

APACHE ENERGY GAS PLANT EXPLOSION — FEDERAL GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

269. Mr A.P. O'GORMAN to the Premier:

Will the Premier please inform the house about whether the federal government is aware of the seriousness of Western Australia's gas shortage after the explosion on Varanus Island last week?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER replied:

I thank the member for the question. Bearing in mind the significance of the role played by Western Australia in the national economy, it is important that the national government be kept abreast of what is happening. We got the information together on Sunday and informed the Prime Minister's office about what we considered at that stage to be the nature and gravity of the situation. Today, I have spoken to the Acting Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, directly about the matter. We will need the positive engagement of the federal government on this issue, and Julia Gillard was more than willing to cooperate in whatever endeavour we sought. The Prime Minister's office was made aware of the meeting I convened on Sunday with key industry and energy sector leaders, and of the fact that this issue would have an impact on the Western Australian economy over an extended period, rather than the two to three weeks suggested initially. Earlier today I spoke to Julia Gillard and apprised her of the situation and the potential for the commonwealth to provide assistance where necessary.

Areas of potential commonwealth help included determining whether it is possible for the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission to assist in the coordination of liquid fuel deliveries from the petroleum industry; that is, to ensure that no technical hiccups or roadblocks prevent diesel fuel from getting to where it is most needed. We have obviously engaged the liquid fuel suppliers in this response, and they are seeking, through the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Chamber of Minerals and Energy, coordinated through the Office of Energy, clarity of information about the demand for liquid fuels over and above that which they are already contracted to supply. They are confident that that demand can be met to the receipt points, but thereafter there is a possibility of logistical issues in transporting the fuel to various sites. There may also be some unintended consequences from Australian Competition and Consumer Commission regulations, which we would want set aside if that were the case. We have also sought possible future assistance from the National Oil Supplies Emergency Committee to ensure that there are no potential constraints on the transport of liquid fuels. We will need the collaboration of the commonwealth there. I also discussed with the Acting Prime Minister the potential, if the need should arise, to access the strategic national fuel stocks, although it is very unlikely that this course of action would ever be needed on the information we have so far.

Mr T. Buswell: Is that the stock held on Garden Island?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: Yes; there are large fuels stocks on Garden Island for use in cases of national emergency. I do not believe it will be necessary to access those stocks, but I have raised that possibility with the Acting Prime Minister, to alert her to that contingency. Ms Gillard said that she was happy to be of assistance in that regard, if needed.

It is highly likely that some companies will have to stand down some or all of their workforce during the difficult period ahead. To this end, I discussed with Ms Gillard the assistance that may be available or forthcoming to the affected communities and how rapidly it could be supplied. Obviously, we want that assistance to be supplied rapidly for the communities and workers through the national welfare agencies and assistance methods. The federal government fully appreciates what is happening in Western Australia, and I am grateful that it is standing ready to help where necessary.

Finally, communicating the seriousness of this situation is a key component of managing it with minimal impact on the community. It is very important that the government communicate frequently and honestly with the community and all the stakeholders, and that they communicate with the government. To this end, from tomorrow we will embark on the advertising campaign I mentioned earlier. Initially, the campaign will consist of full-page advertisements in *The West Australian*, and we will look at other options after that. The campaign is to alert the community about what is happening, what response is being mounted, and what the community can do to help.