

RURAL AND REGIONAL WESTERN AUSTRALIA - FAILURE OF STATE GOVERNMENT

Motion

Resumed from 19 September on the following motion moved by Hon Tom Stephens (Leader of the Opposition) -

That this House -

- (1) Condemns the State Government for its failure to safeguard and improve the interests of rural and regional Western Australia and its misplaced priorities.
- (2) Calls on the Government to amend its policies and give priority to the delivery of core government services to all Western Australians, especially in the areas of health, education, community safety and public transport.

HON N.F. MOORE (Mining and Pastoral - Leader of the House) [4.04 pm]: I was about to complete my remarks yesterday. Again, I make the point that a party - namely, the Labor Party - which is seeking to create the impression in this House that this Government is not concerned about regional Western Australia is the very same party that got rid of or lost a significant number of its members of Parliament in the most remote and regional parts of Western Australia. It has almost no members in the Mining and Pastoral Region. Yesterday I made the point that in the Pilbara, which is a very important part of regional Western Australia, the Labor Party disendorsed one of its sitting members. For the Leader of the Opposition to say that the Government is out of touch is ridiculous, in the context of a party which has disendorsed one of its most popular members. It will be interesting to see whether the dictates of the Labor Party head office can be delivered, because when people make decisions about quotas and factions, they eventually get to the stage where they have square pegs in round holes. They finish up having to get candidates who are not what the community wants. I think we will find out very soon exactly what the people in my part of the world think about the Labor Party.

Hon Bob Thomas interjected.

Hon N.F. MOORE: It is interesting that Hon Bob Thomas interjected that the Labor candidate for the south west comes from Perth. Again, that is a demonstration of the attitude of the Labor Party towards country Western Australia. The Labor Party keeps mouthing platitudes about what it will do for regional Western Australia and it continues to argue the case that the Government does not do enough; however, at the same time, when it has a chance to do something about endorsing local candidates, it picks its head office honchos. It is as simple as that. The Labor Party will send anybody who has the numbers or who is the right gender into regional Western Australia to be its candidate, even at the expense of people like the member for Pilbara, Larry Graham. I find it extraordinary that a party which comes into this House with a motion like this -

The PRESIDENT: I have read the motion carefully, and although I understand that it is framed in wide terms, debating individual candidates seems to be a tad wide of the mark.

Hon N.F. MOORE: By way of explanation, so that the House understands the point I am making, I say this: The Leader of the Opposition, who comes from the Mining and Pastoral Region, has moved a motion to condemn the State Government for not looking after rural and regional Western Australia, for having misplaced priorities, and various other matters. I am simply making the point that the party from which this Leader of the Opposition comes is the same party that is telling the people of regional Western Australia that, whether or not they like it, these are the people who will be their candidates - head office will decide who the candidates will be. If that is not a reason for me to argue against this motion, I do not know what is. It is demonstrably clear to people in my territory at least that the Labor Party has lost touch altogether with the Mining and Pastoral Region. I know that, as do members opposite, and they will find out very soon that that is the case.

The Government has an excellent record in health, education, community safety and public transport, with record expenditure and record consideration of these core business areas of government. At the same time, however, we believe that there is a role for government to spend money in some areas so as to encourage the private sector to invest large sums of money. That is one reason that I argued yesterday that the convention and exhibition centre will be an excellent addition to the job-creation capacity of Western Australia. Similarly, the belltower will be a major tourist attraction. Thousands of people will be attracted to Western Australia to see it as an icon and as the world's biggest musical instrument.

This is another motion moved by the Opposition which has awarded a free kick to the Government. It is typical of the Leader of the Opposition, who clearly does not understand what is going on in regional Western Australia and who purports to be critical of a Government that has put regional Western Australia as its number one priority.

HON LJILJANNA RAVLICH (East Metropolitan) [4.10 pm]: I support the motion. I could spend some time commenting on the speech by the Leader of the House, but I have limited time so I will speak to the motion.

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There is no question that this Government has misplaced priorities. It is obvious that the social dividend promised to Western Australia has not been delivered. I remember when the Government crowed about the social dividend it would produce. However, we have heard very little talk of it recently, largely because there is no social dividend. Western Australians can rightly feel very disappointed about that.

A key area in which I have shown interest is contracting out and privatisation. The Government has its priorities wrong in both areas. It has been gung-ho on the privatisation agenda; unfortunately, it has not put in place the right checks and balances. Due to the Government's gung-ho approach, numerous contracts have been shown to be cost ineffective.

The issue I want to draw to the attention of the House today is the sale of State Print, one of the first privatisations undertaken by the Government some time ago. In undertaking that sale the Government demonstrated that its priorities were misplaced. State Print was purchased by Coventry Group Ltd and then on sold to Fairplay Print, which was then purchased by Sands Print Group. Fairplay and Sands Print are both still operational. Fairplay employs about 10 staff and I understand Sands Print, which operates from Bassendean, employs between 60 and 75 people.

The issue is that a large number of state employees were given 12 weeks' redundancy pay when State Print was privatised and all their benefits and entitlements were transferred to the purchaser. That all sounds very reasonable, but some financial difficulties have arisen with Sands Print. The Opposition understands that it owes the Australian Taxation Office approximately \$9.7m, the Australia and New Zealand Banking Group Ltd \$11m, Dalton Fine Paper \$1.25m and Amcor Ltd about \$250 000. A major provider of printing services to the Government owes approximately \$30m to companies throughout the State.

Hon B.M. Scott: Are you aware of the debt State Print owed?

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: No, but the bottom line is that a number of State Print employees transferred to Sands Print, whose entitlements are now at risk. My other concern is that Sands Print still provides a range of services to the Government, which I will describe shortly. There is also a question surrounding the future of government contracts with Sands Print. My primary concern at this time is that approximately 25 employees at Sands Print are at risk of losing all their entitlements, including their annual leave, long service leave, pro rata holidays and any other entitlements they may have transferred when State Print was privatised. That is unacceptable. The State Government has an obligation to ensure that those employees are not disadvantaged. Apparently Sands Print has established eight companies between which assets and employees are transferred. The firm is under administration by Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, which hopes to sell it as an ongoing concern. It remains to be seen whether that will eventuate; nonetheless that is a secondary issue. The primary issue should be the safeguarding of the financial interests of the previous government employees.

Point of Order

Hon DERRICK TOMLINSON: I have listened to the member's remarks and tried to find something on the Notice Paper relevant to what Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich is discussing. I assume we are debating Notice of Motion No 1 and I ask that it be drawn to her attention that she should be addressing that motion.

The PRESIDENT: I also have been listening to Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich speak. As I said yesterday, it is sometimes necessary to break a motion into its constituent parts. Without going into great detail, part 2 of this motion calls on the Government to amend its policies. And that is discrete. It then encourages the Government to give priority to the delivery of government services to all Western Australians and in some specific areas. The mere fact the motion calls on the Government to amend its policies seems to enable a member to refer to government policies both past and present that, in the eyes of some, have caused the Government to be giving insufficient priority to some areas. The sale of State Print is unquestionably one of the Government's policies.

It is not for me to judge the correctness of the member's claims. However, it is for me to judge that her comments so far are consistent with the terms of the motion.

Hon DERRICK TOMLINSON: Far be it from me to argue with that. However, were we to follow that argument, the first clause refers to improving the interests of rural and regional Western Australia. The operative word is improve. With the conjunction, it would then be "and improving its misplaced priorities".

The PRESIDENT: That is the very point. Hon Derrick Tomlinson is reading it in a conjunctive manner and I read it in a disjunctive manner. My comments yesterday were that certain words were added to the motion. They are the words "and its misplaced priorities". A member could mount an argument on those four words alone.

Debate Resumed

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Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: Thank you, Mr President. There is no doubt in my mind that this Government has misplaced its priorities. Had it been half smart it would have amended some of these policies a long time ago, particularly policies in relation to contracting out and privatisation. However, that is not the case and I do not think its policies are serving the interests of Western Australians. I will refer in due course to regional Western Australia in relation to the Western Australia Police Service.

The Sands Print Group has been the subject of Police Service and Australian Taxation Office investigations for some time. One of the earliest reports was on 26 February 2000. A number of reports were lodged about its operations at Bassendean and Osborne Park. It is interesting to note that, irrespective of the questions raised about this organisation, it has been awarded a wide range of government contracts.

The Government's policies regarding the awarding and regulating contracts need amendment. We are dealing with a company that may go into receivership, given the amount of money it owes. What will the Government do about the large number of contracts it has with this company? It currently holds a \$75 000 contract to offset print geological series maps.

The PRESIDENT: Does this relate to the Government's misplaced priorities? If the member were to mention the words "misplaced priorities" and "policies" every now and again, I would know that she was on track.

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: Thank you, Mr President.

The Government should implement a policy of scrutinising a tendering company and its financial position before any contract is awarded. In other words, there should be a due diligence process to ensure that the potential contractor has a solid business and a strong performance record. Clearly, this company is under financial pressure. I do not know whether that is a recent development, but it has been awarded new contracts in the past 13 months. For example, the contract for the printing of the "Reform of the Criminal and Civil System Report" for the Law Reform Commission, valued at \$110 620, was awarded in August 1999. Another contract was awarded in November 1999 for the printing and delivery of DriveSafe booklets. The company awarded that contract now has a question mark over its future. I suggest that had the Government's policies been effective, a more stringent check would have been done and some of these contracts might not have been awarded. If that were the case, the Government would not now be dealing with the problem of what to do with these contracts in the event that this company does not survive.

The Government's policies do require due diligence checks to be undertaken. However, because of this Government's misplaced priorities -

Hon Peter Foss: Very good!

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: - and because the Government is so hell-bent on privatising -

Hon Peter Foss: It is a policy.

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: Yes, it is a government policy. It is also determined to reduce the number of public servants. This passion for privatisation and downsizing has resulted in the Department of Contract and Management Services not having the resources required to carry out proper due diligence checks.

Hon Peter Foss: Do you think that is the reason?

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: It plays a significant part.

Hon Peter Foss: Do you have evidence of that?

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: This Government also has a misplaced policy about self-regulation, and many problems are cropping up as a result. The Attorney General might like to consider the autonomous purchasing authority given to government agencies. The Government has no idea who is purchasing what. It also has no idea what is going on in government trading enterprises. Many GTEs feel under no obligation to provide information about their activities to their responsible minister. One of the organisations that comes to mind is Western Power. These policies must be revised.

Other contracts awarded to Sands Print also have a question mark over them; such as contracts for the production of motor vehicle registration labels and disks. Substantial contracts have been awarded to this company - one for \$920 000 for the provision of printing and distribution of State Law publications for the Ministry of the Premier and Cabinet. I do not know whether that contract covers the printing of *Hansard*, but it would be a sad day if we could not get a copy of *Hansard*. That could occur because this Government has such misplaced priorities.

Hon B.M. Scott: Do you think printing is a core government service? What about hospital laundry and linen services?

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: I am not sure that the Government is getting a better service from private providers. Whether a service is core or non-core should not be an argument to support privatisation; that is not

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the only judgment one can make. What is seen to be core and non-core will be interpreted differently by different individuals. I am a great supporter of the public health system. If the member were asking whether I believed that hospital laundry was a core service, I would argue that it was more core than non-core. I cannot think of anything more important than the daily provision of clean and sanitised hospital laundry with minimal hiccups and loss of quality control. It is an important service. If I were to ask Treasury officers whether they thought the provision of clean laundry was a core or non-core area in the health sector, they might have a different -

Hon B.M. Scott: I am sure they would agree, but not that it is a core government service.

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: This Government's policies suggest that nothing is a core service.

The public sector is constantly being reduced. This Government's policies do not result in the provision of good core public services. Everything is double handled or double charged. One cannot even get information from public sector agencies unless it is through a fee-for-service arrangement. The Government talks about accountability; I will tell it how bad its priorities are. About nine months ago, I rang the Commissioner for Public Sector Standards to access a report, which was paid for by taxpayers. He said my request should be made through the freedom of information process. I could not believe I was required to submit a freedom of information request to access a report. He said that enabled the Government to recoup the cost of producing the report. That is an indication that we are heading into very troubled waters.

The Government's policies on contracting out are wrong. I am concerned that work undertaken by Sands Print Group could be sent offshore, particularly the work it does for the Totalisator Agency Board. I understand a \$2 000 contract is out to tender. It will be interesting to see who it is awarded to, as two of the tenderers are offshore companies. It would be a sad development if local work were sent offshore. I understand Sands Print is also tendering for the contract. We need to do the best by its employees. It will be interesting to see how the tender evolves.

I am particularly concerned about three things: First, the future of the 75 to 80 employees of Sands Print. A substantial number of people will be directly impacted on by this Government's misplaced priorities and policies. Second, I am concerned about the 25 individuals with outstanding entitlements, which should be met by Sands Print or the Government. It was a government decision to transfer those entitlements to the purchaser of State Print. The Government should not, due to its own misplaced priorities, avoid its responsibilities. Third, I am concerned that state printing work could be sent offshore.

I have listened to government members in this place try to convince me that all that is occurring in the area of contracting out is above board and achieving fantastic success. It is not. Members opposite either believe the situation is too far gone and are trying to make the best of a bad situation, or they are not prepared to accept responsibility for a situation created by their own misplaced priorities and, as addressing the situation would require them to amend their policies, are not prepared to accept they got the policies wrong. That is one of the key issues that is hindering progress. The Government is holding firm and refusing, under any circumstances, to accept that it got it wrong. It is reasonable to expect that prior to awarding a contract to a private company, the Government should ensure the financial background - that is, viability, stability and solvency - of the contractor. Coventry Group Ltd purchased State Print, but it had difficulty making profits and on-sold it to Sands Print. If somebody had applied the proper policies or noted that the policies were deficient and amended them to ensure they could be properly applied, I am sure the financial background of the contractor and the history of the people involved might have come to light. It is not sufficient to rely on a Dun and Bradstreet (Australia) Pty Ltd credit check when awarding contracts of \$1m, \$2m, \$10m or even \$300 000. That does not qualify as a proper due diligence check, yet this Government believes that is acceptable. It is important to ensure that the company's background is checked out, that the directors are who they say they are and that they are the people directly behind the company.

It is also important to ensure criminal checks are carried out. Yet, that is often not the case. A range of things would happen if government policies worked effectively; they do not happen by osmosis. The bottom line is that such regulatory checks - track record, experience, references, previous work and whether the claims made by the company add up - require analysis, time and resources. We know the public sector does not seem to have many resources or surplus individuals who can undertake these tasks. That is indeed sad. This Government's priorities have diminished the public sector to the point at which expertise is not available to undertake work in the critical area of contract management. That is a sad reflection on this Government. This indicates that the Government has priorities and that it needs to have a very close look at its policies and identify the gaps so that they can be amended.

State Print is probably only one of many examples that has come to my attention, but I am sure other examples never come to the attention of a member of Parliament and are, therefore, not raised in this place. However, that does not suggest that similar situations do not arise. As I understand it, many more than 25 employees were

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transferred from State Print to Fairplay Print and then to Sands Print Group, but there has obviously been attrition over time and many of those workers have left.

One of my concerns is that there is not enough scrutiny of these contractors. Four or five months ago the State Supply Commission and the minister announced that, in order to ensure that the Government was adhering to policies in this area, under the minister's authority a "health check of procurement and contracting across the Western Australian Government" would be conducted. I do not know what the Minister for Services expected to find, but the findings of that report were not a surprise to me. If anything, this report demonstrates that the Australian Labor Party has not been far off the mark in relation to some of the problems, issues and identified weaknesses surrounding the Government's contracting out agenda. I draw the findings of this report to the attention of the House because they directly link government policies with the requirement to amend government policy so that taxpayers can be assured that they will get some value for money. It is clear that taxpayers are not doing very well as a result of the Government's contracting out activities.

This health check was undertaken by Cap Gemini Ernst & Young Australia Pty Ltd. Page 1 indicates that the review was conducted on a pilot group of 15 agencies nominated by the State Supply Commission. The report reads in part -

As part of the review process, each agency was required to put forward a list of tendered contracts, which were awarded since 1 July 1998 and were valued at \$50 000 or above. The State Supply Commission selected in total 73 contracts for inclusion in the review.

The review included small, medium and large agencies, and a range of public sector agencies, including Agriculture Western Australia, the Department of Conservation and Land Management and Transport Western Australia. I will not go through the whole list of 15.

I am referring to only the conclusions of this review because time prohibits me from going into detail. Some of the policy areas looked at were adequacy of risk management, internal audit and general administration processes. The consultants found little evidence that formal risk management techniques were being applied to individual contracts and contract management. That is of concern to me. Furthermore, the review continues by stating that in the majority of agencies, contractual information is retained within general correspondence files and is not maintained as contract specific. In other words, the information is all over the place. As I understand it, the Government will introduce legislation in this place in relation to public records. As opposition spokesperson for public sector management, it is my experience that the maintenance of records is absolutely dismal throughout the public sector. As a result of using external consultants and downsizing, there is not the time to maintain records or to file records properly and make sure that they are accessible for future use.

The next section relates to the assessment of the procurement and contracting function, and the report states that this "is usually undertaken, in a general form only, as part of the agency's project justification process. However, formalised procurement planning for individual contracts was only evidenced for procurement valued above \$1m." In other words, contract and procurement planning was not essential, but it was something that was usually undertaken. If I were a taxpayer I would not feel very comfortable that contract and procurement planning was only done on contracts over \$1m. It usually happened for contracts under \$1m, but if it did not happen it was no big deal. That indicates not only the sloppiness of this Government's handling of this issue, but also that the existing policies are certainly not sufficient and should be tightened up as a matter of priority. I have stood in this place and spoken ad nauseam about the importance of proper risk assessment and the need for proper contract management. I have also expressed my concern at the lack of resources applied by government agencies to this area.

The review then stated that -

active Contract Management under the terms of reference of the Health Check was not subject to detailed review;

the limited overview however concluded;

no formal contract management plans were evident;

contract management records were held within general correspondence files making active interrogation and management difficult;

contract records were generally maintained to support the contract formation phase, with little evidence of where these records linked into the contract management process.

If this does not indicate that there is something wrong with the Government's contracting out policies, I do not know what does. In some cases we are speaking about multi-million dollar projects and the Government jumps

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up and down and skites about the fact that it will do a wonderful thing and introduce something as innovative as a "health check".

I remember the minister in the other place walking around in a cloud for two days because a media guru had the bright idea of a "health check" of government contracting. When one reads this report, that is like conducting a health check on a corpse. At best it is an absolute joke that these multimillion-dollar contracts have no evident formal contract management plans. On what basis did the Government determine that this is a good path to go down?

Hon N.D. Griffiths: It sounds like a good subject for a royal commission.

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: There would be no surprise about what one would expect to find in this whole area. I imagine that in the Department of Contract and Management Services a plethora of interesting information exists.

The Australian Labor Party has major concerns about this Government's misplaced priorities in the areas of contracting and privatisation. It is easy to see from what has happened to State Print's former workers, who have been transferred across to Sands Print Group Ltd, that workers are not looked after, are promised the world and at the end of the day delivered nothing by this conservative Government. There might now be 25 unemployed workers of this company that is likely to go bankrupt who are likely to lose all their entitlements. No member of this Government has bothered to put up a hand and say, "We have a problem and we accept responsibility for this problem." In fact, as usual when there is a problem, every member of this Government lies low. That is just one of many examples of the unworkability of this Government's misplaced policy priorities in the privatisation and contracting areas and the direct cost to Western Australian people.

Rather than any benefit or social dividend to Western Australians, these people will pay for the activities of this Government. The Labor Party will carefully watch the situation of Sands Print, how it evolves and what will happen to the contracts that the Government currently has with Sands Print. I ask the Government what it intends to do with those contracts in the event that Sands Print does not survive and goes into bankruptcy. We will watch this situation very carefully as we believe taxpayers' money has been put at risk and the economic wellbeing of people whom this Government should have protected is now at risk. We will watch the situation carefully to ensure the Government does not wriggle out of any of its obligations, in particular those affecting 25 individuals upon whom the misfortunes of Sands Print will directly impact. We will look closely at how the Government handles this situation and watch with great interest other related matters such as the transfer of contract obligations and matters pertaining to the Government's current arrangement with that organisation. It is clear that this Government has got its priorities wrong. The policy holes are so big that one could drive trucks through them. If the Government were half smart it would at least admit, first, that it has a problem and, secondly, try to do something about it.

HON DEXTER DAVIES (Agricultural) [4.54 pm]: I welcome the opportunity to remark on the motion moved by the Leader of the Opposition, specifically his remarks about the Government's lack of interest in and misplaced priorities towards regional Western Australia.

If we were to believe what members opposite said, regional Western Australia is all gloom and doom and nothing has ever happened out there. They peddle that doom and gloom story in a politically opportune way to try to drive people into despair by inferring that it is not worth living in regional Western Australia. Having lived there for most of my life and worked and participated in community activities such as education, the provision of health and working with voluntary organisations in those country towns, I can assure the House that opportunities are well and truly alive. With the support of the Government, opportunities are available in regional Western Australia for people to live and participate in a wonderful way of life. My family still lives in regional Western Australia, as I do when I get away from this place. It is irresponsible of members to suggest that all those things have disappeared in their doom and gloom talk. It is wrong to try to convince people that those areas are disastrous and to talk down people in those areas. It is especially wrong to do that in the environment in which people in regional areas find themselves after a season over which they had no control and which dealt such a hard hand to them.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: You can't blame the Labor Party for that.

Hon DEXTER DAVIES: I can blame the Labor Party for trying to talk them down as this is about confidence.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: You have the problem. Your banks are going and your schools are closing. It is your policy, you must cop it. It is as simple as that.

Hon DEXTER DAVIES: I thank the member for bringing up the issue of banks. There is one area in which that has been an outstanding success recently.

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The PRESIDENT: Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich will come to order.

Hon DEXTER DAVIES: I have not heard of any Bendigo banks closing down in Western Australia. I have heard of five new banks going into regional areas as a direct result of this Government's efforts.

Hon Bob Thomas: This Government? You mean Geoff Gallop.

Hon DEXTER DAVIES: Whoop-de-do!

Several government members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon DEXTER DAVIES: I challenge members opposite to make inquiries of the management of Bendigo Bank as I can assure them that is not true.

Hon Bob Thomas: Gallop invited them here a long time before you did. You guys rewrite history every day.

Hon DEXTER DAVIES: That is very much open to dispute. If the member were to say that outside this place he would be laughed out of town by the management of Bendigo Bank. Aside from that, I know who went to Bendigo, who met with people from that bank and who invited them to Western Australia. I know who compiled a list of towns in which it would be possible to open a bank. I know who went to those towns with the Bendigo Bank management and who put the propositions to them. I know that because I was involved in it. I did not go to Bendigo, but I went to every meeting that was held in Western Australia on that matter from start to finish. I am glad to hear the Labor Party now say that this will not be a fizzer and it looks like it will work out in those country towns. The Labor Party is waving a flag, saying, "You beauty" and congratulating Bayswater and North Perth. I think that is a good thing. However, it is not true that this Government is about closing banks. The fact is that in regional areas we have convinced people that banks do make money and if they participate -

Hon J.A. Scott: What about the R & I Bank?

Hon DEXTER DAVIES: What about Bendigo Bank?

Hon J.A. Scott: You are saying you didn't get rid of any of them, but you got rid of the R & I.

Hon DEXTER DAVIES: BankWest is still there.

Hon J.A. Scott: It is not a Rural and Industries Bank of Western Australia any more.

Hon DEXTER DAVIES: A lot of people would consider that the Rural and Industries Bank -

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Hon Bob Thomas and the Attorney General will come to order. I am trying to listen to Hon Dexter Davies.

Hon DEXTER DAVIES: It is a wonderful thing that community banking has been developed. It provides people with an opportunity to take their destiny into their own hands, and that has assisted them. People in country areas where that has occurred think it is a wonderful initiative.

In terms of closing all the banks, it is a cheap -

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: You have not lost any services out there -

Hon DEXTER DAVIES: In terms of those banks, they have been provided.

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: What have you lost?

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.