

PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEM, PRE-ELECTION CLAIMS

Motion

Resumed from 17 April on the following motion moved by Hon Simon O'Brien -

That this House recalls the Labor Party's pre-election claims that it "understood the public health system" and "would fix the health system" and calls on the Government to explain -

- (a) why the State's health system is under more pressure now than it was in February 2001, especially in relation to staffing;
- (b) why it has cut back rural health services;
- (c) why the Minister for Health will not support an MRI scanner for the southern metropolitan area;
- (d) the failure to obtain a PET scanner;
- (e) why it has halved funding for the Central Wait List Bureau;
- (f) why it has sacked country hospital boards;
- (g) the inadequacy of emergency services to outer suburban areas; and
- (h) the inadequacy of funding for health services generally.

HON SIMON O'BRIEN (South Metropolitan) [10.04 am]: During my introductory remarks, I was commenting on the Minister for Health's lack of support for the installation of the magnetic resonance imaging facilities in the southern metropolitan area, specifically at Fremantle Hospital. I will summarise the Opposition's key point: although it is all very well for the Labor Party in opposition and in the lead-up to an election to say that it will fix the health system and it will do this and that, the fact remains, in respect of MRI scanner availability, that the coalition Government had made provision for the purchase of capital equipment and arrangements were in train for the installation of that equipment at Fremantle Hospital by way of modification to buildings -

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich interjected.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: Indeed we did.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: What was the sense in that? You sold the whole of AlintaGas.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: That is another debate. If the House wishes me to chase that interjectory rabbit down its burrow, I am happy to do so. However, I am concerned that if I deal with every irrelevant interjection by Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich, there may be a problem with prorogation. I wish to make some other remarks about this motion. If the coalition Government had retained office in February last year, those MRI facilities would be installed and in operation at Fremantle Hospital.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: You would have given them to a private hospital, and you know it.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: That is a very silly interjection made without any foundation, and the parliamentary secretary knows it.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: You're a disgrace.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Hon Jon Ford): Order! Let us not start off where we ended last night.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: Thank you, Mr Deputy President. I also thank in a lukewarm way the parliamentary secretary for her constant, whining interjections, because they go to the heart of this matter; that is, the Labor Government's rhetoric in no way matches its performance in delivering quality health services to the people of Western Australia. We have seen it demonstrated, by way of interjection, that government members still think that empty rhetoric and cheap debatable claims are some sort of substitute for the provision of quality services to the people of Western Australia. Labor members must understand that they are in government and they have a responsibility to deliver. We are calling on them to explain how they have matched their pre-election rhetoric -

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: Don't worry about that.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I can hardly wait. We will hear more of the same. We will probably hear the standard Ravlich line, "You sat on your hands for eight years", and that is demonstrably not true.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: The member says it with a smile on his face. You do not commit yourself; how are you going to convince me?

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: It is very difficult to convince someone who is incapable of listening to reason, but the fact remains that if we still had a coalition Government, MRI equipment would be available in the south metropolitan area. Under this Government we do not have that equipment, and it has missed every opportunity to provide it.

The next point in my motion relates to the Government's failure to obtain a positron emission tomography scanner. I did notice a dorothy dixer during yesterday's session that was answered with considerable fluency - by way of a written answer, of course - by the parliamentary secretary to the Minister for Health. It advised that the tenders for a PET scanner would be going out on 19 April, which is this Friday. That is a welcome development, because the actions of the Government in this area have been very sad. It is a classic example of the failure of this Government and Mr Kucera to act in a timely and decisive manner.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: You had eight years to get one. Why did the previous Government not do so?

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: Here we go! The Government did not act in a timely manner to provide this service.

Hon Barry House: Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich should perhaps go back to sleep again for five minutes, then wake up and pretend she has started the day!

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: Hon Barry House should not threaten the House with a re-run of this diatribe; there is plenty of time left today!

The PET scanner issue is a classic example of how the minister and this Government have caused the Western Australian health system to miss out, and it is an illustration of their incompetence, to put it plainly. The anticipated interjection, which the House has already heard, that the previous Government did nothing for eight years is just not true. The Western Australian Department of Health has been working towards obtaining a PET scanner -

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: Why did you not get one, then?

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I am about to tell the House that. Does the parliamentary secretary want me to tell the House or not? If she is asking me, I will tell her.

The department has been going through the process and working towards obtaining this technology for some years. Because the parliamentary secretary does not seem to know it - I do not know what she does in that portfolio - I will have to explain exactly what the former Government did to obtain a PET scanner. This is not to remind her, but simply to educate her, because she obviously does not know. Then I can turn to the question of how -

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: First there was *Educating Rita* and now there is "Educating Ljiljanna"!

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: It would have been easier to educate Rita, because some people want to learn, and others refuse to learn.

Let us look very quickly at the history of the PET scanner saga in Western Australia. The former coalition State Government did provide adequate funding for PET technology, so this Government cannot say, as it has said in the past, that money is some sort of barrier. As I said a moment ago, I am glad to see that a tender will be let this Friday, so that the Government can finally get on with obtaining this technology. In 1997 - just to educate Rita a little - the Commonwealth made limited Medicare benefits scheme funding available for the evaluation of PET. At that stage, only the units at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in New South Wales and Austin Hospital were to have access to this funding. I was particularly interested to learn that Austin Hospital in Victoria was one of them, because that was where my mother did her nursing training back in the late 1940s. I do not think it had PET technology then. It is interesting to see that Austin Hospital is still providing quality services to the public following on from the success of my mother, when she was given a medal for being top of her nursing intake.

Hon Sue Ellery: Is she still with us?

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: No - sadly, she is not. Just a few years ago a eulogy was given at her funeral by a lady identified as a matron. Some matrons still endure, even though the term "director of nursing" has been used for some decades. This former matron offered me condolences and it was she who advised me that my mother had been the top nurse in her class. This lady, half a century later, said, "Oh yes, I remember it very well - I came second."

PET units were established at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and at Austin Hospital in 1997, and they received limited Medicare benefits scheme funding. The Commonwealth Government at that time was seeking advice and conducting evaluations on the merits of PET technology, not only as a diagnostic tool, but also in relation to its cost effectiveness. By mid 1999, this arrangement had failed to produce the level of evidence required to

satisfy the requirements of the Commonwealth's evidence-based approach to funding for health services. This in part answers the interjection of the parliamentary secretary about the slow progress in introducing PET technology in Western Australia. In 1993, the Government could not just go in and buy something off the shelf.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: The present Government introduced it in 18 months, while the previous Government took eight years. You cannot have it both ways.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I am not trying to have it both ways; I am trying to establish the truth. This side of the House does not want it both ways with this motion or anything else.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: You sat on your hands.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I believe the member just said that the previous Government was sitting on its hands, as I suspected she would.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: What is more, you enjoyed sitting on your hands.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I think members opposite find it a far more pleasurable sensation than do members on this side of the House. I want to talk about the health system. After that moment of insane levity from the member, can we now return to the issue at hand, which we are not sitting on?

I remind the House that those considerations of the Commonwealth Government led to the establishment of the PET inquiry, which was completed in August 2000. That report recommended that future funding be restricted to seven dedicated PET facilities - two in New South Wales, two in Victoria, one in Queensland, one in South Australia and one in Western Australia. Following the PET inquiry, the Commonwealth established a three-year PET program, and sought tenders for the provision of PET services under the Medicare benefits scheme. Those tenders were advertised nationally on 4 August 2001, and closed five weeks later on 7 September 2001. This is the train of events that is leading to the viable introduction of these seven MBS-licensed PET facilities around Australia, including one in Western Australia. As I have just pointed out, there has been a steady progress towards this point. The former coalition Government and the Department of Health were part of that progress, even to the point, at the appropriate time, of the Government making sure that funds would be available for the Western Australian facility. It is not a matter of people sitting on hands; the process was going on. However, when the music changed tune to the extent that tenders were called, the Labor Government was in office - heaven help us.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: Why do you not give the Government credit for doing that?

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: If the member sits on her hands for while, I might just do that. I will dangle a carrot - not the one referred to in the Prosh newspaper yesterday in respect of Dr Gallop - that I might give her some credit in a moment. Then again, I might not.

The tenders were advertised nationally on 4 August 2001 and closed five weeks later on 7 September 2001. Under the request for tender guidelines, successful tenderers who entered into eligibility agreements with the Commonwealth would be eligible to provide positron emission tomography services under the Medicare benefits scheme on a fee-for-service basis, which is a very important part of the consideration. Minister Kucera wrote to the federal Minister for Health and Ageing on the day tenders closed to outline concerns relating to the Commonwealth's offer, and requested a response so that Western Australia could proceed in the tender process. It staggered me, as I am sure it staggered any observer of the Western Australian health system, that although there was a five-week period in which tenders could be lodged, the Government waited until the day tenders closed to write a letter of inquiry about the process. It gives weight to my earlier claim that this is a good example of the Government's failure to act in a timely manner and, dare I say, its incompetence. The Government should not have left it to the last day to write and request a response about Western Australia proceeding in the tender process. That made it very difficult for Western Australia to participate in the tender process. That is why, seven months down the track, no tender is called for. Certainly, nothing has been accepted. The facts speak for themselves. It came to pass that Western Australia was the only eligible State not to submit a tender at that time. In fairness to the federal Government - it is a very good federal Government -

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: It lost \$5.5 billion. What is a bad federal Government?

Hon Barry House interjected.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I know that you, Mr Deputy President (Hon Jon Ford), will closely follow the remarks of the parliamentary secretary when she responds to this motion, because you will be concerned that she will not want to address the motion but will want to talk about anything else except this Government's failure to live up to its rhetoric. We are seeing ample evidence of that. There is no point -

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: Do not get distressed. Keep calm.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I am not distressed.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: The honourable member is clearly distressed. He needs to calm down. It is because he is trying to run an unsustainable argument.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Hon Jon Ford): Order! Some of us need to calm down.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: Yes, some of us need to calm down. For the record, I am not exhibiting any signs of stress or distress. I am pointing out that this Government does not want to face up to or deliver on its rhetoric.

Hon Bruce Donaldson: It hates the truth.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: It does not like the truth. It cannot deal with it.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: The federal Government lost \$5.5 billion. You have beads of sweat forming on your forehead.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: That is an absolute falsehood. I do not have beads of sweat forming on my forehead. It is an irrelevant point. The money that the parliamentary secretary wants to talk about is a federal issue.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: You said that it was a great Government.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: It is a great Government. That matter needs to be tested. If this House were to examine the parliamentary secretary's claims about a \$5.5 billion loss in relation to what Hon Barry House described as the Keating-invented formula, I think it would find that her figures are well wide of the mark. That is not the matter we are talking about today. If the member wants to talk about it another time, we should do that. I want to hold this Government to account for its failures with the health system.

While the parliamentary secretary is trying to dream up a fresh interjection, I will acknowledge that, as of yesterday, seven months down the track, we finally learnt that the State Government has allowed things to progress to the extent that it will put out a tender. What have we seen so far? We heard a dorothy dixer in this House yesterday, the answer to which said that the Government has put out a request for tender for a PET machine, which will close on Friday. We will see what happens in due course, and how long it is before patients in Western Australia have the benefit of this technology.

I want to comment about the Central Wait List Bureau. Waiting lists for elective and required surgery is a topical and important issue in the health portfolio and in the minds of people in Western Australia. That is rightly so. The House is well aware of the pressures in the health system, which have probably existed for a very long time, that prevent people getting access to surgery. Those pressures combine to cause waiting times for surgery, particularly so-called non-urgent surgery, to be extended. Patients are often then subjected to further delays. That is difficult for people, particularly patients and families, to accept. It is difficult for me to accept. I do not like patients having to wait excessive periods for the surgery they need to aid their quality of life. I am sure that nobody in this House derives anything but displeasure from the knowledge that people often have to wait excessive periods to enjoy the benefits of hip or knee replacement surgery, or other forms of surgery of a so-called non-urgent nature. Such operations are very urgent from the point of view of the patient and his family. That is why the coalition Government introduced the Central Wait List Bureau. It funded that bureau to tackle the waiting lists for some common types of surgery. That bureau has more than a coordinating role. Many people think it has purely a coordinating role to find available theatre time and to try to match patients to that slot. There is more to it than that. On many occasions the Central Wait List Bureau must pay for that time, and funds have been made available to do that. What happened in Western Australia once the Labor Government came in? It has made a couple of contributions in regard to the Central Wait List Bureau. The first thing it did was to cut funding in half. It took \$12 million from the pool available to the Central Wait List Bureau and gave it to the tertiary hospitals. In my earlier introductory remarks yesterday, I pointed out that the Gallop Labor Government's promise that it would properly fund the hospitals was not reflected in the budget. Three months after the state budget was brought down, it had to top up the health budget with another \$70 million. It delivered an inadequate budget, even though it knew that the major hospitals were running nine per cent over budget. It attacked the Central Wait List Bureau by taking away half its funds and putting it into the funding black hole in which tertiary hospitals can sometimes find themselves. An amount of \$12 million can disappear into several tertiary hospitals without touching the sides. However, when that occurred, it made a big impact on people looking for benefits from the Central Wait List Bureau.

What has been the net outcome for waiting lists? Between November and December 2001 - these are the notes I prepared at the time I gave notice of the motion - an additional 273 people had joined the elective surgery waiting lists at Perth's tertiary hospitals. The median waiting time had increased by nearly a month since the same period in the previous year. Those extended waiting times are still in force. The up-to-date figures from March 2001 indicate that just after the Labor Government came to office, the median waiting time for elective surgery was 5.62 months, and as at March 2002, which is the last month for which we have complete figures, it was 6.61 months. Again there has been a failure to deliver. The pre-election assertion was that waiting lists

were symptomatic of a system in crisis. However, the Government's actual performance delivery is to take money from the Central Wait List Bureau and to stop tackling surgery waiting list times. What happened? The waiting list grew and the time that people had to wait for surgery also increased.

[Quorum formed.]

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: Hon Bruce Donaldson certainly knows how to draw a crowd! I thank members for their attention.

To summarise my point, the Labor Government has cut funding to the Central Wait List Bureau while at the same time presiding over a blow-out in waiting times for category two and three elective surgery such as hip, liver, prostate and colon operations. That is not something that it should be proud of. However, I do not think it particularly cares, otherwise it would do something about it.

One of the blows that has hit health consumers in Western Australia particularly hard was delivered in November last year. In response to a number of recommendations contained in the interim report of the Bunbury Health Task Force, the Minister for Health, Mr Kucera, abolished the health service boards in the south west. That was in response to only an interim report; yet at that time, the minister rushed straight out and announced the abolition of these hospital boards. That strikes me as rather precipitous action, unless it was already contemplated and planned in advance.

Hon Barry House: No; he was already embarrassed by the resignation of the chairman of one of the health service boards just a few days before.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I thank the member for the interjection. I thought the standard operating procedure for Labor members when they are embarrassed and are trying to defend the indefensible is that they refer to figures from Canberra which have nothing to do with the issue. The member might well be right.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: Which figures? Are you talking about the \$5.5 billion loss by the federal Treasurer on the foreign currency market?

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I am darned sure the member was not talking about the blow-out in federal debt from \$23 billion in 1983 to \$96 billion in 1996.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order, members!

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: A number of steps were taken in response to the task force's interim report. I do not know what a task force is. There are a lot of reviews, but "review" does not seem to be an adequate word for all the things that this Government does. For some people, such as the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure, "mirror" is sufficient - she is always looking into things. However, the health minister seems to need working parties and task forces. Perhaps that is to indicate that some action is taking place and that some progress and aggressive planning is going on. I think it is more window-dressing. One of the recommendations of the task force was that an area structure for the south west be established by the Minister for Health. Accordingly, the minister amalgamated - that is a nice word - the Bunbury, the Harvey-Yarloop, the Vasse-Leeuwin, the Warren Blackwood and the Wellington health service boards to create a single South West Health Service Board, with the minister acting as the board. What a busy -

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: He did not sack them as you allege.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: No. He did not get rid of them; he just amalgamated them! A number of health service boards are removed and an overarching regional health service is created in their place. If that is not getting rid of the local health service boards, I do not know what is, and neither does the parliamentary secretary. However, that will not stop her talking about it. The absence of knowledge or any material of a useful nature to contribute does not stop the parliamentary secretary from having her say.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: And she will continue to do so!

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: We are reassured that she will continue to do so. Based on long observation, I believe the parliamentary secretary; I know she will continue to do that. When the parliamentary secretary is shouting interjections at us, we know that the world is still spinning. I will ignore the unkind taunts of the Minister for Racing and Gaming.

On the basis of the interim report, the minister created a single South West Health Service Board, with the minister acting as the board. What a busy minister he must be. He certainly does not have time to progress the position of health consumers in Western Australia. A further recommendation of the task force was that a position of Chief Executive Officer of the South West Health Service be created and an appointment to this position be made by the minister in his capacity as the South West Health Service Board. Then, exhausted from single-handedly being the South West Health Service Board, the minister accepted a further recommendation

that he delegate to the Commissioner of Health all the minister's powers and functions as the South West Health Service Board. He was in and out of that board very quickly.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: I am sure he enjoyed the experience.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I am sure he did. The abolition of the five regional health service boards in the south west -

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: It was not an abolition. You just said that it was an amalgamation. Get the terminology right.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: No; the member said that it was an amalgamation.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: You said that it was an amalgamation, not me. You don't even know what it is. You should not even be here if you don't know the difference between the two.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I will ask a question over the prattle of the broken record opposite. Do the Bunbury, Harvey-Yarloop, Vasse-Leeuwin, Warren Blackwood and Wellington health service boards still exist? No, they do not. They existed prior to November 2001 but they do not exist now because of the action of this Government. Is that not getting rid of them? What happened to those people?

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich interjected.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I cannot get through to the member. What is the difference between the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and a computer? At least the information only needs to be punched into a computer once for it to understand.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: I have been called dog, a cat, a rabbit, scum and a computer, all in four hours.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I have not called the member any of those things.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Hon Jon Ford): The debate should revolve around the actual motion.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I make it clear that I have not called the honourable member any of those things, and I certainly do not now. The fact is that I have just demonstrated that those five regional health service boards did exist and now, as a result of the action by the Minister for Health in November, they do not exist. However, the parliamentary secretary says, by way of interjection, that they have been amalgamated and therefore they still exist.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: That is what you said.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: No; I quoted from the member's press release, in which the term "amalgamation" was used. I am using the term "abolished". Those boards were done away with. A health service board consists of people charged with the responsibility to do things for health consumers in their own designated area. What happened to the people that made up those five regional boards? Were they given a seat on this new regional board? No, they were not, because the south west board is made up of a minister in isolation. The boards were done away with. Let us not have any nonsense that says that they were not abolished; they were abolished.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: They were amalgamated.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: We are getting semantic nonsense from the Government. The boards were abolished and that is abundantly clear. The Government wants to go on with this sort of nonsense because, with its Greens (WA) mates, it has the numbers - 17 votes to 16 - and it can assert anything and claim it to be true. In a recent Bill this Government abolished the concept of fatherhood. If the Government wants to vote 17 to 16 to say black is white, it can do so; it can pass such resolutions. However, that does not mean that it is true. This Government can vote 17 to 16 to say that night is day, but that does not mean it is so. This Government can assert that it has not abolished those five regional health service boards, but the fact remains that it did. No amount of gainsaying by interjection, or by press release, from the government benches can deny the fact that it is so. If the Government wants to live in this false paradise and a state of denial, I cannot stop it from exercising that sort of silliness. The fact is that this is what the Government did. If that is the case - this Government has the power to do that and has done it - why is it now trying to say it did not abolish those regional health service boards? Those people who made up those boards are still exercising -

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: I did not say all of them were there.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: None of those people is there; zero per cent have been retained.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: You need a good night's sleep; you are very stressed and you are causing us stress.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I am not stressed at all. I am enjoying myself watching the member get upset and squirm when she is held to the account for the first time in her life for the irresponsibility of her Government's actions. The member reckons it is great; she sits there laughing and she thinks it is an absolute hoot. It is an

absolute disgrace that the people on those boards were dismissed in such a cavalier fashion from their positions in which they serviced the community.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: So you agree that the boards were amalgamated.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: No, I do not agree and the member is being quite silly in trying to persist in saying that I do. Can she not take me seriously?

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: It is a very serious matter.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: Apparently it is a very serious matter; that is good. Now we may find out what the Government will do about it. When things are thought to be serious -

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: So you want the Government to take the amalgamated health board and go back to a structure that was totally inefficient - a structure introduced by your Government. The honourable member should just build a bridge over the matter and accept that he is no longer in government. We will govern for all Western Australians.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I do not think those were my exact words. This is the fairyland, the fantasy world that the parliamentary secretary inhabits: she thinks that she can just assert herself, talk over the top of people and make outrageous claims that will stand uncontested. She must get in touch with reality. This motion is all about calling this Labor Government to account for making outrageous claims prior to the election. Now that the Labor Party is in government it has a responsibility to account for what it said it was going to do and what it has done. However, that reality does not seem to be sinking in. I have cautioned and advised the parliamentary secretary that she has only a little under three years left to get the message assimilated inside that mass of unused grey matter inside her head. She must understand the concept that in this unfortunate window of four years in which we have a Labor Government - the rotten Government that it is - it must understand that it is the Government and that it has a responsibility to deliver.

I return to the issue of the country hospital boards. On 16 November 2001, the shadow spokesman for health, Mr Board, said in a press release that the loss of local hospital boards was another slap in the face for country people already suffering from a reduction in health services as a result of real funding cuts to regional hospitals. That is the subject we should be focusing on. Mr Board went on to say that in real terms, budget cuts between six and 10 per cent had been identified by hospitals in Geraldton, Merredin, Ravensthorpe, Vasse-Leeuwin, Wyalkatchem, Dalwallinu, Bruce Rock, Quairading and Cunderdin. I do not want to hear any more semantics about calling an abolition of health service boards an amalgamation. I do not want to get into any of that newspeak nonsense that the parliamentary secretary wants to get into. This is the substance of the matter. Does this Government, as it claimed it would, support regional health services? The evidence is that it does not. There is no other complexion that can be put on it, because that is its performance. It has cut funds and sacked country hospital boards. Not only is it reprehensible because it represents -

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich interjected.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: Mr Deputy President, will you ask my dear friend opposite to wait until I have sat down before she commences her speech? I want to hear it and I will receive it with the same warmth that she has received my remarks.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order, members! A debate is going on between two members of the House instead of the House as a whole, and both members are guilty of inciting each other. I would appreciate it if all comments were addressed to the Chair.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I shall address the Chair. I am mortified that you, Mr Deputy President, would think that I would incite unruly interjection.

The sacking of the south west country hospital boards has occurred. I believe that there will be more sackings, or amalgamations if people want to be twee about it, and abolitions of country health services to come. When I was in the Merredin electorate not so long ago, I visited with Mr Board some members of the country health services board. They are outside the south west division, but they are concerned about their future. The policy is causing disquiet, and rightly so.

The abolition of country hospital boards is plain dumb. It is yet another crime of the Government, and a silly thing to do. Most of the initiative of local boards, when they exist, is about getting things done in the local health community. I am complaining, and I hear from a lot of consumers and others involved in the health sector who are complaining, that this Government cannot get things done. It cannot get tenders in on time for positron emission tomography machines, it cannot get magnetic resonance imaging machines into hospitals and it cannot do a whole lot of things. Why get rid of local boards that have a lot to contribute?

What sort of things do local boards do? They make strictly local efforts to get doctors. A single doctor arriving in a local health district makes a huge impact. Local boards assist in those sorts of things. They set about improving accommodation for staff in the town. A local hospital run by a board will certainly keep its standards up. All those things make such a difference to the happy running of the institution and to the care of patients. The Government has shunned a whole range of volunteer assistance. I received an e-mail signed "a dedicated volunteer in the areas of health and education". The person gave her name. It reads -

I am very concerned that the Labor Government is working towards winding up all statutory bodies and plan to run the services with Government employed people. Relegating the community to an advisory role only but with little hope that their concerns and suggestions will be taken into consideration.

Many of the statutory bodies have volunteers/community members sitting on them and are able to advise the Government on what is best for the organisation whether it be a Health Service or a board involved with education.

If the statutory boards/bodies are dissolved how will the community be involved in their local services? Advisory bodies will not always work especially if there isn't a district run body overseeing the service in the area. How will the community be sure that the services continue to run to their needs and not to the agenda of the Government of the day?

She goes on to write -

I am extremely disappointed that volunteers are being made redundant especially just after all the hoo ha of 2001, The Year of the Volunteer . . .

I hope that it is not too late for Government officials to see the huge mistake they are about to make and allow volunteers/community members some say in their local services.

To abolish all statutory boards and bodies will be detrimental to all services and I believe will cause deep unrest and dissatisfaction with the Government and how they plan to run our State.

Please ask questions and help to stop the madness before it is too late.

Because they are a central issue in this motion, I am sure that the parliamentary secretary will be able to respond to those comments of a genuine volunteer helper in a regional area.

I will conclude my introductory remarks by turning briefly to the inadequacy of emergency services in outer suburban areas. This is another sub-issue in the health story, which has also been dealt with on another occasion. I think it was through an urgency motion of Hon Derrick Tomlinson, although I stand to be corrected. He certainly had a lot to say on behalf of his electorate of the East Metropolitan Region. I do not think that we need to spend much time in addressing this point. However, if the parliamentary secretary wants me to, she can indicate -

The PRESIDENT: Order! We have been going very well lately. Hon Simon O'Brien will address the Chair.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: I am happy to have the member continue.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I thank the parliamentary secretary. I was not trying to incite a reaction.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: I would be more than happy. Keep going. As these are your introductory remarks, I am prepared to listen to the rest of the speech. I am sure it will be as good as it has been thus far.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I thank the parliamentary secretary. She is exceedingly gracious as ever. I am delighted to take up her offer that I be allowed to proceed with my remarks, and I thank the House for its indulgence.

We all recall the saga of the Swan District Hospital emergency services, which is a good point on which to conclude my introductory remarks. It puts into a human scale the lack of understanding that this Government has for the dragon it is tackling. I refer, of course, to the Metropolitan Health Service Board.

Around March 2001, just after the Government took office, the Department of Health received a report outlining the inadequacies at Swan District Hospital emergency department. That review had been carried out by a Dr Gary Geelhoed who said in August, "I completed the review in March and as yet no action has been taken."

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: We have gone through the doctors' enterprise bargaining agreement which your Government signed.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: We do not want to go back to the doctors' EBA. I will talk about the inadequacy of emergency services in outer suburban areas. The inaction on those issues led to the closure of the Swan District Hospital emergency department after 6.00 pm and all day on Sundays. I listened with great interest when Hon Derrick Tomlinson and others were making the case on behalf of their regions for the services to be retained. Basically, the problem was that they could not get doctors to work at nights and at weekends.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: It was your EBA.

Hon Derrick Tomlinson: Rubbish! Why don't you go and check with the Swan District Hospital, and get your facts straight?

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: The facts are straight. They are on the record.

The PRESIDENT: Order! The parliamentary secretary and Hon Derrick Tomlinson, although they might like the call, do not happen to have the call. Hon Simon O'Brien does.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: He is sore because he lost the last debate.

The PRESIDENT: Hon Simon O'Brien.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: Thank you, Mr President. I see that the sleeping giant of Hon Derrick Tomlinson has awoken.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: It has been a long morning tea for him.

Withdrawal of Remark

Hon DERRICK TOMLINSON: Mr President!

The PRESIDENT: There is no point of order.

Hon DERRICK TOMLINSON: I object to the disparaging comment about the long morning tea. I have been on a strict diet since 3 January, and I ask the member to withdraw those disparaging comments.

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: Mr President, I withdraw.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Having resolved that point of order on the floor, we return to Hon Simon O'Brien to conclude his introductory remarks.

Debate Resumed

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: The Government had great difficulty tackling the problem of recruiting staff and of keeping outer-suburban emergency services open at night on weekends. It appalled me and other members that the Government suggested that one possible way of dealing with that problem would be to scrap the emergency services in those suburban hospitals. The Minister for Health showed a lack of sensitivity to and understanding of the issue when he asked on radio whether we could afford an emergency department at every hospital. He referred to the new Armadale-Kelmscott Memorial Hospital, which will have an emergency department. Is that not good? That is another one of our hospitals, which the minister opened at the last minute.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: It is owned by the Liberal Party! You must be kidding; that is a disgraceful comment to make.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: It was initiated, funded and built by the coalition Government; yet Bob Kucera believes it is his hospital.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich interjected.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I did not say "owned by us". Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich is inventing words. The parliamentary secretary should get a life.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: Yes, you did. The implication was that it was built by you.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: It is an implication now. The minister said at that time that the new Armadale hospital had a wonderful new emergency department. He said that, although it is great that those facilities exist, within about 15 minutes of Armadale there are world-class facilities at Royal Perth and Sir Charles Gairdner Hospitals. I do not know how quickly the minister can drive from Armadale to Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, but 15 minutes is an optimistic view of the travel time, even by helicopter. That shows the fairy fantasy land this minister and his parliamentary secretary and colleagues seem to inhabit. With those introductory remarks I hope I have encouraged other members to comment on this issue. In the light of the rhetoric to which it subjected us prior to the election, the Government should provide an explanation of how it has conducted itself on all the matters I have briefly touched on in the past couple of days. I look forward to an explanation rather than just the normal flippant remarks we have come to expect from a Government that is determined to avoid its accountability. With those few words I commend the motion to the House.

Debate interrupted, pursuant to standing orders.