

WATER PRICES

227. Dr D.J. HONEY to the Minister for Water:

I remind the minister of his government's significant water price increases, up to 16 per cent in one year alone, 2018, for consumption above 500 kilolitres, which the minister claimed was needed to manage the budget and was aimed at water guzzlers in the western suburbs. I further remind the minister that Water Corporation data exposed the fallacy of this claim by showing that high water-consuming homes are mainly families across the suburbs who happen to have four or more people in their house. Noting that the budget position does not need added revenue from higher water prices and as those large increases are an attack on larger families who are feeling the pinch of the rising cost of living, will the minister rescind the large water price increase that he inflicted upon families for consumption above 500 kilolitres; and, if not, why not?

The SPEAKER: Just before the minister answers, Leader of the Liberal Party, there is a lot of discussion in your question. I would urge you to consider in future how much argument you should actually have in a question. Although you need sometimes to add some context at the start, that preamble was rather long. The minister in response, please.

Mr D.J. KELLY replied:

I thank the member for the question. I welcome him back to the water portfolio. I think members opposite have never really taken the water portfolio seriously. When they were in government, they had four water ministers in eight years. I thought that was pretty bad. In the five years they have been in opposition, they have already had four different spokespersons for water: David Honey, Steve Thomas, David Honey for a second time and James Hayward.

Point of Order

Dr D.J. HONEY: I believe it is appropriate to refer to members not by their name, but by their designation—their seat.

The SPEAKER: That is quite right. I give the minister guidance that members of this house should be referred to by their seat title and members of the upper house need to be referred to with the title “honourable”.

Questions without Notice Resumed

Mr D.J. KELLY: I take that on board.

The point is that the opposition has had four shadow spokespersons for water in the past five years. I welcome the member back to the portfolio so that he can renew his interest in the issue of water.

There are questions from the other side about water pricing increases. The opposition's record in government was horrendous. At the end of its period in government, it was cutting off 2 500 Western Australian families, having their water reduced to a trickle because they could not pay their bills. That was 2 500 WA families a year, when the Leader of the Opposition was the Minister for Water. It is a terribly humiliating thing for families to find that they cannot shower their children or wash their clothes. That was the opposition's record in government.

When we came to government, we asked the Water Corporation to review the way it dealt with hardship issues. In the full year before COVID hit, that number of customers had gone down from 2 500 to just under 800. That is a massive decline in the number of customers who experienced that, because we were proactive with families who were struggling to pay their water bills. We introduced a whole range of new schemes to assist people who may be finding it difficult. We were so successful that the Financial Counsellors' Association of Western Australia wrote two letters to us in two years outlining and congratulating the government for the hardship measures we put in place through the Water Corporation. Our record, compared with the previous government, has been outstanding.

The previous government increased the price of water. Again, the Leader of the Opposition sat in the Minister for Water's position for a considerable time at the end of that government. Every year, for the eight years it was in office, it increased the price water by above the rate of inflation—6.7 per cent, 10.8 per cent, 8.5 per cent, 6.8 per cent, six per cent, 5.2 per cent, 4.5 per cent and 4.5 per cent. Compare that with our record in office—six per cent, 5.5 per cent and 2.5 per cent. The residential price of water actually went down during COVID. The increases under this government have been significantly less than those during the term of the previous government.

The particular increase that the member is talking about, the increase in the upper tier for customers who use in excess of 500 kilolitres, was to encourage high water users to use less water and, therefore, save more money. Interestingly, at the time, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia congratulated the government for that move. It saw it as a very useful price signal to send —

Dr D.J. Honey: But you've targeted big families—that's all.

Mr D.J. KELLY: If the member looks at where those customers are, he will see that most of the people who use more than 500 kilolitres are those on very big blocks, many of them in your electorate, member for Cottesloe.

We stand on our record. We have done everything we can to assist struggling families when they have needed assistance to pay their water bills. We have a much better record than you ever had in government.