

Hon Tjorn Sibma; Hon Neil Thomson; Hon James Hayward; Hon Steve Martin; Hon Alannah MacTiernan; Hon
Dr Steve Thomas; Hon Dr Brian Walker

ENVIRONMENTAL DEVELOPMENT

Motion

HON TJORN SIBMA (North Metropolitan) [10.10 am] — without notice: I move —

That this house affirms the need for the government to —

- (a) ensure that its agencies, systems and processes encourage environmentally, socially and economically responsible development throughout Western Australia;
- (b) avoid adopting policies which are economically and socially destabilising and confer questionable environmental benefits;
- (c) expedite changes to its environmental approvals system, and other approvals systems, necessary for attracting investment; and
- (d) deliver, quickly, on its various commitments made over recent years to streamline and reform approvals system.

It is sort of customary on a Thursday that when we discuss non-government business, there is sometimes an element of rancour in the course of debate. There are interjections on occasion, generally unruly, sometimes constructive, and often times not. One of the peculiarities or aspects of the current arrangements is that when a member comes up to bat, they are greeted by the slip cordon, immediately adjacent. Hon Kyle McGinn is there, who is probably first slip, and Hon Alannah MacTiernan, who might be probably a short leg, I think, if I get my positions right. Unfortunately for these members, I am a right-handed batsman, so if I am going to edge anything through, it is going to go to the crossbench.

An opposition member interjected.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: I will not introduce anything like that, which would give cause to interjections.

A government member interjected.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: Indeed. See? It is delivering already.

I think we can have a pretty constructive debate. I note the motion brought forward today by Hon Dan Caddy around hydrogen energy.

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon TJORN SIBMA: There is a theme to this morning's business, which I hope will be constructive and to the benefit of Western Australia more generally. I want to start by explaining the reason I have put my motion in the terms that I have. This is not to lambast the government, or criticise it for ruining the Western Australian economy or anything of that sort, but to just encourage it to continue its focus on reform. Reform is very, very difficult.

I move into the substantive bit of my motion by referring to a couple of quotes from debate when, in this chamber two years ago, we debated the Environmental Protection Amendment Bill 2020. On indulgence, I will read this in. It might be lengthy, but it puts today's motion in its proper context, and states —

Western Australia is home to some of the world's most biologically diverse flora and fauna, as well as some of the world's most significant natural resources. For this reason, finding a balance between delivering on the full economic potential of our resources and the protection of the environment is vital. The need to ensure that our precious environment is protected for current and future generations and that environmental legislation works efficiently to support a sustainable economy is particularly relevant at a time when we are moving to support recovery from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I endorse those words absolutely. I was moved to invoke their spirit the other evening in debate when Hon Dr Brad Pettitt moved his motion to disallow the exemption orders as they apply to prescribed burning. The author of those fine words, however, was not somebody from the opposition; it was Hon Stephen Dawson who at that time was the Minister for Environment. He expressed the strategic imperative that we need to balance these things. But as I mentioned previously in this chamber, reform, generally speaking, is the most used and abused word in the political lexicon. We are always reforming one way or another. On indulgence, I will quote from my contribution to that debate. Sorry; it is a little lengthy, but it puts this in its proper context. I said —

Reform finds itself accompanied in sentences with other words such as “streamlining”, “fast-tracking”, “efficiency” and the like. These are all good words. I have not seen a government bring in legislation and provide by way of a second reading speech or the explanatory memorandum that goes with it a commitment

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to increase duplication or make things more inefficient or cumbersome. All governments have shared this desire from at least the 1980s macroeconomic and microeconomic reforms onwards for streamlining, fast-tracking, reducing duplication and cutting red tape and green tape ...

I went further, and this gets to the essence of this motion. I said —

Essential to all reform is that it is bedded down by way of black-letter law and suitable regulatory instruments, and that it is absolutely driven into an organisation's culture ... Until regulatory or legislative changes are embedded at that level, there has not been reform ...

I would reflect probably on the course of a series of environmental and approvals reforms announced by the McGowan government over the course of these five years that reform is an unfinished business. I note and applaud the government for when it gets things right. I thought the Environmental Protection Amendment Bill 2020 was comprehensive legislation that took a lot of work, and one of the ex-holders of that portfolio, Hon Stephen Dawson, should have been complimented and was rightly complimented on negotiating that bill through this Parliament. It was done through this chamber when it was far more complex in its representation. It was a multiparty chamber. There were a series of amendments, some that got up and some that did not, but they were negotiated properly. Stemming from that was a series of regulatory work, some of which is incomplete, and for some of which the rubber is just hitting the road, but more properly reform needs cultural embedded change: changes in culture, changes in systems and changes in processes and the ways of doing business. Cultural transformation is obviously a subject that has received a lot of attention in academic literature, and I will not go into that in any more detail.

Over the course of the last four or five years, the government has made a series of related announcements and signals about its intent and desire to speed things up, to fast track and to avoid duplication. I will refer to three specifically as they relate to the motion. One is Streamline WA, and one is Environment Online. The other relates to an announcement made last year in July, and backed in in the budget, when the Premier, being the Treasurer, made around a \$120 million commitment to recruit 150 frontline approvals officers and red-tape reducers, I suppose would be the way that I put it. I will speak to Streamline WA very briefly. Streamline WA was announced on 6 December 2018, three and a half years ago. I will quote from this document released by Mark McGowan. It states —

The initiative is an innovative whole of sector approach to develop best practice principles for making and applying regulation.

Streamline WA will assess referrals and prioritise areas of reform against set criteria throughout the year to provide accountability and avoid time and effort being spent on ambit issues, before they are allocated to agencies for action.

There is a range of nice sounding, well-intentioned commitments to speed things up and be a little bit more sensible and rational about how the government balances its regulatory responsibilities and the environmental estate while also ensuring that WA is a place that business wants to do business in because it provides investment certainty, and gives proponents an understanding of what the left and right of arc is and what they can expect in having their assessments dealt with in a professional manner. I will make an assessment here. Sometimes I get the view from individual proponents at various levels of scale that they are frustrated. Sometimes they do not understand the regulatory environment that they are dealing with and sometimes their propositions are not completely fully rendered. There can be misgivings on both sides but the government is the owner and regulator of the system so the large burden of responsibility for making the system efficient rests upon the government. What has Streamline WA accomplished? I would think that the jury is out on that subject. This has been going on for three and a half years now. I think late last year, a council of regulators, under the ambit of Streamline WA, was appointed to decide what to do next. Streamline WA is a branding or ephemeral commitment to speed things up, but the actual delivery of that system, policy and unit is very hard to determine. It very hard for me to determine as an external observer, but it is also very hard for industry proponents to determine. What outcomes has Streamline WA actually delivered? We often have debates in this and other places about commitments and they are very input biased to the degree that it is policy by input. It is a bit of a fallacious approach that if the government makes an announcement or a budgetary commitment, or talks about money going into something, obviously that is all it needs to do. The government needs to start focusing on delivery and measuring the validity of government programs by the outcomes they deliver. After four or five years of this government, we should start seeing some of those results. Are we seeing those results? The government will probably argue that we are.

I want to quote from an article. I will not go extensively through the article. It is a *Business News Western Australia* article by Matt McKenzie. It is a recent edition; I cannot find the date, sorry, but I will find it later. I will table the article when required. Matt McKenzie outlines a series of projects that are working their way through the approvals system. The headline reads "A combined 2,243 days on the waiting list" and the article recognises a number of projects—for example, the Scarborough Project Nearshore Component, which is a very complex project. There is

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a concession that a lot of the projects going through the approvals system are, of their very nature, complex and probably demand scrutiny and will take some time. But we are in a very—I will not say precarious—challenging situation in which the demand for approvals outcomes is outstripping the capacity of the government to provide those approvals services. If we put it in supply and demand terms, that is exactly where we are when we should be doing a little better than that—absolutely we should. I will quote from the article—sorry, I can see from the by-line that it is a *Business News Western Australia* article of 14 February.

I will quote the outgoing CEO of the Chamber of Minerals and Energy Western Australia, Mr Everingham, because what he said conceptualises the challenges at the moment. He is quoted as saying —

“However, as we have pointed out on numerous occasions in the past two years, there is still extensive duplication of environmental assessment and approval processes, including crossover by the Department of Mines, Industry Regulation and Safety,” ...

“Removing this duplication would be a positive step towards reducing the current time frames associated with assessments and approvals.”

I think that is a reasonably straightforward assessment of where we are despite the rhetoric of reform.

The other commitment is Environment Online, which is a one-stop-shop portal for getting a project approved. Environment Online has been referred to, I think, from memory, in the 2018–19 budget, the 2019–20 budget, the 2020–21 budget and the 2021–22 budget. Environment Online is not yet online. As often happens with government-run bespoke IT projects, it is unlikely to come online soon. The first portal, which I think is called the minimal deliverable product—I think there is an acronym for that—will be tested with proponents around the end of this month. In answer to a question I asked last week of the new Minister for Environment, he was not in a position to specify when the very first portal of Environment Online will be online and usable. Full functionality of that platform is, on the government’s own rendering, not likely until the final quarter of next year. But considering how long it has taken to get to this point, it is probably inevitable that the system will be further delayed. We might not have a fully functional digital system in place until seven or eight years after it was originally announced, when the need for expedited approvals is clearly a present one. I will talk about that issue over the course of the next few years.

The government has recognised that one of the problems or deficiencies is the lack of qualified staff to deal with the demand. I referred earlier to 150 frontline officers being allocated across, I think, five agencies to deal with approvals systems or processes in their various forms. Again, this was a commitment made by the Treasurer, as I understand it. I am prepared to be disabused because I think we need to get an understanding of who the single point of accountability is in cabinet for this kind of reform, but I assume it is the Treasurer because he is the head of Streamline WA and the person who made the original commitment. When I asked the Treasurer last week, “How many of these 150 people across government have been recruited?”, I was told to put the question on notice. I have therefore gone through the laborious process of going through individual agencies and asking, “How many have you recruited?” and “How much have you spent?”—that sort of thing—not to entertain myself, but to get a sense of what has been accomplished against the rhetoric. At the end of question time yesterday, Minister Alannah MacTiernan, speaking for the Minister for Mines and Petroleum, read in a positively surprising answer from the ex-Department of State Development, which is now the Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innovation, about the number of people who have been recruited. I have thought about that. It seems that the government is on track towards reaching between 60 per cent and 70 per cent of the recruitment target it announced in the budget last and has been working on since July last year. Seemingly, it has been able to deliver this when the borders have been closed and there is a very tight labour market. I wonder whether new positions have been created and qualified people have been recruited into these roles, people with the capacity to assess, or whether there has been a series of widespread reclassifications, redesignations and sideways transfers across the public service. Do we have a situation in which we might be robbing Peter to pay Paul to some degree? The jury will be out on that for some time.

Element (b) of the motion—I have referred to elements (a), (c) and (d)—is to “avoid adopting policies which are economically and socially destabilising and confer questionable environmental benefits”. I politely suggest to the government that it not run the environment portfolio by press release, but that it actually thinks through the consequences of the policies it announces and the way in which it goes about developing them. I will mention in passing what happened to the native timber industry last year. If we take through to its logical conclusion the government’s commitment to expand the softwood plantation estate, I can only assume that that will necessitate the clearing of native vegetation in some form. The environmental benefits need to be weighed against each other. I mention that in passing.

I will focus very briefly on the implementation of cost recovery for environmental assessments. I will again quote from the *Business News Western Australia* article. This quote, which is attributed to Mr Chris Rodwell from the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia, states —

“A particularly acute example right now is the clawback of funds from businesses through environmental ‘cost recovery,’ ...

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“The fees the state government has begun charging businesses for environmental impact assessments are the highest such fees anywhere in the nation.

I asked a series of questions last year about the modelling and the way in which it was done. It seemed to be a very expedited process that lacked consultation. The first tranches of hundreds of thousands of dollars are now going into the department’s kitty. This is something that I will focus on. It needs attention. It will be reviewed, although not necessarily independently, at the end of this year. However, I put on notice to the government that I think this measure will need reference to the Economic Regulation Authority, because I do not necessarily think that industry is getting what it deserves.

HON NEIL THOMSON (Mining and Pastoral) [10.31 am]: I also rise to support the motion. I think it is very important that the government gets its regulatory reform processes, approvals reform and the streamlining of approvals processes right. I think there is a little confusion in the government at the moment as to what that actually means.

I refer to the planning system. An idea that is permeating through the government is that if decision-making is centralised in the minister or those close to the minister, that will somehow result in a more efficient and streamlined approvals system. That is true insofar as a decision can be made very quickly. I mean, the minister is in a position to make a number of decisions under the Planning and Development Act, for example. There has been bipartisan support, to some extent, for the powers under that act that allow the minister, in exceptional circumstances, to do things that are in the public interest. But what we have seen with the most recent processes around the state development assessment unit is an inappropriate alignment of decision-making. One thing people have respected and loved about our planning system over many decades is that appropriate decision-making is made at a strategic level, although this has resulted in some complexity and has been a barrier to timely decisions. For example, the WA Planning Commission has taken a very strategic role and maintained the economic and social oversight that is vital for the City of Perth, the metropolitan area and, of course, our regions in terms of developing the right land-use framework across our state. There is also the interaction with our local governments and the role that they have. However, we are seeing, more frequently, the erosion of that role.

It is vital that we retain the appropriate place for local government, particularly through the development of its local planning schemes and strategies, because local government is where grassroots politics occurs. Local government is where the community gets to have its say. Local government is really the level of government that is most engaged with our community; anyone who has attended a local government electors meeting will understand that. Local governments are vital. We are seeing a propensity to override the decisions of local government and the strategic frameworks that were put in place. We often hear, by means of interjection or in speeches that are given, that we have recalcitrant local governments that do not keep their schemes up to date. That is the role of the Planning Commission. Its role is to have strategic oversight of those frameworks so that they are appropriately maintained and have the right layers of decision-making. The pointy end of decision-making is when we really start to see the development approvals. These approvals need to be done in a way that engages the community at the strategic level, have a proper strategic framework to oversee the process, and involve people with appropriate expertise.

Another area of bipartisanship that has been undermined of late is the development assessment panels. The development assessment panels, which received bipartisan support from both sides of this place, receive both professional and local advice. I will watch very closely as we move forward from the state development assessment unit, which I do not think has resulted in the right outcomes or reinforced community engagement or decentralised decision-making. I hope very much that when this new reform comes through—the DAPS for special matters, which I hear might be the replacement—we will see the retention of the great strategic framework and that operational decisions will be made with proper local input and oversight so that we get the economically and socially stable outcomes that people expect from government.

The problem with this government is that it is all about taking shortcuts. It is great at taking shortcuts, because the hard work of making systems and processes efficient involves dealing with the processes within agencies. This government embarked on the machinery-of-government reform process. Meanwhile, there has been no proper intellectual or thoughtful approach to designing the processes and the way in which they are managed within the system. Proper management and oversight is the hard work that has been missing. I think the following example is very telling. Members will know that I was involved in the Aboriginal Lands Trust, which was rolled into the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage. For at least two or three years, I checked on a monthly basis to see whether someone could go through the process on the department’s website to make an application for a land-use approval. It was impossible. There was no way that somebody who was based in the regions could just click on the website and have a simple application form pop up. Even today, it is only a PDF document. People have to find their way online through this mega-department to the Aboriginal Lands Trust land-use and development application information package, which is a PDF. The best way to find it is through Google. People have to do a Google search to find it. There is about eight or nine pages or whatever of preamble and then there is this hardcopy form. It is not even a smart form. I mean, seriously. Simple things could be done to make the application process more seamless for our

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community. This is about making sure that our community has access to and participation in the vital decision-making of our government. It is not about just reinforcing the power of the minister: “We are going to make a decision on the Armadale line and tell the people what is going to happen. Then we’ll do some consultation over the next 12 months and shut it down. Too bad about that—you’ll just have to do what you’re told because this is the way this government rolls.” Quite frankly, that is not good enough. The government has to do the hard work and has to have the right leadership in those agencies to deliver the outcomes. That is the bit that this government wants to miss. It wants to take shortcuts and look after a few big mates who donate to the Labor Party, but not do the hard work of allowing the community to have its say in the government and democratic process. That is what we need to make sure of.

I commend this motion. I believe Hon Tjorn Sibma is onto a very good point here. I support this motion because we need to avoid adopting policies that are economically and socially destabilising.

A member interjected.

Hon NEIL THOMSON: Those policies have questionable environmental benefits. I use the word “environmental” in the broadest possible sense—the environment of our community and urban landscapes and the social inclusion criterion that is needed for the design guidelines in relation to our precincts plan, for example. There is no thought of that. The government is going to shut down the train line in Armadale, the heartland of Labor. People in Armadale should vote Liberal at the next election if they want to have access to their train line for 18 months. We would be more careful and thoughtful about what the constituents of Hon Tony Buti’s Labor seat would be thinking about, so they could get on a train to the city and participate in employment.

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Hon Neil Thomson.

Hon NEIL THOMSON: I am sure the former member for Armadale would completely understand the need to have —
Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Hon Neil Thomson.

Hon NEIL THOMSON: I am sure the former member for Armadale would understand that people in Armadale are disadvantaged.

[Member’s time expired.]

HON JAMES HAYWARD (South West) [10.42 am]: I thank Hon Tjorn Sibma for moving this motion. I will limit my comments largely to the first part of the motion that refers to agencies being encouraged to be environmentally, socially and economically responsible in future development. Big planning projects cost hundreds of millions of dollars of taxpayers’ money and it is important that we get it right. I understand that it is not easy to look into a crystal ball and know what the future holds, just like COVID-19 has not been on the radar; it is something that has not been seen, but the state has had to manage through. Nevertheless, we need to find a way to do this stuff better. An example of planning for the future and making the right decision occurred in about 2006 when the construction of the Forrest Highway to Bunbury was being built. I understand that the then minister, Hon Alannah MacTiernan, insisted on a rail corridor being included in the Forrest Highway project. No doubt that cost extra money at the time. It required the corridor to be wider and I am sure it added complexity to the construction work. However, it futureproofed the development and made a decision that would make it easier for the state to develop and do things properly into the future. That is an example of a right decision being made at the time. Interestingly, it took three years to construct. By the time it was constructed, the Barnett–Grylls government was in power, but I think Hon Alannah MacTiernan managed to be there for the opening and still cheekily cut the ribbon first.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan interjected.

Hon JAMES HAYWARD: That is it. In 2008, the Carpenter government in a long-term vision announced a feasibility study into whether high-speed rail could be built between Perth and Bunbury. That feasibility study was completed in 2010. The prospect of a fast rail service to Bunbury was probably even more remote then than it is now, given that we are 13 or 14 years further down the track, but the decision was made to ensure that that corridor existed. The McGowan government is delivering some welcomed state building projects at the moment. I think particularly about the duplication of the Bussell Highway between Capel and Busselton—a project that is very much needed. The safety of commuters is paramount and I congratulate the McGowan government on getting that job done.

Metronet is another big project. Obviously, it is a state-building dream that the Labor Party has had for a long time, and it is getting on with the job of building that. The McGowan government has also established an organisation called Infrastructure WA, an agency that has the job of looking at long-term planning with a holistic view of how

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everything in Western Australia interconnects and making sure that taxpayers get the best value for their money. Hopefully, that becomes an influential government department in the future and is able to do some good work.

Many members here would know that I am passionate about the Perth–Bunbury rail line. As a snapshot, if we look back over time at what has occurred, largely nothing happened after a report was prepared in 2010 until the 2017 election. Mr McGowan and Don Punch made an election announcement and promised to invest \$30 million to upgrade the existing *Australind* diesel train service. Labor won the election in March and another one of Mr Punch's election pledges for Bunbury was to provide an additional non-stop rail service between Bunbury and Perth. In September 2017, Minister Rita Saffioti made a budget announcement of \$32 million in funding for the *Australind* railcar upgrades, so we were on track to see something happening. Some time passed and in 2019 a preferred candidate was announced to build the railcars. That work is underway. In 2020, Mr McGowan and Minister Saffioti announced the *Australind* action plan to minimise transport disruption between Perth and Bunbury while the new railcars were under construction and they unveiled the design for upgrades to the *Australind* railcars. At this stage they are expected to be delivered in 2022–23.

In November 2020, the *Australind* trains were taken off the tracks due to significant damage. I think it was for eight or nine weeks—it could have been a touch longer. The government revisited its time line for the delivery of the new railcars from 2022–23 to just 2023. The government recently announced that it would need to close the Armadale line for 18 months in the first quarter of 2023 to facilitate its Metronet work. Effectively, that will impact the *Australind* rail line because it runs through that section of track, meaning that the delivery of the new railcars set for 2023 will not be able to be on the tracks and operating until the end of 2024 at the earliest. I guess that means there is a broken election promise, or some frustration around that election promise at the very least.

Also in this space, the government announced in December 2020 that, along with the federal government, it would allocate a total of \$8 million towards investigating future plans for a fast train to Bunbury, including looking at the potential routes it might take and some of the challenges, such as the location of the stations and the initial work. That is fantastic; it is great. That state-building stuff needs to happen.

One of our challenges is that we do not know what route the potential fast train might take. It may run through the Armadale corridor, which will be closed for 18 months to do works. There does not appear to be any consideration of the future needs of a potential fast train from Bunbury. That means that at the end of the 18 months, if upgrades need to be accommodated now for that fast train from Bunbury, they should be made now.

The other problem with the fast train to Bunbury is that there is massive congestion in the last 28 kilometres of the track because it shares a single rail line with freight services. Again, if the Armadale line is closed for 18 months, it would make sense for the government to look at duplicating that section of track so that when those new railcars finally get to carry passengers from Bunbury to Perth or from Perth to Bunbury, they will not be constricted by that congestion.

The other challenge that we have down in Bunbury is that the northern corridor of the Bunbury Outer Ring Road is starting to be built. That interchange is being built without the capacity to put a rail line through it. After all the good work that Hon Alannah MacTiernan did to ensure there was space in the middle of the highway all the way to Bunbury, when we get to the interchange, it stops. Main Roads says that the only way through that intersection in the future will be to tunnel under it. What a massive cost that will be. The government simply did not make a decision to design a corridor through that interchange. That is an example of one of the challenges we are facing. I understand that it is difficult to do all these things, especially during a pandemic. We need to do better when making those long-term plans.

The Armadale line will be shut down for 18 months, which will affect the potential delivery of the *Australind* rail service. We need to ensure that we utilise that time to do other work on other parts of the line to ensure that it is not interrupted further. The government is making decisions to build a northern interchange, which will make the job more difficult. That is frustrating because in the future, governments will have to spend more money to achieve something that could have been sorted out with an intelligent planning solution right at the start. I encourage the government to take that on board as best it can.

HON STEVE MARTIN (Agricultural) [10.52 am]: I rise to make a contribution to the excellent motion moved by my colleague Hon Tjorn Sibma. He touched on the forestry sector, which I will spend some time on, and the approvals process in the mining industry in the Agricultural Region, specifically the wheatbelt. I would like to start by looking at paragraph (a) of this motion, which states —

ensure that its agencies, systems and processes encourage environmentally, socially and economically responsible development throughout Western Australia;

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I turn to the forestry sector and the words “economically responsible”. We had the Minister for Forestry doing exactly that in early 2020 in the south west of Western Australia. He visited Manjimup and met with Parkside Timber, saying, “Well done. Great investment in this exciting industry. There is a bright future in forestry.” A short time later, in September last year, we heard the announcement from the Premier and the Minister for Forestry. That bright future had a very sudden and rapid end. Again, I mention the words “economically responsible”. That is not how business works or how business can invest for any medium-term future when we hear the government say that the industry has a bright future one day and a very short time later, it does not. That highlights some of the government’s recent decisions that do not point to it acting in an economically responsible way.

The other people who would have paid attention to the announcement from the minister in April 2020 and in September last year were the workers in those businesses—the mill workers, the truck drivers and the firewood cutters. In 2020, they would have thought that they had a bright future and they could invest in and build a future in Manjimup and Nannup. They thought they could buy a home and put their kids into schools in those towns. Come 8 September 2021, those workers would have been wondering what they had. They realised they needed to start looking at a future elsewhere other than in those south west communities because clearly the government can change its mind on a whim.

I will now move to the next paragraph in the motion, which states —

avoid adopting policies which are economically and socially destabilising and confer questionable environmental benefits;

I would like to concentrate on the questionable environmental benefits. When the Premier made that announcement, I think he was wearing a hard hat, he had driven up to the hills and I think he planted a pine tree, which was a nice media opportunity. He talked about what the announcement would mean for the carbon story around the world. On that day, an article in *The West Australian* stated —

“This will be good for preserving carbon, for stopping the release of carbon into the atmosphere.

We asked about that at the time. I still have doubts about the evidence of that statement. If we talk to foresters and scientists, there is some debate about that. Evidently, an old-growth forest is in a reasonably steady state when it comes to carbon; the old trees mature and die and the carbon is then released into the atmosphere. In a managed forest or plantation, even a softwood plantation, that equation is slightly different as timber grows more rapidly, it is harvested and the carbon is being stored. According to the Premier, because we will stop the hardwood logging in our forests, somehow we will be locking up the carbon. If members do not believe me—I do not necessarily expect that they would—let us look at the glossy brochure that the Forest Products Commission put on its website on behalf of the government. It states —

The FPC manages harvesting operations to meet State timber demands, to create regional employment and for forest health.

...

Jarrah forests are selectively harvested, leaving a healthy forest structure. All harvested forest is regenerated after harvesting for use by future generations, while providing a range of beneficial environmental services as it grows.

I think this is still on the FPC’s website, so obviously it has not trickled down to the minister, who would then say, “Hang on, we’re not doing that anymore. The harvesting of jarrah is unsustainable and bad for the environment.” The brochure also refers to jarrah forest management in Western Australia, stating —

Sustainably managed forests support the community’s environmental, social and economic needs and values by:

It sets out a number of points, including —

- maintaining forest health, structure and habitat values;

Again, that message has changed. Before I move off that, if members do not believe the FPC or me, the fourth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, not an organisation that I frequently quote, states —

Forestry can make a very significant contribution to a low-cost global mitigation portfolio that provides synergies with adaptation and sustainable development.

...

Mitigation options by the forestry sector include extending carbon retention in harvested wood products ...

For the benefit of *Hansard*, I am standing in front of a desk that is a sequestered piece of carbon.

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Hon Alannah MacTiernan interjected.

Hon STEVE MARTIN: According to the IPCC, when it comes to the carbon equation, there is no difference between those pines and sustainably managed hardwood, minister. I will move on.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: There are other biodiversity benefits.

Hon STEVE MARTIN: According to the IPCC and the Forest Products Commission —

Hon Alannah MacTiernan interjected.

Hon STEVE MARTIN: It is not much of a sustainable environment. I return to the IPCC report, which states —

Globally, hundreds of millions of households depend on goods and services provided by forests. This underlines the importance of assessing forest sector activities aimed at mitigating climate change in the broader context of sustainable development and community impact.

I refer back to Hon Tjorn Sibma's motion, which refers to avoiding the adoption of policies that confer questionable environmental benefits. I would suggest that what has happened in our hardwood sector in the last six months is very questionable.

In the very short time I have left I will move onto mining approvals. For those who are unaware, the wheatbelt is a hub of mining exploration at the moment. I believe 25 companies have formed a mining exploration group in the wheatbelt. Since the recent Chalice Mining announcement, almost every single hectare has pegged for exploration for gold, nickel, copper, lithium, mineral sands et cetera—all over the wheatbelt. One of the companies that I have had some engagement with recently has explained to me that the delays in applying for a program of works are now extraordinary. Companies have been advised that the Department of Mines, Industry Regulation and Safety has a target of completing 80 per cent of program of works applications within 15 days. However, many companies have had this time frame pushed out to up to 60 days. This is one example of the approvals processes mentioned by Hon Tjorn Sibma, and it is an area that deserves significant priority from the government, to speed up those processes.

I am biased, but one of the reasons it is particularly important in the wheatbelt to get those processes through quickly is that it is not pastoral or crown land; it is land that is privately owned and cropped on a regular basis, so there are limited times during the year when exploration can occur. During seeding and harvesting, obviously, it is difficult to do exploration, so if there is a delay in the approvals process, it leads to further delays in exploring for those valuable resources. I am told by some exploration companies that the average time line from exploration to mining is more than a decade, and can be up to 15 to 20 years. If we hold this up at the start, it will obviously have a large impact on the final establishment of a mine. I again thank the previous speakers, and Hon Tjorn Sibma for moving this motion.

HON ALANNAH MacTIERNAN (South West — Minister for Regional Development) [11.02 am]: Hon Tjorn Sibma has brought forward a hardy perennial that oppositions always bring forward, and we recognise that these are issues that have to be examined. However, Hon Tjorn Sibma started by making an observation that reform is difficult, and that is absolutely the case. To achieve reform, you need ministers who are dedicated, capable and able to sustain hard work and drive their agencies. Quite clearly, that was pretty much in short supply in the Barnett government. I think everyone will recognise that there probably were not many ministers in that government who would have qualified as change agents.

The issue of dealing with red tape was a Barnett government commitment, and it commissioned in 2009 a report jointly chaired by members who were again perhaps not real change agents: Hon Ken Baston and Hon Liza Harvey. They produced a report, but it turned out that nothing happened in many of the key areas that were identified for reform. That government actually failed to implement any of those reforms whatsoever. It tried, and failed, to reform the Aboriginal Heritage Act; it failed to introduce Environmental Protection Act amendments; it failed to deliver Mining Act amendments; it stripped funding from approvals agencies, year after year; and it failed to drive any digital transformation of the public sector. It was quite amazing, coming to government in 2017, to see how little had been done in that area. That government also left the then departments of environmental regulation and Aboriginal affairs on their knees.

In my own portfolio, some of the previous government's regulatory failures were extraordinary. It had been working on a veterinary surgeons bill for the entire time it was in government, and failed to produce it. It had been working on Agricultural Produce Commission legislation, but failed to produce a bill. All of these had been in train before the Barnett government came to government, and they just stalled. The wheels were also spinning in the regulation of animal welfare. The Barnett government had agreed to all these national standards and said that they were fantastic; it said, "It's really good for the industry. We've got to have these national standards." Not one of those national standards were implemented in WA as regulations, because that government failed to make the amendments to the Animal Welfare Act necessary to make that possible. In terms of regulatory reform, there might have been a few capable, high-performing ministers who got some things through, but when we look at the record of approvals, that

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government was missing in action. Our government has done that. We have introduced and passed reforms to the Aboriginal Heritage Act. We introduced amendments to the Environmental Protection Act, which Hon Tjorn Sibma acknowledged. We have made amendments to the Mining Act. We are progressing on all those matters, but it does take time.

I want to talk a little about Environment Online. To me it is a bit odd that that has been singled out for attention, because I think it is a pretty compelling story. The announcement was originally made in August 2018 to bring environmental approvals into an online environment to allow for much easier processing. Hon Tjorn Sibma is a smart man and he would know that these projects are massive. This one, in particular, was an incredible endeavour. We had to get detailed user experience, so there was an enormous amount of work to go on with the people who used the system to inform the build. The design work went on throughout 2019 and 2020. The tender process commenced at the beginning of 2021 and then, in August 2021, the contract was let for that build. The first element, as the member said, has been built and is now going through workshopping with proponents like Iluka, Rio Tinto, BHP and Woodside. They are all working on Environment Online, testing its functionality.

In the overall scheme of things, as someone who has been involved in developing processes, that is not an inordinate delay for a very complex IT process. The original aspiration set out in late 2018 was that the first part of this system would come online in the first quarter of 2021. Of course, we were not then yet aware of COVID, and every single agency and private sector proponent has been impacted in some way by COVID. Therefore, the commitment to ensure that that public-facing product would be delivered in the second quarter of 2021 was, I think, pretty commendable. We certainly do not accept that that is a failed project. I think that project has been very successful, and I commend the various ministers and the various agencies that have driven that.

Streamline WA is a concept. Hon Tjorn Sibma queried the work that has been done by the intergovernmental and interagency workshops. Those particular workshops are trying to address the issue of culture. Hon Tjorn Sibma recognised that culture in the public sector is an important issue that will need to be dealt with if we are to streamline processes. Those workshops and that interagency work is designed to change that culture so that it is not a question of a person moving stuff off their desk and onto another person's desk but is focused on getting an outcome at the end of the day and having that discipline of time lines. It is also about recognising that the people in the various agencies must work in collaboration in order to achieve that aspiration. The determination about whether a project will go ahead or not go ahead needs to be made in a way that is timely and in which agencies understand and work very closely with their colleagues.

We have been getting a series of questions from the member. I can tell the member that new people are being brought into government agencies every day. As the member quite rightly pointed out, it is a bit of a struggle. That is because we have done so well in the economic development of this state that there are not a lot of spare people of talent floating around looking for somewhere to go. It has been an issue. People are being recruited, of course, from the eastern states, and some of those people have been able through that period to find their way into Western Australia, and we are expecting through our recruitment to see more of that in the future.

It is important to look at what is happening on the ground. At the end of the day, the whole point of this exercise is the creation of jobs and opportunities for Western Australians, because that is their pathway to prosperity and to have broad and fulfilling lives with a sense of achievement. We only need to look at the figures. Since we have come into government, year on year there has been a steady, and, indeed, quite stellar increase in the number of people employed in the mining and exploration sectors. When we came into government, in the order of 140 000 people were employed. We are now looking at 150 000 to 160 000 direct employees into the mining sector. A record number of people are being employed in the mining and exploration sectors. That industry is clearly expanding.

Extraordinary opportunities are opening in Western Australia. That has led to a significant increase in the number of applications for approvals. That is because we have been able to manage COVID so well that our mining industry has not been in a state of decline but rather has been going forward with new critical minerals et cetera coming onstream all the time. Of course, because the amount of economic activity is increasing so significantly and rapidly, that is creating some strain in the system. We have certainly been prepared to allocate the money. Over the past five years, the Environmental Protection Authority received an average of 44 referrals each year. In 2021, that leapt up to 58. To date, this financial year, of which we still have some four months to go, we have already received the average number of referrals. We anticipate that we will certainly match last year's record number of referrals.

We have made the budget allocations. We are endeavouring to change culture. We have invested in Environment Online. That is a great project. With regard to the amount of resource that we are putting in, half a billion dollars was allocated in the last budget for the upgrade of IT systems across government to make our public sector more efficient and effective. If members look at those really hard legislative reforms that the previous government tried and failed with, and at how we have been able to grapple with those hard problems and come up with a legislative package and get that implemented, I think we can very proudly stand on our record in this area.

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HON DR STEVE THOMAS (South West — Leader of the Opposition) [11.16 am]: It is a joy to make a contribution to the motion moved by my good friend Hon Tjorn Sibma. Given the very cooperative manner in which he presented his motion, I will endeavour to be as collegiate as possible. I want to make a couple of points in response to the comments of the Minister for Regional Development. The first part of this motion asks the government to —

ensure that its agencies, systems and processes encourage environmentally, socially and economically responsible development throughout Western Australia;

As the minister pointed out, this is a regular thing that oppositions talk about, and a regular thing that governments say they are doing; these things come around. I note that the initial part of the minister's response was to go back to the usual tactic of blaming and making a comparison with previous governments—kind of race to the bottom stuff. I was pleased that the remainder of the minister's contribution was in a much more positive light. Every opposition thinks this is very important, and every government tries to do it, with varying degrees of success. This is absolutely critical. If we were to poll the members of the house, we would find that everybody agrees with the triple bottom line of environmental, social and economic development. The debate then becomes about how that should look, and I suspect that would be slightly different for all of us. I include the Greens in that as well. I think that is where the debate goes.

This is a particularly good motion. The sad part is that, in an hour, I will barely be able to scratch the surface of this important area, and I have only another eight minutes, so it will be very tight to get through some of the critical issues.

I turn now to the balance between development and social responsibility, and also social impact. The minister touched on this as well in a reasonably good way. This balance is one that every government has to work on and struggles with to some degree. I find that in society at the moment, the nimby effect is becoming stronger and stronger as we fill up areas with population. From my perspective, as a conservative—members might argue perhaps the furthest on the right wing of my party—I think that we run a real risk of becoming nimbys ourselves if we are not careful. That balance of development versus non-development is absolutely critical. There is an old truism that says that a developer is someone who wants to build a house in the forest, and a conservationist is someone who built that house in the forest a year ago. There is some truth to that amongst some of the community. We have to be careful. We need development but it needs to be said that I am not a believer in high-level economic development forever.

I note that the minister claimed a lot of credit for the economic position of the state. I say this on the approvals process. It should be noted that the fast-tracking of the approvals process through some COVID concerns was supported by both sides of the house. The opposition, and in fact the shadow Minister for Planning at the time, Hon Tjorn Sibma, was instrumental in assisting that process, because we recognised that the approvals process can be onerous in some circumstances. If that were not the case and it had not been recognised by the government, then there would have been no need for that legislation on fast tracking. However, I was pleased to move an amendment to remove environmental assessments out of the exclusion, and, ultimately, the then Minister for Environment, now Minister for Emergency Services, agreed with that. We had contesting amendments and I just happened to get mine in first, so I am claiming the credit. But the reality is that there was an agreement that we did not want to completely remove the environmental processes out of that. I think that was again a critical example of how, if we try to work together across the houses and work in goodwill, we can get some better outcomes. I know that I like to stir up the Minister for Regional Development, but the Minister for Regional Development will actually listen to alternative proposals with an open mind. There you go. I do not give too many compliments out; I think that is the second one I have done today, so I am probably done for a month. She raised the Veterinary Surgeons Act and she took some interest in that and listened to the opposition. We can actually make improvements as we go, and I think that is the tenor of the motion that was presented today by my friend Hon Tjorn Sibma. We accept that the government is trying; I think all governments try. As the minister said, all oppositions try to suggest improvements, and we all make a little bit of politics out of it—that is part of the game we are in—but in this circumstance, I think the motion is particularly good.

I am going to run out of time very quickly so I want to address a couple of the things raised by the minister in particular. I refer to the increase in economic activity, particularly around the mining sector. To be honest, every government claims credit for economic growth when it is in power, and the reality is that every government has far less influence over economic growth than they tell everybody, particularly the public and the media. Although the government might argue that it did not get in the way significantly, I think the previous government would argue that as well. The government has taken advantage of the mining boom, particularly the current 2019–22 and continuing mining boom, but it did not initiate it. We have had that debate in the house on a motion moved by my friend Hon Jackie Jarvis on the other side. The Premier did not orchestrate an outbreak of COVID and the Chinese economic stimulus package that responded to that. It is a little rich for every government to stand up and claim credit for these things. I note that the minister said—I probably trust the figures—that the workforce in mining has grown from 140 000 to 150 000, maybe a bit more, over the five years of the government, which is good, but that is a seven per cent rise. It is not as if there was a massive boom. It is a good, relatively solid growth. A rise of seven per cent over five years is absolutely fine, bearing in mind that the population growth of the state has actually

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stalled to a large degree, partly because of the borders and partly because of the economic situation in which we find ourselves. Again, although those are good figures, I do not think the government can claim credit for them.

I think it is important that we continue to try to support economic growth in a reasonable way. I could spend some time on the timber industry, but I think my friend Hon Steve Martin has covered that pretty well, with the possible exception of the simple statement, in my view, that this government has destroyed the timber industry for the benefit of whatever votes they can glean in the leafy western suburbs and others where the green movement is perhaps having some impact. The destruction of the timber industry will be on the head of the Minister for Forestry, who has destroyed the forestry industry.

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: There we go; I did not quite get to the end in a collegiate manner. I nearly got there, but the minister got me a bit fired up. I nearly got there! The Minister for Forestry is competing with and has probably surpassed the Attorney General in the level of destruction that he has wrought. I have to say that his compensation package for business was an absolute embarrassment. His compensation package for the workers was welcomed, and that was reasonable. I suspect that even Labor members down in the south west are embarrassed by his performance on the compensation package for business. That was an absolute disgrace. There are some politics being played here on both sides, and this was politics that destroyed livelihoods and businesses throughout the south west. Members have to be careful of the glasshouse in which they ride their high horse, because large horses and glasshouses generally do not mix very well. I think the government might take a good look at that as an example.

I will finish my contribution. Of all the things I could talk about, I think part (d) of the motion by Hon Tjorn Sibma is critical, which is to deliver quickly on various commitments made over the years and streamline and reform the approvals process. The government has put more staff into various departments to deal with approvals, and that may or may not be a good thing. Just putting in more bureaucrats does not necessarily mean a more streamlined approvals process. If I were to be slightly cynical, I might suggest that in some cases, the more bureaucrats you put in, the slower the process might become. It is not enough for the government to say that it has put extra money into it and applied additional resources in staff; it actually has to make the approvals process function efficiently whilst retaining environmental protection as a part of that. In the debates last year on the Environmental Protection Act and on fast tracking, this house has proved that we can have a civil, sensible debate and get good outcomes if we keep those things in mind. I commend the motion to the house.

HON DR BRIAN WALKER (East Metropolitan) [11.26 am]: I think it has been said before on all sides that we can certainly agree that the general approach is that we want to have sensible, responsible legislation. Every government would say that. On this topic, I am going to focus just on part (a) of this motion, and just one word of part (a), which is “economically”—economically responsible development. I recall many years ago, when I was living in the Soviet Union, a man approached me and said, “We’ve got 1 000 kilometres of forest thataway, and there are bears there, and bearskins will be popular to sell in the west.” I said to him that if he were to shoot a lot of bears, he would be damaging the environment, because they are really quite critical for the safety of the environment and the forest. His response to me, bearing in mind it was a time of perestroika, it was a time of great poverty and there was nothing in the shops, was, “I don’t care about the children or the grandchildren; it’s about now and my children now.” The money now is important. The consequences, basically, be damned. That was certainly not responsible. I can see why it was like that.

I am reminded of something more immediate, in the last months of the Barnett government, and that is the Roe 8 project and my incandescent rage at seeing how the Environmental Protection Agency had been steamrollered to enable vandalism of a section of that, knowing full well that an election was imminent and knowing full well that the outcome was not going to be positive for the government. I thought that was highly irresponsible, and I am sure a large part of the population agree.

Here, we have the question of what is responsible. The government of the time might think it is responsible, but is it really, or is it just expedient at this moment? Then we look at the questions here. We have the environmental, social and economic aspects of a responsible development, and, to be honest, these are three competing needs. What might be sensible economically might not be sensible environmentally, so what are the heavy points going to be? How are we going to make that decision? These are issues that need to be managed by the government of the day. Here we see the question about agencies, systems and processes.

Having been through a similar system, I will tell members another story. It is a true story about one of the prisons here. The prison wanted to put in an X-ray machine, because if people who often fight in prison—not with staff, but with prisoners—have a suspected broken bone, they need to go for an X-ray. Sending a prisoner out for an X-ray requires two, maybe six, officers to accompany that person, which is always a problem because that is a manpower or womanpower issue. The prison wanted to install an X-ray machine, and so the processes started. We are talking

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about processes and systems. They looked at a room, and saw that it was a small room, and decided to get an appropriate machine. The boxes were ticked, and then it was said, “No, it’s too expensive”, and so the careful decisions of the medical officers were overruled on the basis of cost. Anyhow, \$750 000 later, a machine was installed in the room to be inspected by the radiographers board, which then condemned the whole thing and said that it was not fit for purpose because the room was too small. Three quarters of a million dollars had been spent and lost, and no-one was held responsible, because the appropriate boxes had been ticked. A pathway was deemed to be according to the requirements of good government. That waste of three quarters of a million dollars could have been avoided if we simply had good processes in place. I would think most of us who have been involved in any form of government would realise that the processes leave room for improvement, shall we say. The agencies, systems and processes, which are now standard throughout government, seem to be more designed for slowing things down rather than getting things done properly. In fact, if we had this in private practice, we would probably find that people would go bankrupt a lot more than they are now.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.