

**MARGARET RIVER BUSHFIRES — MINISTERIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

*Statement*

**HON SALLY TALBOT (South West)** [8.04 pm]: Since the bushfires in Margaret River during the middle of last week we have seen from the government the most extreme abandonment of any vestige of ministerial responsibility. It is that that I want to address tonight. I want to try to go through the information that we managed to extract from the government today just so that it is on the record. It has been very hard to extract that information. The one thing that has become increasingly clear since last Wednesday night is that the one thing the government is desperate to do is to find a scapegoat, to find somebody else somewhere to blame for the disaster that befell the area of Margaret River.

What we had today, both in this chamber and the other place, was the most pitiful defence of the indefensible. We had today, one would have to say, the setting of a new standard of government accountability, although I am reluctant to use the word “accountability”, because what we have seen is another way for government to duck accountability. This is the new formula that has been established by the Barnett Liberal–National government: a catastrophe occurs; an inquiry is set up; and then all questions are avoided in both houses in this Parliament on the basis that an inquiry is about to be set up. We do not even know when this inquiry is going to start or what the terms of reference will be or who is going to carry it out, yet all day today, in both houses of this Parliament, the government has refused to answer our questions on the basis that, “We’re having an inquiry. You’ll find all that out in good time.” This is simply not good enough. What I want to do tonight is to go through some of the information that I think we heard today for the first time, because there are two or three things that we have finally managed to drag out of the government about the sorry, sad sequence of events over recent months.

The first thing that we found is that, of the prescribed burns that have been lit since the middle of this year, 50 are still burning. A similar question was asked in the other place, and no answer was forthcoming. Fortunately by 4.30 pm, somebody—I suspect not the Minister for Environment—decided that it might be sensible to provide the answer to that question, particularly in light of the weather forecast that was produced by the ABC, which is where I saw it, and I am sure it is available from other media outlets. It says that the weather later this week is going to be similar to the weather that prevailed last week when the department was still dropping incendiaries in the Margaret River area. When I was down in the region at the weekend one person said to me, “I’m an elderly woman. I like playing golf. I decided on Sunday that I would not be playing golf on Wednesday because it was too hot and too windy.” She said to me, “If I could make that decision on Sunday, how come DEC was still dropping fire on Monday afternoon?” We know now that 50 prescribed burns have been started by DEC but not completed. Sadly, and rather puzzlingly, we have also found out that the government does not actually know how many more prescribed burns are planned for the rest of this year. I asked the minister, through his representative in the house, how many more prescribed burns are planned between now and 31 December 2011. This is the answer that I got back —

The commencement of any additional prescribed burns during the remainder of this year will depend on weather and fuel conditions and other circumstances.

I was actually asking—this goes to the heart of the problem—what prescribed burns are planned, not what the government is going to do. We all know that whether a prescribed burn goes ahead depends on things such as weather and fuel conditions. I was asking the government what it had planned between now and the end of the year. A similar question arose in the other place and, exactly as happened in this place, no answer was forthcoming. We know that there are plans, because that is clearly part of the process that the minister is supposed to be presiding over. But the government cannot tell us what further prescribed burns are planned between now and the end of the year.

We were told gradually over the weekend, as the government allowed a bit more information to dribble out, that the previous Minister for Environment, Hon Donna Faragher, queried the appointment of a certain individual, who has since stepped down from his position, who had an adverse finding from the Boorabbin fire inquest. We also found out today that the incoming minister, Hon Bill Marmion, received the information about that person as part of his induction into the portfolio—as part of his introductory briefing. What we did not know until today—until we prised the information out of the government—was that that person had actually been promoted under the current minister’s watch. The current minister said during a radio interview earlier this week that he knew that this person had been reinstated. Let me make it absolutely clear: I am on no witch-hunt for anyone to shift the blame to. The only witch-hunt going on over this issue is being conducted by the government, which is absolutely desperate to find a scapegoat. It is absolutely desperate to find someone to hang out to dry to save its own skin, exactly as the government did with the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia and Jo Harrison-Ward. We are seeing exactly the same tactics unfold here.

Earlier this week, the minister said during a radio interview that he knew that this particular individual had been reinstated but—wait for it—that he did not know that that person had any responsibility for fire management. What an absolute disgrace for the minister to say that! It is one bit of further evidence that this minister does not have a clue what it means to be a minister. Not only does he not understand his portfolio, but also I have never, since I have been following politics, heard a minister admit that they did not understand their portfolio, yet that is what this minister did, as reported in one of the weekend newspapers. Further proof that he does not understand his portfolio is that he said that he had no idea that a district manager had anything to do with fire management or fire plans, yet this afternoon what we dragged out of the government is that there is a job description for a district manager, because the information that was supplied to us states —

A district manager is responsible for leadership and supervision of staff in the district who prepare prescribed fire plans, and for approving such plans, ...

Yet the minister said on the radio the other day that he did not know he had anything to do with fire. What an astonishing world the minister must find the place when he comes across this information!

Gradually, during the course of the day, we have dragged further information out of the government. But three things are totally clear and have been clear for some days now. The first is that we have a minister who does not understand his portfolio and who does not understand what it means to be a minister. The second thing is that we have a minister who does not even have the grace to apologise because his department lit the fire that destroyed 40 homes. If a person had a two-year-old child who apologised like the minister did the other day, they would be very upset and would at least give that child time out. That is exactly what this minister deserves to cop after this incident. The third and most serious thing is that this minister and this government are systematically destroying confidence in the prescribed burning system in Western Australia.