

PLUMBERS LICENSING BOARD REGULATIONS - TAP WASHERS

Grievance

MR A.P. O'GORMAN (Joondalup) [9.52 am]: My grievance this morning is also to the Minister for Water Resources. I thank him for accepting this grievance at late notice. I want to talk about drips this morning.

Several members interjected.

Mr A.P. O'GORMAN: I am not referring to the member for Albany or members of the National Party!

It seems that the flavour of this morning's grievances is water. As we all know, this state is facing a crisis in water management and in providing water to individual consumers. It has been brought to my attention over the past 12 to 18 months that the Plumbers Licensing Board of Western Australia has introduced a regulation that prevents people from changing a simple tap washer. A tap is one of the simplest mechanical devices on the planet. Under the Plumbers Licensing Board regulation, an ordinary, everyday person is allowed to change tap washers only in his own house. There are tens of thousands of taps in the metropolitan area, not to mention the country areas, and anyone can pull these devices apart. I prepared one earlier. I have the body from a tap. Members can see the seat on the bottom. To reseal the tap washer, a person has to buy a \$30 or \$40 reseating tool.

Mr M.P. Murray interjected.

Mr A.P. O'GORMAN: A person who lives in Collie can buy it for \$5 at WA Salvage!

It is very simple to see whether the device has a clean seat. The next step is to take that off and to flush it out. I hate to be giving a lecture on how to change a tap washer, but I am a tradesman and I have known how to do this since I was 15 years of age. This is the sort of job that is given to a first-year apprentice. The tap washer is then replaced and the old ring on the shaft of the bonnet is replaced. The next step is to screw it together, flush it out and ensure that there are no drips. That is a very simple thing. However, the Plumbers Licensing Board has taken it upon itself to ban people from changing tap washers in other than their own premises unless they are licensed plumbers.

Dr K.D. Hames: Is that with or without charging?

Mr A.P. O'GORMAN: I am coming to that.

In my own home I can change as many tap washers as I like, without breaking the regulation. I have a query about investment properties because people receive remuneration from investment properties in the form of rent. If a person who owns an investment property changes a tap washer on that investment property, will he be breaking the regulation?

Another concern is that around the metropolitan area there are a large number of handymen. They make a living tending to people's houses, cleaning their gutters, tidying up the gardens and doing all sorts of maintenance jobs. One of the jobs those guys have relied on for many years to bring in some money is changing a simple tap washer. Under the regulation, handymen are not allowed to change tap washers, and that severely cuts back on their capacity to earn a reasonable income. If people have to get a plumber to do this simple job, most companies charge a \$90 call-out fee. The washer itself costs \$2 - if that - and it takes between 10 and 15 minutes to change one washer. When handymen are cleaning the gutters and doing other odd jobs around the house, if they spot a leak, they will mention it and fix it. If a handyman does that 10 to 15 minute job, it costs somewhere between \$5 and \$7. Allowing handymen to change tap washers does not detract from the plumbing trade, and it does not affect the income of plumbers. I venture to suggest that any plumber who is relying on replacing tap washers to earn a living probably should not be in the trade, because he would be earning a helluva lot more money in the building and construction industry, where he would be replacing hot water systems etc. The imposition on this small business is causing great distress, a loss of earnings and the risk of large fines if handymen are caught changing tap washers.

That brings me to another point. Given that there are hundreds of thousands of houses in the metropolitan area and across the state, how will the board know whether a handyman has replaced a tap washer? How is that regulated or policed? It is one of those red-tape, ridiculous regulations that does not serve any purpose. Rather, it puts a handyman who changes washers for a small fee in the position of being charged and taken to court. How will the board find out whether a handyman has replaced a tap washer? I do not know. How will the board police it? Does the Plumbers Licensing Board have tap washer inspectors policing the state?

I agree that regulations should be in place. I agree that plumbing and electrical trades should be regulated for safety and hygiene reasons. Indeed, plumbers face huge problems when they deal with waste products. We have seen the environmental damage that is caused when waste products that are being transported leak. It is

bureaucratic nonsense for a regulation to state that only a plumber can change a tap washer. I ask the minister to raise this issue with the Plumbers Licensing Board and to shut the tap, stop the drip from the board and have this problem fixed so that handymen can continue to make a reasonable living and so that we do not waste thousands of litres of water through small leaks. I, for one, would never call in a plumber to repair a tap washer. Rather, I would do it myself. I accept that many people in our community may not have the time or knowledge to complete this simple task. I ask the Minister for Water Resources to raise this issue with the Plumbers Licensing Board and to have this idiotic regulation thrown out.

MR J.C. KOBELKE (Balcatta - Minister for Water Resources) [9.57 am]: I thank the member for Joondalup for his grievance. I agree with him that drips can be worrying! There are occasions late at night when things are very quiet that one hears a dripping tap. That is concerning and can disturb one's sleep. However, that is not the concern raised by the member for Joondalup. He is clearly worried about the regulation of the Plumbers Licensing Board.

The water saving aspect is covered by my portfolio; however, the licensing aspect of this issue comes under the portfolio of the Minister for Consumer Protection, which was previously my portfolio. My concern is that when the drips become a dribble -

Mr G. Snook: And when experts dribble!

Mr J.C. KOBELKE: The definition of expert relates to drips. If we break up expert into two parts, X is an unknown quantity and a spurt can be defined as a drip under pressure! I am currently not under pressure.

As the member for Joondalup mentioned, the real concern is that a small drip, especially one on a rental property, can end up wasting quite a lot of water. Over time that can amount to thousands of kilolitres. When the millions of taps around the state experience a small loss of water through a drip or a trickle, there is a huge loss of water across the whole system. In terms of the community's need to use water efficiently and to save water, there is a major imperative to support people who repair dripping taps so that water is not wasted. The issue arises also with rental properties, which I have experienced as I am sure have other members, in which a tenant has tolerated a dripping or running tap that creates a huge water bill. The tenant and the landlord are then at odds over who is responsible for the cost, and whether the problem is due to lack of maintenance of the taps, which has caused the water to be wasted and the ensuing water bill.

I refer now to the Plumbers Licensing Board and the regulations, which issue the member has raised on behalf of his constituents. We must be very clear about the importance of plumbing and its regulation. Huge advances that have occurred in health, and the community's extended life expectancy, relate more than anything else to plumbing standards. That is easy to overlook in light of the marvels of medicine and the range of treatments and drugs now available. However, fundamental to the health of our community is the provision of safe drinking water and safe sewerage disposal systems. The regulation of this industry is very important. The success of the industry relies on the skills of our plumbers throughout Western Australia.

I am a very strong supporter of the role played by the Plumbers Licensing Board. It must administer regulations to ensure that plumbing work is carried out by licensed and qualified tradespersons. Issues can arise about how people should be qualified and registered. However, the issue the member has raised today is the extent to which that regulation applies to minor plumbing work. The standards of professionalism are regulated to protect consumers against faulty work. Governments must ensure that people do not perform faulty work that causes water wastage and has adverse impacts on important health and safety issues. There is clearly an issue about where we draw the line. The board would take a pragmatic approach to minor work, such as replacing tap washers, that is done infrequently on a not-for-profit basis. It would not be interested in it. As long as people are not being remunerated for doing that sort of work regularly, the board is not interested. If such minor work is effective and done efficiently, there is clearly no benefit in the Plumbers Licensing Board seeking to impose its regulations.

The more difficult issue is people doing that work for money. A handyman who might be simply changing a washer might think he can change some piping because it is only a minor job or install a new hot water system to save the home owner some money. That is a real no, no. That work could not only threaten the safe delivery of water but also make appliances unsafe; people can be killed if faulty hot water systems blow up, and that has occurred, more typically with home-made appliances. As I said, the board's approach to this issue is pragmatic. It is not likely to prosecute under those regulations unless it is in the public interest to do so, although that does not always give the certainty that people might like about what is considered to be the public interest. The limited resources available to the Plumbers Licensing Board mean that it will not seek to pursue very small matters such as the replacement of a leaking tap washer in a person's home, as the member for Joondalup adequately explained. He raised the example of a person replacing a washer and re-seating a tap that had been dripping for a considerable time, causing part of the metal to wear. The Plumbers Licensing Board is charged with maintaining standards in the plumbing industry. This is a contentious area because many people will judge

it to be something that people with lesser skills than a plumber can adequately handle without any adverse effects. However, in a limited number of cases things can go wrong, so the regulations provide protection to the public at large.

The bottom line of the issue raised by the member is that the Plumbers Licensing Board would take action if it were in the public interest to do so. That is a vague concept in some cases, but that is the government's approach to this matter.