for 2016–17 was estimated using 2017–18 insurance premiums. The table operated consistently throughout all the years up until 2023. I will not labour through every single year. In 2021–22, the stamp duty period was estimated using 2022–23 insurance premiums. If we work up the table, there are figures from the budget year ending in 2018 in which the representative household spent \$211.95 on stamp duty. In the following year it was \$216.72, then \$219.14, \$236.96, and \$246.11 in following years. This year, it was \$246.11. Why? That is because as is said in the footnote, the stamp duty in 2023–24 was estimated using 2022–23 insurance premiums to isolate the price impact. That is the exact wording that is used every year, but for some reason

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we have gone backwards. We have missed a year. We end up with no increase at all—zero—because there is no difference. Exactly the same numbers were used in the previous year. This piqued my interest, obviously, because I do not like to be wrong. I thought, “I will double-check that.” I thought I was right, but I thought I had better check to make sure. Having spent most of my career in Treasury, I know that Treasury people do not like to be wrong, either. I am sure that it is an honest mistake, so let us see whether we get some sort of clarification from the minister representing the Treasurer in the next few days.

Let us think about this because the impact on revenue is significant. If we go back and do some digging in the tables on revenue for general insurance stamp duty, it is significant. The headline figure was 2.4 per cent, but it is clearly not 2.4 per cent. The increase in the cost of living from general household charges for represented households in Western Australia is not 2.4 per cent. It cannot be because that figure is not the right figure. For some reason—either an error or an omission—the next year’s estimate has not been put in there.

That is really important because much information is out in media land at the moment about the impact of insurance costs. I refer to an article by *Choice* on 1 June 2023 headed “Nine out of ten Australians facing higher home insurance costs” that read —

Contrary to the industry code of conduct, many policyholders aren’t being told why their premiums went up.

They are not being told. Fortunately, the midyear review provided an inkling about why insurance costs are going up because that was explained. Page 7 of the last *Government mid-year financial projections statement* states —

- higher taxation revenue (up \$3 billion), —

That is over the forward estimates. The \$3 billion additional is —

mainly due to:

- payroll tax (up \$1.8 billion), with higher collections in the year to date underpinned by mining sector activity and a stronger outlook for private sector wages growth across the economy;

That is fine. We have higher wages growth. Personally, I like to see payroll tax being trimmed back because it is a tax on jobs, but it has always been part of our tax-collection system, and it is an important part. It is great to see that that is increasing. As I said, the higher collections in the year to date are underpinned by the mining sector. It also says —

- insurance duty (up \$608 million), —

That was in the midyear review of only six months ago. The \$608 million over the forward estimates had to be adjusted. It continues —

with cost pressures in the insurance market (such as from adverse weather events) flowing through to premiums;

We basically have a tax on hardship and crisis. We know the terrible impact of weather events such as that in Kalbarri—people are still going through the process of patching that up—and the challenges in the Kimberley, and these have resulted in higher insurance premiums. Obviously, weather events around the country are having an impact on us, but we see \$608 million in the midyear review alone.

While I am speaking, I add that the impact of COVID on new vehicle supply chains resulted in additional motor vehicle licence duties of \$430 million because the second-hand vehicle market went through the roof in Western Australia. People paid more for a second-hand car than a brand new car because people had to wait 18 months or longer for a new car. The midyear review says —

... with new vehicle wait times and prices remaining elevated since Budget;

I am reading this from the midyear review —

- total transfer duty (up \$192 million), reflecting stronger activity in both the residential and commercial property markets;

Some additional transfer duties were due to the housing market as well.

I go back to the table that shows the 2.4 per cent increase, which I find unbelievable. It needs to be reviewed. It would be great to get a good explanation from Treasury because the figures presented are quite low when compared with the lived experience of people and the amount of stamp duty paid on their insurance. The figure for each representative household is currently in the table as \$246.11. I did some back-of-the-envelope numbers. Please excuse me on this, but I would like some clarification. I went through multiple budget papers, and I looked at that table and forward estimates numbers for 2021–22 and 2023–24. I put a gap in there. Members can see what I was trying to do—go back in time and look at what was predicted for insurance duties. It was predicted on page 175

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of the 2021–22 budget paper No 3 that \$751 449 000 in insurance duty would be collected in the forward estimates for 2023–24. That was predicted. In this year's 2023–24 budget papers, that number is \$994 715 000. That is a massive increase. In fact, the calculation is that it is a rate of about \$350 a person in insurance duty and an increase of \$85 for each person in Western Australia. That is a significant amount for each person. If we look at the number of dwellings, it is an increase of \$211 and a figure of \$864 for each dwelling.

I note and concede that some commercial numbers are probably part of these insurance costs. Probably some boffin in Treasury sits down with a spreadsheet, calculates it and tries to take it out because we are trying to look at households. There might be a figure in there. I concede that it might be lower, but there is a massive discrepancy between the figure of \$246 a household—which is actually last year's number because we do not have a new number—and the \$864 number that I came up with by taking the amount of stamp duty and dividing it by one million. I used one million to calculate it because Western Australia has about one million households.

I stand to be corrected on that particular aspect, but I do not stand to be corrected, as I was corrected by the Under Treasurer at the time, that somehow the methodology has not changed. It might have been an honest mistake and somebody just forgot to check the new number and put it in. I put it on notice that Treasury should go back and look at that and provide a bit more background about how this number is calculated so we can understand the impact of stamp duty. This stamp duty is a revenue-collecting process and a tax on the very thing people need; insurance is an essential requirement to protect people's assets and housing. It is a massive figure. As I said, it is not unusual for someone in the north of the state to pay \$1 000 in stamp duty every year on insurance. It is really not unusual. Fanciful numbers that somehow add up to a 2.4 per cent increase only in the cost of living from government charges just do not stack up to me. It is a serious issue.

We really need more accurate and timely information, please. It is not only desirable, but also essential. People are suffering right now. Going back to the *Choice* online article, there have been premium increases across the board. We are paying a lot more for insurance and people are not really being told by their insurers why costs are going up. I know it is a big issue in my region because when the Morrison government was in power federally, it set up a reinsurance pool that was supposed to result in reduced insurance costs. Sadly, we did not see that work through the system. With the way it was structured, I do not know whether it was going to do the job but we did not see insurance rates come down. People are paying huge insurances because of the impact of concerns about cyclone activity and so forth. Reinsurance arrangements are made between insurers to make sure one insurer is not impacted by one event. It means the weight of the insurance pool is shared around the world. That was a well-intentioned measure, but while one arm of government was trying to reduce insurance rates, the other arm was making a massive revenue boon from this issue. That is my request.

I have mentioned stamp duty on motor vehicle insurance. I referred to a figure of \$400 million or so being collected in the midyear review. Again, this all adds to the cost of living. It adds up on top of people's ability to drive safe vehicles or afford reliable vehicles, for example. That is particularly the case in the regions, where road safety is a very important issue. To use the words of the shadow Treasurer, we should not be rolling in the money bin just for the sake of it. Because cost pressures from other factors have been driving up prices, there should be an opportunity for the Western Australian government to say, "Actually, the money's pouring in the door. Maybe this is an opportunity for some reform to insurance duty." The online insurance duty overview says duty is calculated at 10 per cent of the total premium paid in a general insurance policy. Those costs are going up and we are not getting a different service. People are just getting the protection of their assets to make sure they can drive their car and get it replaced if they have to. They can get their house repaired or rebuilt if something untoward happens. This is a real opportunity for the government to look at the cost-of-living factor that everybody is focused on at the moment.

I quoted the midyear review. Members can go through it. I will not bore them by going through table after table but I have been through them myself and looked at the duty figures for every line item—whether it be transfer duty, motor vehicle duty or insurance duty. It is important to note two elements in the midyear review: \$603 million of additional funding in the midyear review, which continues to go up; and \$430 million in motor vehicle insurance stamp duty. That is over \$1 billion as a result of the COVID pandemic and supply chain disruptions, and additional natural disasters across Australia. It works out at \$1 billion in additional funding and that continues to head north.

We know that the state government has been up for a considerable amount and that the commonwealth has been up for a whole lot more for repair and reconstruction in the Fitzroy Valley. It has been a significant cost and I assume the total cost for that reconstruction will eventually have a "b" in front of it—it will be something like a billion dollars. I am sure the final figure will be pushing up half a billion dollars or maybe more, who knows? The reconstruction of those houses will be a lot. It would be great to see some easing of the cost-of-living pressures and some transparency about the impact of government fees and charges on the cost of living. It would also be great to see a more thorough and comprehensive response to the natural disasters in the Kimberley, particularly for people in the East Kimberley. I have spoken to many businesses and the impact of the transport disruption has been profound, as has the uncertainty on the transport future. They do not know about the future. By all accounts, it looks like the project to rebuild the

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bridge is a good project. It looks like there is a big effort there. I have no doubt Main Roads Western Australia and the contractors involved, including Georgiou Group, are doing everything they can to make that happen. Despite what was said in the other place, where I believe someone made some comment that I do not support that project, what I have been disappointed in and have raised on multiple occasions is the certainty around the transport future and the alternative arrangements that will be put in for the next wet season. Here is an opportunity. With all the money that has come in, I would have thought that there would be more certainty. I refer to a question I raised on 10 August. I will raise it again because, to me, this is unacceptable. The answer provided no certainty or clarity on what the future holds for people in the East Kimberley who rely on that connectivity across our north. I quote from *Hansard* —

I refer to the upcoming wet season in the Kimberley and the failure of the state to reopen the Great Northern Highway in 2023 for up to 105 days.

For 105 days, we had no ability to traverse that river apart from with a very small barge. It was like the government was happy to slug everyone on stamp duty and take advantage of the windfall that came with the floods, taking the 10 per cent. The government was happy to take \$1 000 every time people up north had to pay for their insurance on their home. It was happy to put out a report that did not show any increase, which was wrong. That is not correct, which is my point. The government was happy to do that but it was not happy to go the extra mile to make sure it could get connectivity across the Martuwarra Fitzroy River when the water was high. The government made all the excuses in the world about having extra rain and then unseasonal rain. Go back and look at the science, folks. Go back and look at the numbers. We always get the lecture to go and look at the numbers. They will see we do get rainfall in the dry season. I said it was 105 days and then Hon Kyle McGinn interjected. I said —

Do you think it is a joke?

Hon Kyle McGinn: No, I think you're a joke.

That is the kind of attitude we get when we ask serious questions. The debate continued with —

The PRESIDENT: Order! Order, members.

We get a bit of that from time to time. I then continued —

Immature behaviour.

- (1) Has the minister developed contingency plans to ensure heavy transport between the West Kimberley and the East Kimberley is uninterrupted by coming summer rains to the greatest extent possible and reasonable?

It is a very mature and sensible question to be asking in this place, but I got a very childish response.

I also asked —

- (2) If yes, what are those contingency plans?

What are they? I advise members opposite to listen for a moment because they might learn something.

I then asked —

- (3) How should transport companies plan to maintain supplies into and out of the East Kimberley from October 2023 to April 2024?

That was the essence of the question. They are the questions that any company, business or store owner in remote communities like Mulan have if they run a store or provide fresh vegetables. Listen to the voices of the region. These are the questions people are asking. The answer from Hon Stephen Dawson was —

I thank the honourable member for some notice of the question.

- (1)–(3) The state government is currently investigating options for maintaining some level of access, including provision for freight, over the Fitzroy River this wet season. Main Roads will continue to liaise with industry in preparation for highway closures over the upcoming wet season.

What an absolutely lame response. It provides no certainty at all. The Western Australian government got a hardship windfall due to floods, fires, disasters and the pandemic worth \$1 billion in stamp duty alone. That is not to mention anything else going into the coffers of the Western Australian government. That \$1 billion was in the midyear review, and it is going north, yet that is the best the government can do to provide certainty to the Western Australian business community. I find that response and the childish attitude also very shameful. It is beneath this Parliament and beneath the government of Western Australia to treat the people with such contempt. That is what I say today. We need to listen to people's concerns and deal with these huge challenges. I also ask the good people in Treasury who might be watching to consider providing some clarification, because that is vital for us going forward.

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I will raise my last issue in closing. Members know how important government funding is for our agencies to ensure that we continue to have this vibrant democracy that we all love and cherish. Providing accurate and timely information is essential to our Parliament and our vibrant democracy. I ask members to consider checking the submissions made to Electoral Boundaries WA and the Electoral Distribution Commissioners in the most recent round of consultation that is currently underway about the boundary redistribution before the state election. If members have the time, they will see an excellent submission by Hon Neil Thomson that provides some excellent advice. In particular, I hope that when the Electoral Distribution Commissioners meet again, they give it some consideration. It is important that our agencies are properly resourced to do the job they need to do. Remote and regional Western Australia faces unique challenges that impact on it very much. I will give members a headline fact that I strongly suggest members consider. In the seat of North West Central, only 61 per cent of the adult population is enrolled. Blind Freddy could tell you that relates to the level of engagement.

A requirement of the Western Australian Electoral Commission is for the Perth-based agency to undertake to get out there and talk to people and make sure that they are enrolled and that the necessary training is done. That is based on information in the WAEC's annual report. It must get out there and talk to people. We know that costs money, unfortunately. The commission has to go out to some of the most remote parts of Western Australia to talk to people and engage with them. I will compare those remote communities with the seats of Joondalup and Cottesloe. I am being bipartisan and using them as an example because one is currently held by the Liberal Party and the other by the Labor Party. In those electorates, 89 per cent of the adult population is currently enrolled. I would like to see the analysis. I put in a challenge at the end of my excellent submission—I am willing to be corrected on this—for someone to do the work and provide the details showing why those massive discrepancies and structural differences in enrolment rates across our regions are so profound. That has a direct impact on the electoral boundaries because it is all to do with enrolment, not population. Do not be confused by the papers put out so far. It is not based on population. Population is used only for geographic information system boundaries. Enrolment forms the basis of our electoral boundaries. Under the act, it is important to maintain the electoral roll. We understand that that can be done only to the extent to which the Western Australian Electoral Commission is sufficiently resourced and is provided with the capacity to do so. It does excellent work, but we need to make sure that it has the tools to do that work. I recommend people look at that excellent submission.

That was my final point, but I am also looking forward to the correction that I am yet to receive. I asked for it in committee and am waiting for it. I refer to the table on the estimated impact of the cost of living on a representative household and I want to see an adjustment of the 2.4 per cent upwards and for some footnotes to be added to explain the massive discrepancy between the hundreds of millions of dollars raised from stamp duty and the mediocre or small number that is quoted as being the average impact stamp duty has on the average household. With that, I finish my point. I am looking forward to that feedback.

HON WILSON TUCKER (Mining and Pastoral) [3.16 pm]: I would like to take this opportunity to continue my remarks about the rental market crisis and the need for greater protection for renters in WA. This topic is near and dear to my heart. As a renter, I certainly have been on the receiving end of some unscrupulous landlords. I have felt some of the pain that a lot of renters in WA are facing. We know that 30 per cent of the Western Australian population is renting. We heard previously from the former Premier; Treasurer, Hon Mark McGowan, who I quickly add has taken the well-trodden and well-worn path down the hill to take up a very lucrative contract in the resources sector after spending his term in office looking after his mates during his tenure. That is probably a topic for another day. The former Premier was very quick to downplay the housing crisis that we were facing in Western Australia under his watch and that we certainly are facing under this government's watch. He said that there was nothing to see here because in WA we have higher than average incomes and lower than average property prices compared with the eastern states. That is a true statement, but it is also true to say that not everyone in WA enjoys fly-in fly-out wages or can afford a mortgage or, in some circumstances, even afford to pay rent.

We know that the housing crisis is caused by a supply issue that is putting pressure on the rental market. There are fewer rental properties available, which is driving up prices. In some circumstances, it is spitting people out the other end into homelessness and onto the ever-growing social housing waitlist. There is a housing spectrum, and affordable housing is on that spectrum. When affordable housing becomes unaffordable, we have a problem. That is exactly what we are seeing in Western Australia with the ever-growing number of homelessness and the ever-growing number of people on the social housing waitlist. The statement about affordable housing becoming unaffordable is backed up by a recent report by Anglicare Australia called the *2023 Rental affordability snapshot*. I encourage members to read the report. Its findings are quite damning. It found that zero per cent of properties were affordable for a single person on JobSeeker, and one per cent of available properties were affordable for people on other income support payments. At the time of the report, there were only 2 912 rental properties available in WA. Just under 3 000 properties available is a very small number given the size of Western Australia. I think the Perth property market right now is operating at about 0.1 per cent availability, which is the tightest in the country. Things are clearly not working as expected. The report also found that available rentals dropped 16 per cent compared with the situation

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in 2022. It was also very telling that the WA median rental price was \$560 a week, which is very expensive. That has put affordability of a rental property out of reach for every household on some level of income support, which I just outlined, and also anyone on the minimum wage. A large section of the population cannot afford to participate in the rental market.

Thirty per cent of Western Australians rent. I mentioned a report in the chamber in the last sitting week commissioned by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. It found a split of 30 per cent, 30 per cent and 30 per cent. The report found that one-third of young Australians could not afford a property in the next five years. Another one-third did not think they could afford a mortgage to own a property in the next five to 10 years. Very alarmingly and distressingly, another one-third did not think they could ever afford a property. They could not envision a reality in which they could afford to break out of the rental spiral they found themselves in.

We know some reform will come in WA. I have said previously that I think there are some good bits in the reform that the Minister for Commerce outlined. However, one piece that renters want the most is missing. It is essentially the elephant in the room ignored by the WA government—that is, removing no-grounds evictions. I asked some questions to the minister last sitting week about the basis for the government’s position of not scrapping the no-grounds evictions. The minister provided me with some very fulsome answers, and I appreciated the responses. I did not necessarily like their content, but they were fulsome nonetheless. The minister pointed to a report commissioned by Bankwest called *Housing affordability in Western Australia 2023*. It is a good report. I will read from it because the wording is important. It says —

Reforms designed to aid tenants might —

“Might” is the operative word here —

have the opposite effect if supply were to contract even further.

This report basically states the obvious. If renters are given more rights and landlords and property owners feel like they do not have ownership over their property, investors might be spooked from investing in the property market, with the end result of less supply, thus driving up prices and making the situation worse. This report is not a glowing endorsement of the government’s position. It does not back the government’s policy. It states the absolute obvious, saying a tighter rental market might result. The report also goes on to say —

A thorough assessment of the reforms that would deliver a private rental system equitable for both tenants and landlords is required.

So this report is not a thorough assessment; it says that a thorough assessment is required. Last sitting week, I asked a question, and I will ask it again. If the minister, the department or the government has done a thorough assessment that forms the basis of its position not to scrap no-grounds evictions, I would be very interested in it. I found a report that is a more thorough assessment, as opposed to the Bankwest report, again put out by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, called *Regulation of residential tenancies and impacts on investment*. This report is peer reviewed. It looked at two jurisdictions that underwent recent rental reform, being New South Wales and Victoria.

I will not bore members with the details, as the report is publicly available, but it summarises its findings by saying —

The analysis supports the characterisation of Australian tenancy law as accommodating of landlords. While the prospect of reforms may cause some would-be investors to pause, the analysis does not support the contention that tenancy law reforms have caused landlords to disinvest.

It also says —

When investors decide to invest, prospective rental income and capital gains are the most important reasons, but tenancy laws are an important consideration too. On the other hand, tenancy laws do not figure strongly in reasons for disposing of investment properties.

In short, the report says that rental tenancy reform is absolutely a consideration for landlords, but bigger macro factors come into play. For an investor, they are capital gains, negative gearing and property growth. They are the main considerations that come into play when a landlord looks to invest and put their house into the rental market pool, as opposed to tenancy reforms that would potentially spook investors. Even more telling, no-grounds eviction is a small component of tenancy law—it is a small subset of a small consideration for investors. In reality, landlords exercise their right to use no-grounds eviction in only five per cent of cases. The majority of landlords have a legitimate reason for eviction, and they list the reason to evict someone when a fixed-term contract expires. They use no-grounds eviction in only five per cent of cases. In reality, landlords do not care about no-grounds evictions at all, but tenants care a lot. A survey was conducted by the Make Renting Fair Alliance this year, and it had some interesting findings. I will read a key finding directly from this survey. It says —

Renters feel powerless to negotiate rent increases — mostly due to the fear of no reason evictions

The threat of a “no reason” eviction hangs over negotiations between tenants and landlords about unfair rent increases. Due to the record low vacancy rate and current tenancy laws permitting evictions without grounds, real estate agents and landlords can easily replace tenants, creating a significant power imbalance and pervasive insecurity for tenants.

The survey found that in 41 per cent of cases, renters tried to negotiate their rent increase but were refused. Forty-one per cent did not even ask, with the most common reason being that they felt they were at risk of losing their lease and not being able to find another property. They did not feel like they had a reasonable seat at the negotiating table, and if they raised any concerns, if they rocked the boat, they would essentially find themselves on the street. That is the reality that a lot of renters will find given the 0.1 per cent availability rate in Perth for rental properties and the fact that hundreds of people rock up to home opens every day.

Lastly, the survey found that 17 per cent of renters were able to negotiate to a very modest rate. For 17 per cent of cases, there was a successful outcome, but just under half did not feel that they had provision to raise their concern about a rent increase because of the fear of this metaphorical axe in the form of a no-grounds eviction termination hanging over their head. That survey was conducted using a sample size of renters. If we look at the broader population, we see strong support for terminating no-grounds evictions as well, with 71 per cent of Western Australians supporting the removal of no-grounds evictions. As I said, landlords have used no-grounds evictions in only five per cent of cases. I think the only people who actually care about no-grounds evictions are real estate agents or property managers backed by the Real Estate Institute of Western Australia, which are a very strong and potentially influential lobby group. They are the only ones who want this provision retained. Landlords do not care; tenants definitely want it scrapped; and the wider public also want it removed.

There was some commentary at national cabinet around this. There was some agreement on general guidelines around protections for renters. The majority of states have supported this, except for WA when it comes to no-grounds evictions. A number of principles were put forward by national cabinet, and the majority of states and territories have signed onto these guidelines. One of them was genuine-grounds evictions, which makes total sense. WA is the only state, along with the Northern Territory, that is digging its head in the sand and backing no-grounds evictions without any evidence or data to back up its claim that removing no-grounds evictions will disincentivise investment in the market.

We also heard an announcement last week by, I believe, the Deputy Premier basically saying that one of the reasons WA was retaining no-grounds evictions was short-term stays and Airbnb. This feels like an absolute red herring. We heard from the Minister for Commerce about the Bankwest report. Then we heard from the Deputy Premier that the government did not want to spook the investment market, and it was using Airbnb and short-term rentals as its reason, saying that if it removed no-grounds evictions, landlords would potentially go off and take their property out of the rental market and make it available for short-term stay. I cannot see any evidence for that position, and I have not found any related to the Bankwest report. If the minister has a basis for the government’s position on this, I am waiting and very interested to hear more.

HON MARTIN ALDRIDGE (Agricultural) [3.32 pm]: I rise to contribute to the cognate debate on the Appropriation (Capital 2023–24) Bill 2023 and the Appropriation (Recurrent 2023–24) Bill 2023 that authorise the appropriation of some \$8.6 billion and \$27.4 billion respectively to the state of Western Australia. I want to make some contributions, as I normally do, focused around the estimates process and the opportunity that the Legislative Council had through it. I initially put on the record my thanks to the members of the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations who week in, week out keep the wheels of this standing committee turning for the benefit of us, who are non-members, to participate in its inquiries, particularly around the consideration of budget estimates.

When I made my contribution to the budget in June, I canvassed a number of matters, from the COVID-19 response through to procurement, health and health service delivery. Towards the end of my contribution I started to touch on the portfolio that I hold as shadow Minister for Emergency Services. That area was certainly more of a focus for me during the estimates process. I will highlight a number of things that arose from that process that played out over the last few months. When we considered the noting of the budget papers back in June, a situation was unfolding in the Northern Hemisphere, particularly in Canada, with what it calls wildfires. At that point, some five million hectares had been burnt. That was double its annual average, which is some 2.1 million hectares in Canada. The previous record, which was held in 1995, were some 7.1 million hectares burnt during a fire season. Knowing that I would be contributing to this debate, earlier today I looked up the current burnt hectares in Canada, which now stands at some 15 million hectares. There has been a significant escalation in wildfires in Canada. I also want to recognise the volunteers and the career officers from Western Australia and indeed across Australia who have contributed to the Canadian wildfire response. At that point in June, it was only one month into its traditional fire season. Why is this relevant? It is because we are looking at a similar risk as we approach the Southern Hemisphere

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high-threat period. Some months ago, the Bureau of Meteorology placed Australia on an El Niña alert and I think it will revise that forecast next on 12 September when I suspect we will probably move into a declaration of El Niña, which is forecast to bring a warm dry winter —

Hon Stephen Dawson: Honourable member, it is El Niño and La Niña. We were told it is El Niño.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Really? I checked the pronunciation on this earlier, because I do get the two confused.

Hon Stephen Dawson: That is what we were told at the Fire and Emergency Services meeting. They are quite similar, but obviously masculine and feminine.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: We have obviously seen a warm and dry winter and indeed that is the forecast for spring. I think the Bureau of Meteorology has forecast an 80 per cent chance of above-average spring temperatures, and an 80 per cent chance of below-average rainfall for spring. Indeed, on the last day of winter this week we will see, certainly where I come from, a forecast of 31 degrees. Parts of the wheatbelt will for the first time enter a high fire danger rating, according to the Bureau of Meteorology forecast, in winter. It is not a good sign of what is to come in spring. The bureau model is predicting a 70 per cent chance and the United States model is predicting a 90 per cent chance of El Niño being declared, and of course the issues that will flow from that will affect not just fire and emergency management, but also many other industries and other responses that are reliant on weather outcomes.

Last week, as the minister just referred to, was the press conference that came out of the emergency services ministers' meeting, I think it was.

Hon Stephen Dawson: The press conference was the AFAC that the commissioners spoke at. We did one a couple of days later. It was their one that the info came out from.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: That is when the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council released its seasonal outlook for spring. Unlike last year, Western Australia has not been identified—in fact, it might be the only mainland state that has not been identified—as an area of increased fire potential. The ACT being the only other mainland —

Hon Stephen Dawson: It is an interesting diagram because it shows that if you look at the Northern Territory and SA, it stops at our hard border, so I did not have great confidence in it. But it shows that we do not have a higher threat, but have a high threat normally.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: The maps within the seasonal outlook, which are largely derived from earlier Bureau of Meteorology forecasts, show the higher-than-average temperatures and the below-average rainfall expectations for spring. We can see, although Western Australia has not been identified, according to the seasonal outlook, there is an increased risk of fire in spring. The commentary that is contained in the section about Western Australia shows increasing risks towards the latter stages of spring, but also as we head into the traditional southern high threat period, particularly in the south of Western Australia.

One of the things I have taken an interest in, not only through last year's budget consideration, but also this year's, is the issue of preparedness. That window is rapidly closing, not to say there is never work to be done ahead of the southern high threat period. I think the window for some mitigation works will close earlier than expected. As I said earlier, we have a high fire danger rating for one fire weather district in the wheatbelt on the last day of winter. I think we will see the loss of burn potential. We have been engaged locally in hazard-reduction burns. Members would be surprised by the fire behaviour we are seeing in winter. Normally we would be able to execute cooler burns, but we are seeing much more intense burns, which are more difficult to manage. That is before we even get to spring, which is traditionally when the opportunity exists for burning.

One of the other areas that has continued to take my interest is a number of fleet and workforce matters. Last year, when I looked at this issue, we had almost 200 of our primary fire fleet trucks in service beyond their design life. The design life of each type of vehicle varies from five to 20 years. Last year almost 200 vehicles were identified. I am sad to report that we have not improved on that number, despite the questions I asked prior to budget estimates hearings. I asked —

... how many vehicles remain in service beyond their indicative service life by:

- (i) appliance type;

The answer was zero. Initially I thought: "Here's something to celebrate. Last year we had nearly 200 vehicles within our primary fleet operating beyond design life, and this year we are at zero. That is remarkable recovery in 12 months."

It was one I was preparing to congratulate the government on until I asked an additional question following budget estimates hearings. That was question 1 about the Department of Fire and Emergency Services fleet, when it was identified upon further examination that 281 vehicles were operating beyond their design life and 263 of those were

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in primary fire response functions. It is concerning that that number has grown by 80 vehicles, some types excessively. A light tanker, which is, effectively, a LandCruiser cab chassis with a firefighting unit on the back of it, has a design life of five years if it is in the career fire and rescue service, and 10 years in other services. We have 140 light tankers—about half of all vehicles are light tankers—operating beyond their design life. Some are twice the age of what they should be. In fact, the entire first page shows 39 light tankers that are in excess of 15 years. It goes on page after page.

Interestingly, looking at the vehicles that are probably the greatest offenders in terms of their overdue replacement, some are at 20 and 21 years of life. We should keep in mind that if they are in the volunteer service, they should be 10 years of age. We have vehicles operating at 21 years of age. If we consider the location of those vehicles—the Kimberley, goldfields—midlands and the Pilbara region—they are operating in the most remote parts of Western Australia, in places where we expect to rely more significantly on those vehicles or in which the maintenance and repair of those vehicles might be more challenging. I remember—I often recount the story—that the emergency services levy has significantly transformed the provision, particularly of fleet, in respect of fire and emergency services. I remember when I first started volunteering in the mid-1990s, we had vehicles that were older than I was at the time. There were vehicles that ran on petrol, not diesel, and vehicles that were unreliable. I recounted to a forum recently that luckily the front driveway of our old fire station ramped down to the road because, on more than one occasion, we had to push our vehicle out of the engine bay, bump start it on the front apron, then off we would go in our petrol LandCruiser. I worry that we are going backwards in terms of replacing our ageing fleet, particularly in remote areas of our state.

The other aspect that adds to my concern is workforce. It is not an issue that only affects the state government; it affects local government as well because local governments are responsible for maintaining the fleet that is under their control. We have a situation in which we continue to see significant vacancies in our workforce. I do not know whether there are newer figures than those from February—I will interrogate that ahead of the next southern high threat period—but in DFES in February we were short by four mechanical technicians, two radio technicians and one auto electrician. To put that into context, the total strength of mechanical technicians in DFES should be nine, so we are effectively at 50 per cent strength. At one point we were flying in mechanics from New South Wales to help us with that function. That is an issue that we have not made progress on for at least two seasons that I have been shadow minister. I hope that when I ask for further data on that later this year, it will be something we make progress on. Interestingly, from budget estimates, many of the positions that are vacant in DFES are in the fleet maintenance division. Some are into the hundreds of days. A technician position has been vacant for 594 days. That is according to answers to questions prior to hearings of this year's budget estimates.

One of the other areas that I want to talk about relating to the budget and budget estimates process is the provision of community emergency services managers. We have a strange situation in Western Australia in which, over time, we have evolved and developed a system of paid employees embedded within local governments who are called community emergency services managers. According to budget estimates, seven of them are directly employed by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services and local governments employ a further 27. A funding arrangement or memorandum of understanding exists whereby local government and DFES share the costs of a community emergency services manager, depending upon the ability and capacity of that local government to pay. In some instances, those positions are heavily subsidised by local government and in others they are not. For some time, inequities have existed between local government and DFES-employed CESMs, which has led to considerable angst and communication with me and others about those issues. They range from simple things like pay and conditions through to professional development opportunities. Just recently, in examining the provisions of the Workers Compensation and Injury Management Bill that continues to be before the Legislative Council, it was identified that we are not even treating them the same in respect of workers compensation. That is concerning.

For some years we have had standing requests from local governments to have a CESM in their local authority. Local governments effectively have to make a funding request. We have consistently been unable to increase the number of CESMs operating in Western Australia. I think there has been at least one occasion in which a local government did not continue with its CESM program and there was an opportunity for another local government or a group of local governments to then take that up. However, growing the funding for the CESM program has not been supported in at least the last two budgets. We know that six local governments have made a request for funding for a CESM, but according to answers to questions prior to a hearing, the CESM program is oversubscribed.

Thankfully, this issue was taken up by my colleague Hon Colin de Grussa at estimates. It resulted in some supplementary information being provided that identified the six local governments—Narrogin, Boddington, Wandering, Cuballing, Mingenew and Three Springs. It has actually now identified a seventh request coming from the Shire of Northampton. Effectively, seven local governments have indicated, some consistently, their request for a CESM. I think that those positions should be funded when local governments request them and are prepared to participate in an MOU and a funding-sharing agreement with the state. They provide enormous support, not just to the local government but to its volunteers and its administration of fire and emergency management functions.

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Without having a position of this type within a local authority, those types of particularly administrative and sometimes operational roles are burdened upon volunteers and volunteer functions. They provide a very good service in the context of the state budget and its operating surplus, but also in its growth.

It is important to reflect that the available budget to the Department of Fire and Emergency Services has continued to grow. I think that is a good thing. This year, some \$565 million was allocated. Compared with a decade ago when it was allocated a little over \$300 million, we have effectively seen a doubling of the DFES budget. However, we still find ourselves in a situation in which local governments are consistently requesting community emergency services managers and those requests are being denied. The view of the government is that it is not due to a lack of funding, but due to the program being oversubscribed. If funding is increased to the program, it will then be able to fund more CESMs. As of today, only seven local governments are requesting support. I would have thought that in the context of a forecast \$3.3 billion operating surplus—we would be talking about a contribution of \$1 million or thereabouts to the budget, keeping in mind that local governments also contribute.

While I am on local government, I want to talk about the local government grant scheme. I think it is now called the local government emergency services grant scheme. I wanted to raise this because demand in this area continues to increase. I am not suggesting that funding to local governments is decreasing, but it is certainly not increasing at the pace that we are seeing in other fire and emergency services management organisations such as DFES or even in the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions or other agencies with similar functions. It is effectively a grant scheme consisting of capital grants and operating grants. The thing that probably alarms me the most is the number of capital grants. They are particularly important because they ensure that the appliances, vehicles and facilities that predominately volunteers in the local government sector work from have a high standard. That is not just for the safety of those people; we obviously have a work health and safety obligation to them because they are now encompassed under the Work Health and Safety Act. Many of those are in need of improvement.

Let us look at the capital grant funding for 2022–23 from budget estimates. The 2023–24 information was not available at the time of asking this question, so this information is from the last financial year. I asked for the quantum of funding that met the grant criteria but was not funded. When a local government puts in a request for either an operating or capital grant, it is assessed against the criteria and it is then prioritised. There is a prioritisation process that occurs based on the amount of funding that is available. As I said, the amount of funding that is available is growing, but it is growing very slowly in comparison with other budgets.

In the last financial year, there were 70 capital grant requests for bush fire brigades, totalling some \$30.6 million, that met the grant criteria but were not funded. For the State Emergency Service, there were 15 grant requests totalling some almost \$1.6 million that met the grant criteria but were not funded. There is a significant unmet need here in which governments are trying to access funding, particularly capital funding, from this grant scheme which is the primary source of funds available to them to be able to meet their emergency management functions obligations under the law in Western Australia. If members are interested, these questions are detailed in answers to additional questions post-hearings. Members can actually see the applications by local governments that met the criteria but were not funded, the scope of the works and the amount of funding that was requested. Members might be interested in having a look at the list. At quite a granular level, it identifies electorates, or emergency service organisations in members' electorates, that are trying to either improve or increase their capabilities or amenities. They have made capital requests in situations in which funding is not available, but their grant meets funding criteria. If there is an area I think we need to be increasingly cognisant of, it is the financial support we provide to the local government sector. That is particularly so given that, hopefully in this term of Parliament, we will have a bill to combine a number of emergency service acts in WA.

As I understand it, there will be a mechanism for local governments to formally transfer control of their emergency service obligations to the state. Of course, if that were to happen, the state would have to appropriately fund these services. I do not want a situation to be created in which the local government sector is starved of funding to incentivise it to transfer control to the state. I do not think that that is the state's intention; in fact, as I said earlier, I think it would add complications and costs for the state if that were to occur. We need to ensure that we adequately fund and support local governments that want to continue to deliver emergency management functions, particularly in regional communities, by supporting their requests for community emergency services managers and operating and capital grants, especially when they meet the criteria. At this point, we are not even having an argument about the criteria; that is another whole argument in itself. However, even if we accept that the grant funding criteria is perfect, which it is not, we are well behind in providing financial resources from the emergency services levy for local governments to do their jobs effectively.

Another area that I felt that interesting information was provided about during budget estimates was the provision of aircraft. In my speech on the budget in June, I spoke about the aeromedical inquiry. I made some brief remarks then, and I will not go over those grounds today. I asked a number of questions in the budget estimates process about the provision of firefighting aircraft. I know it is an area that everybody likes to get excited about. No doubt

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there will be a big press conference around October, maybe November, probably in Busselton, with ministers and members of the Labor Party. They will all have a nice selfie in front of a big shiny plane, but some questions need to be asked around the provision of firefighting aircraft. I tried to extract some of this information through the budget process, and it was quite challenging. I want to draw members' attention to the contrast between the responses provided by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services and the responses provided by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions. As members might be aware, we effectively have two fire agencies that have responsibility separately to contract and operate firefighting aircraft in Western Australia. It is not a cheap exercise. Keep in mind that this year we saw the loss of the national large air tanker on the south coast of Western Australia that was responding to a fire down there. There are inherent risks and significant costs associated with operating these important assets.

I asked a number of questions about the utilisation of these aircraft. An area that I foreshadow that I will focus on during the spring is how prepared we are to bring on aircraft earlier this year. I am looking at the information provided, and it was not until November at the earliest that these aircraft were available last year. I think we will need them much earlier, perhaps towards the end of spring as the Australasian Fire Authorities Council seasonable outlook suggests. How prepared are we as a state to bring aircraft on early?

With respect to cost, I asked DFES: for each aircraft type and year, please identify the relevant costs associated with firefighting operations. The answer was that costs associated with the firefighting operations remain commercial-in-confidence. I asked: what costs were incurred by the state government and the deployment of the aircraft during this period? This was about the national large air tanker. The answer was that that was commercial-in-confidence.

I want members to compare that with the responses, when I asked the same questions, of the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions. I said: for each aircraft type and year, please identify the relevant costs associated with firefighting operations. In 2021–22, the cost—I am summarising here—for rotary wing aircraft was \$867 000 and for fixed wing water bombers was \$8.38 million. In 2022–23, the cost for rotary wing aircraft was \$762 000 and for fixed wing water bombers was \$8.3 million. It is interesting that we have one state agency that says “speak to the hand” and “commercial-in-confidence” but DBCA had no issue and gave me the number to the dollar. In post-budget questions, question 21, regarding aviation firefighting resources, was asked to DFES prior to the hearings. Noting the response provided by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions prior to estimates, I asked: for each aircraft type and year, please identify the relevant costs associated with firefighting operations. The answer was that these costs were commercial-in-confidence. I find this amazing. I could probably understand it more if there were a consistent view between the two agencies that the information was commercial-in-confidence. One agency appears to be forthcoming with the Parliament's request to know how much of the budget is going to these types of operations, as expensive as they are, and one agency says that it will not tell us.

The other thing that I wanted to point out was the information provided by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services about the number of drops and the amount of water that was dropped by each aircraft, even though no financial information was provided. I think this will be interesting to members because when we look at the efficiency—I am not saying for one minute that there is no role for large air tankers, but they are expensive and challenging to operate, as we saw last summer—of the WA large air tanker, the Hercules C-130, last year it made 79 drops and dropped 907 000 litres of water, according to budget estimates. Last year we operated eight rotary wing helicopters that dropped water, and last fire season one of those Bell 214 helicopters dropped twice the amount of water as one large air tanker. Similarly, when I go down the list, every helicopter bar two dropped more water than the large air tanker. Therefore, it is very difficult to have an informed debate about the use and cost of aviation firefighting and its assets when, according to the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, a lot of the underpinning information, particularly the financial costs, are commercial-in-confidence. To date, I am not aware of one section 82 notice having been lodged with the Auditor General. Not one has been lodged, but I want to recognise and thank the Minister for Environment and the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions, as difficult as the name is, for providing answers to those questions.

In concluding my contribution to the bill, one other aspect that I want to touch on that has come to light more recently is the failure of this government to adequately live up to its commitment to the recovery of the midwest and nearby regions from severe tropical cyclone Seroja. While the final numbers are still filtering through, my prediction is that less than 10 per cent of the \$104.5 million package will be spent in response to, and on recovery of, communities impacted by cyclone Seroja. I have said previously that it concerns me we have now finally admitted we are not good at recovery, we need a whole bunch more people, and we need to lift our capacity and capability in this area. I am pretty sure all the permanent employees who will be employed to do that through this budget are going to be based in the Perth metropolitan area. I think it is a missed opportunity to decentralise these subject matter experts into the regions where we are most vulnerable to natural disasters. But no; according to advertisements I have seen, it appears we have leased an office in Como or we are office-sharing with another agency. The government does not even have space for them at the Department of Fire and Emergency Services headquarters. They are going

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into new offices in Como rather than building capacity to recover in the regions, which are more likely than the Perth metropolitan area to be impacted by significant natural disaster events.

One thing I want to talk about in closing is a government commitment made three days ahead of the last election, which is not usually the time to make election commitments. Mark McGowan, on his official Facebook page, shared by Hon Alannah MacTiernan, made an election commitment with a lovely little infographic. It reads, “Our plan to boost tourism to Kalbarri.” It was three days before the last election. The post says —

Kalbarri tourism has been booming and there’s a real need for additional housing for workers.

Our Government has been working with the local Shire to identify an appropriate site to develop that extra accommodation, and, if re-elected, we’ll fast track that development so local businesses can bring in the workers they need.

I think what government members sniffed three days before the last election was victory in the seat that represents Kalbarri, which is North West Central. Of course, that victory did not come for the Labor Party and I suspect that translated to its lack of commitment to delivering and fast-tracking this development. Members might have seen a media statement issued by the Minister for Lands just yesterday. It is titled “Kalbarri Workers’ Accommodation negotiations conclude”. Anyone just skipping through the plethora of media statements we get from the Cook government spin doctors each day might have taken this to have meant something positive, but no. The government has been unable to deliver on this key election commitment in Kalbarri to fast-track the development of workers’ accommodation. I remind members that this commitment was made just a few days before the election and prior to tropical cyclone Seroja. The need for a workers’ accommodation facility in Kalbarri only increased by a significant magnitude when cyclone Seroja devastated not only the town but also the broader region. The government has completely dropped the ball on the development of the 56-person capacity accommodation facility in Kalbarri and I cannot come to any conclusion from the minister’s statement other than that the government has walked away from it.

When the project was put out to market in the way it was, it was questionable whether it was ever going to be commercial. The government released an undeveloped greenfield site with no services and said, “Here you go. We’ve made a piece of land available—nothing else. You go and build a 56-person worker camp and operate it.” It was not going to work. It was questions by the opposition that I think woke up the minister who was, as early as last sitting week, denying the fact that this company was in trouble. My office went to its premises in Perth. This is a so-called Western Australian company and its forwarding address is in Malaysia. A sign on the gate says it is shut. A notice to the Australian Securities and Investments Commission says that it is in liquidation. It says to call a phone number or send an email to Malaysia and they might get back to you. The minister denied that this company had walked away from Western Australia. It was not until the media statement yesterday that it was confirmed that the project is dead.

What is important from here is how the government responds. It has a \$3.3 billion operating surplus this year and less than 10 per cent of the \$104.5 million disaster recovery funding arrangements package has been spent. The government’s record is not good. It owns a company called DevelopmentWA. It has an agency called the Mid West Development Commission. It purports to have more regional members of Parliament interested in the regions than anybody else.

Hon Darren West: That’s not purported; it’s a fact.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: They seem to be very excited at this late stage. Why is it that the government continues to fail our regions time and again? When the midwest, in particular, needed those members of Parliament to stand up for them to make sure this project was on track and to deliver for those communities, they were quiet. If there is one criticism of this budget—it is a reason there was such reluctance by the government to support a select committee inquiry into our preparedness and management of natural disasters in Western Australia—it is that the government’s record of failure is consistent.

HON STEPHEN DAWSON (Mining and Pastoral — Minister for Emergency Services) [4.17 pm] — in reply: I thank all members who made a contribution to the debate this afternoon, including Hon Dr Steve Thomas, Hon Nick Goiran, Hon Neil Thomson, Hon Wilson Tucker and Hon Martin Aldridge. A number of the contributions related to specific ministerial portfolios outside the Treasurer’s portfolio and I will certainly bring those issues to the attention of the affected ministers’ officers. I also acknowledge and thank the honourable members who made contributions during the estimates process and as part of this second reading debate.

The 2023–24 budget highlights Western Australia’s sustained economic strength that is still the envy of the world and the nation despite economic headwinds from high inflation and rising interest rates. Our strong economy is creating opportunities and an abundance of job opportunities with a new record level of Western Australians in work. We know that despite Western Australia’s economic strength, some families out there are doing it tough. That is why we are spending about \$715 million to provide cost-of-living relief to every Western Australian household.

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This assistance includes a \$400 electricity credit for all Western Australian households, which they are now seeing on their power bills, or certainly the first instalment of that. This complements the Cook government's commitment to keep government fees and charges low with the rise in the basket of household fees and charges being kept to below inflation for a fourth consecutive year. Our responsible economic and financial management enables us to continue the important work of building our state for the future and supporting the essential services that our community expects and deserves. This includes, but is not limited to, a record \$2.7 billion of additional investment into our health and mental health system, \$750 million of additional investment to boost housing supply and housing choice and we are taking action on climate change with \$3 billion of investments, including to decarbonise electricity and to move towards cleaner, greener, more affordable, reliable energy and to build Perth's third desalination plant. We are also spending about \$463 million in economic infrastructure and diversification initiatives. At the same time, the government is continuing its record of managing the state's finances responsibly, with a \$3.3 billion surplus expected in 2023–24 and surpluses projected to continue over the forward estimates period. This continued commitment to responsible financial management has recently been recognised by Moody's in its upgrade of Western Australia's credit rating to AAA status, nearly a decade after we lost our AAA credit rating from both Moody's and Standard and Poor's. The upgrade means that Western Australia is now the only Australian jurisdiction—either state or territory—with a AAA credit rating from both major international ratings agencies and one of a very small number of jurisdictions globally with such a rating. Moody's stated that Western Australia's governance has strengthened considerably over the past five years, including strong expenditure controls as well as the introduction of robust and conservative budgeting protocols resulting in improvements in the state's financial metrics. We are, as a government, continuing to make investments for the future and providing the service that Western Australians care about while delivering strong economic outcomes and responsibly managing the state's finances.

Hon Neil Thomson raised the issue of insurance duty and the representative household. The honourable member is correct insofar as the wording of the footnote has changed. However, as indicated by the Under Treasurer at the hearing, I can confirm that there has been no change to the methodology that underpins the household model. I can also confirm that the overall increase in tariffs, fees and charges paid by the representative household in 2023–24 was \$154.07, or 2.4 per cent, excluding the impact of the government's household electricity credits, is both correct and unaffected by the revised wording of footnote (j). Footnote (j) relates to stamp duty payable on general insurance. The rate of stamp duty payable on general insurance has for many years remained unchanged at 10 per cent. Each year, as part of the annual household model exercise, this rate of stamp duty is applied to an estimate of average home and contents and motor vehicle insurance payments to derive an estimate of the amount of stamp duty payable by the representative household. At the time of finalising the household model calculations for inclusion in this year's budget paper No 3, Treasury did not have an estimate of insurance premiums for the coming 2023–24 financial year. Therefore, both the 2022–23 and 2023–24 estimates of stamp duty payable were calculated using the available estimate at that time of insurance premiums for 2022–23, and that is what necessitated the revised wording of footnote (j) in this year's budget paper No 3. I acknowledge that the wording of footnote (j) could have explained that more clearly. However, the key point remains that the issue raised by Hon Neil Thomson is simply an issue of timing or data availability. As indicated by the Under Treasurer, there has been no change in the underlying methodology of the household model, which is designed to isolate the impact of government policy decisions on the representative household. Further to that point, there has been no change in the rate of stamp duty and general insurance this financial year. The increase in tariffs, fees and charges reflected in table 8.7 is correct and is unaffected by the issue raised by the member. He also raised the issue of insurance in the regions, which is a concern to the government. It came up at the National Emergency Management Ministers' meeting in Brisbane last Friday and I raised it with the Insurance Commission of Western Australia. We continue to work on it with the feds to see how we might be able to support in particular those in the regions who face significant increases in their insurance levies.

With that, I commend the bills to the house.

Questions put and passed.

Bills read a second time.

[Leave granted to proceed forthwith to third reading.]

Third Reading — Cognate Debate

Bills read a third time, on motions by **Hon Stephen Dawson (Minister for Emergency Services)**, and passed.