

CYCLONE SEROJA AND WOOROLOO BUSHFIRES

Motion

HON DR STEVE THOMAS (South West — Leader of the Opposition) [10.06 am] — without notice: I move —

That this house —

- (1) acknowledges the impacts of cyclone Seroja on the communities of the midwest, Gascoyne and surrounding areas and the Wooroloo Bushfires north of Perth, and thanks our emergency services professionals and volunteers for their services to those communities; and
- (2) calls on the state and federal governments to make all reasonable efforts to assist those communities to rebuild.

It is not my intent today to take up the full 20 minutes available to me in an 80-minute debate. I am sure that members on all sides of the chamber will be very keen to express their support for the emergency services personnel and these communities. I was pleased to see the Minister for Regional Development jump up and do a ministerial statement on this topic this morning. It is obviously an issue that all sides of the house are quite passionate about.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: We did have a motion on notice about this.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: The minister also now has an opportunity to stand and give the government's response. The opposition is here to help, Madam President. We are giving the government an opportunity in the first full sitting week to give a proper response to this motion. I am sure that the minister will want to rush out and make sure that local communities throughout the region are aware of her ministerial statements and the comments she will no doubt be making in the not-too-distant future, so I do not want to unduly take up the time the house has available for this motion. I am sure that members around the chamber, from all parties, will be very keen to make sure that their good intent is recognised. I can see media releases going out in all directions this afternoon, so it is very important.

In relation to cyclone Seroja, it is interesting that, unfortunately, cyclones and these sorts of weather events are going to be a normal part of Western Australia's weather pattern, and have been for a long time. If we look at agriculture throughout those regions, generally Perth and northwards, it cannot survive without those heavy rain events that create the subsoil moisture for significant grass growth and cropping. I was last up in Hon Ken Baston's electorate in, I think, January or February of this year. I drove from Broome to Derby, and I have to say that I have never seen that country looking as green and lush as it did at that time. As I was travelling in the north west, it seemed to be in very good condition. As I drove, I passed many cows that were belly-deep in grass. I have not seen that before. It is absolutely the case that we require these cyclonic events to deliver our agriculture, but, obviously, there is a limit to how much is good. In this case, once again, we have seen nature at her furious best. A bit further south, around the midwest and Gascoyne in particular, the impacts have been dramatic, and not only in those areas. The impacts are spread far and wide. I am sure that members have visited; I know that members across the chamber and from all sides of politics have made the trip through those areas. The Minister for Emergency Services was up there fairly quickly and the local members of the National Party, my colleagues in the alliance, have visited. They were out there quickly talking to their communities. I know that members of the Liberal Party were out there, and the member elect for the Agricultural Region, Steve Martin, was out there as well. I am sure that Hon Colin de Grussa and Hon Martin Aldridge have also made their presence felt. It may well be that other members have attended that I am not aware of, but it is absolutely the case that members across this chamber responded immediately and dramatically to these events.

The damage is significant. There is still a housing issue in those regions. That is why the second part of this motion today calls on both state and federal governments to do everything possible to assist those communities. There was significant damage to infrastructure, particularly housing, throughout that region. It is not restricted to Kalbarri or Northampton or any one of those towns. The impact has been proportionately significant for many towns across that region, and one issue that the governments will need to address is temporary housing in the interim. Where do those people go when their houses are deemed to no longer be safe? It is absolutely the case that temporary housing needs to be looked at as a matter of urgency. It will take some months—many months—for a full response to that loss of housing to be generated. It is not an easy process to start constructing or reconstructing housing in regional areas, and I am sure that regional members are well aware that there is a limitation on workforce, so there will need to be a real focus on temporary housing while more permanent solutions are found. I am sure the government is aware of this. Presumably, the Minister for Regional Development will give the official government response, and hopefully she will be able to address those issues, but I think that it needs to be looked at as an absolute matter of urgency.

Another issue that we need to address is power. My understanding is that the electricity supply has been reconnected to pretty much all the towns throughout the region. That is good. Obviously, the response has been as quick as is

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feasible. We would all like everything to be reconnected immediately. One day, isolated systems off the grid might obviate the need for long lines to be reconnected, but there is an issue of power, not so much for regional communities, but particularly for isolated individual farmhouses. Whilst the communities themselves have generally been reconnected, there is an issue that a number of farmers, particularly those in more isolated areas, have not yet been reconnected. That becomes an issue particularly in terms of timing, because with all the rain that has come from a few cyclonic events over the last few months, I would expect, Hon Ken Baston, Hon Jim Chown, Hon Martin Aldridge, that it is probably one of the best seasons up that way, or I would suspect that farmers will have had one of the better initial cropping seasons that they have seen for some time.

Hon Jim Chown: The season hasn't finished. It's only just started.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: The season has just started. It is a good start. There is always time for it to go to pot, said Hanrahan, but you are right.

Hon Jim Chown: Normally good starts finish well.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: Yes, we are touching wood with that one. Obviously, farmers are attempting to get onto paddocks, and that is difficult when there has been a fair amount of rain, but it is an additional issue for someone in a remote area in a farmhouse that has no power. Farmers are trying to get crops in when they potentially have no power or are relying on a generator that may not be completely adequate. They also potentially have staff and family that they are trying to cater for, and in some cases it is easier to send family away, so there is a time-critical issue here in relation to the provision of those services. I was pleased to note that the Minister for Regional Development announced today that the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development is distributing a survey, and that is a good start, but there may be more that the department can do, particularly on that issue of how to manage the cropping process.

It is also the case that because those farming communities are out there madly trying to get crop into the ground, some of the longer term impacts of the cyclone such as the impact on people's wellbeing of the loss of houses may take some time to bubble through. I am sure the Minister for Mental Health will be aware of this potential deferment of the impacts. Whilst a farmer is madly trying to get crop into the ground, they are probably very busy and their mind is occupied. It may strike them further down the track. I simply want to make sure that the Minister for Mental Health is aware that there may be additional supports required not only now but for some time into the future as these impacts start to trickle through over the next six to 12 months. It will be incumbent upon him to look at this. I am sure he is aware; he is a very good minister and I am sure he will be looking at these issues as best he possibly can.

The first part of my motion is really to acknowledge the work done by the emergency services, both professionals and volunteers. Obviously, in the best of circumstances, those two groups work together hand in glove. I noted that Hon Martin Aldridge made some comments about the memorial service for firefighters this week. I thought they were magnificent. I have attended a number of those ceremonies myself. It is a great location and a very important ceremony, so I concur with his words on that one. Obviously, it works best if people are working together. I would like to pass on my thanks and congratulations on behalf of the National-Liberal alliance for the work that they have done and I am sure will continue to do in the future. Regional communities cannot exist without the volunteerism that keeps them alive. I know that volunteerism is important in the metropolitan area as well, but it is absolutely critical in communities that do not have the capacity to provide those services, particularly those given by volunteers, because in a lot of those places there are not enough people to run a professional unit. Country towns and regional communities will not survive without that volunteerism.

Those people who volunteer and stand in uniform do magnificent work and we congratulate them for that. But it is absolutely the case that every community has unsung heroes who also contribute. For the most part, the local doctor in a country town cannot be on the volunteer bushfire brigade because if there is an emergency, they will be required in the hospital, and it is the same for nurses and even vets. In a fire, there is obviously other damage to deal with. We absolutely congratulate the work of the volunteers and the professionals in all those organisations. We commend the work that they have done in dealing with cyclone Seroja and the Wooroloo bushfires. We urge them to continue to work together, as they are capable of doing, to provide those services to their local communities. They do a great job. It is often said that the volunteers are perhaps often a little keener to go on the attack than the professionals because, in many cases, it is their houses and their communities, but I have seen the two groups work together to get the best outcomes for a community. There is probably still more work we can do to get that communication happening, but it is very important. In relation to that, it is very hard to pick out a particular group that has done a good job at both the cyclone Seroja and the Wooroloo bushfire emergency events. Because it is more recent and pertinent, I mention the Northampton cyclone recovery committee, led by Debbie Carson and Rob Horstman, which has done a particularly excellent job in assisting the community to recover. I am sure that these committees know that at some point they will face exactly the same thing in the future.

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We cannot prevent Mother Nature from delivering these negative as well as positive outcomes. Our communities are resilient. In my view, regional people are particularly adept at adapting to the negative environment and making the best of situations. We have traditionally done so stoically and silently and we need to get better at perhaps talking about how we manage it. Regional communities are very good at responding and adapting. They are survivors particularly due to the work of people who work in emergency services both as professionals and as volunteers and those who volunteer around that process to support their communities.

I think this is an important motion. I accept that I could go on for longer but I am sure that in this first week, many members in this Parliament would like to address their support for those communities and those people, and I encourage them to do so.

HON MARTIN ALDRIDGE (Agricultural) [10.21 am]: I rise to support the motion before the house moved by the Leader of the Opposition. It is an important and timely motion to consider in light of a number of natural disasters that have impacted not just my electorate but neighbouring electorates in the last few months. The motion reflects on cyclone Seroja and the Wooroloo bushfire, although a number of significant fires have occurred. However, obviously the Wooroloo bushfire in particular was quite devastating with the amount of assets lost and how quickly and volatile that fire was as it ran through Gidgegannup and ended up not far from Bullsbrook.

The generosity of Western Australians to other Western Australians in times of need is interesting. I saw that on the ground towards the end of the first week after cyclone Seroja when, along with my colleague Hon Colin de Grussa and colleagues from the other place, I visited Northampton, Binnu and Port Gregory. It is interesting how, particularly country communities but not exclusively, come together to help each other in times of need. It was extraordinary to see some of the volunteers in Northampton on that Friday, who were literally doing their best to bring their community together and to help people in need. Those same volunteers themselves had significant losses; that selflessness is not unique to any one community but we see it frequently in times of disaster.

The other thing is the generosity of giving that we have seen. The Lord Mayor's Distress Relief Fund was established following the Dwellingup fires in the early 1960s. Until recently, that distress relief fund had raised and distributed some \$25 million, which is no small amount of money, due to the generosity of not just Western Australians but Australians. It is interesting to compare over that period from 1960 to today these last two appeals that it has run. The Wooroloo bushfire appeal raised some \$16.4 million and the cyclone Seroja appeal is just shy of \$16 million, and that appeal is still open. It is quite extraordinary that in the space of two or three months, two appeals have exceeded the entire collection of the Lord Mayor's Distress Relief Fund from 1961 to 2021. It is quite extraordinary how Western Australians and, indeed, Australians have reacted to support their fellow citizens.

The Leader of the Opposition touched on this, but it is often at the time of disaster that we see significant impact on our networks—our road networks, communication and power networks. As of yesterday, I received a briefing, and many members have received very good daily briefings from Western Power by email. There are still some 1 150 homes and businesses without power following the cyclone Seroja event. Western Power is predicting that they will be without power in some cases for weeks ahead. Keeping in mind that those homes have lost power now for four weeks, that demonstrates the extent of the damage. As quoted in this email, "Around 20 per cent of the network was damaged." Obviously, the loss of power and communication networks was significant and does not help with emergency responses. This is an opportunity for the state, Western Power, telecommunication operators and other operators of critical networks to use these events in a really positive way, particularly as we rebuild and recover to try to become more resilient to disasters of the future.

I saw the Premier and the Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner on the ground in Kalbarri on the Tuesday after the impact on the Sunday evening, so they were there quite soon after the impact. In fact, we could probably call it day two. They were on the ground and when I was watching the live press conference the Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner was asked about losses. At that time, teams of urban search and rescue firefighters in the midwest were doing what is called rapid damage assessments and had done a number to that point. However, the FES commissioner at that point on the ground in Kalbarri could not provide any information on losses, not because the assessments had not been done but because poor telecommunication was impacting the ability to communicate and coordinate the emergency. That persisted for quite some days. I know that local governments in that area had very important roles under our emergency management arrangements but did not have telecommunications until day four after the cyclone had impacted. They are things I think we need to use as opportunities. I am not using them as criticism but as opportunities for us to rebuild better and make sure we have more resilient networks not only to continue to supply power and telecommunications to customers and businesses but also to assist us in coordinating a response.

I want to also put on the record my thanks to the many hundreds, if not thousands, of volunteer and career first responders from across Australia who came to the midwest and to the outskirts of Perth for the Wooroloo bushfire. It does not take long, particularly with these protracted incidents, for fatigue to set in not just for volunteers but also those in the career service. Having our teams of SES people arriving from interstate and having Defence assets

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mobilised to assist with the coordination and logistics of the disaster are really important. The point I would like to make now is that we need to make sure we are not there for just the response. As the Leader of the Opposition said, the recovery over the days, weeks, months and years ahead will be just as important. The community affected by natural disasters over the last few months took a lot of confidence, but it was empowering to see so many people willing to help. However, there is obviously a limit to that, particularly as we enter the recovery phase and it ramps up. I think the Leader of the Opposition made a really good point around making sure we continue to support these communities.

That is why the government has our support in negotiating what will be very important category C assistance under the disaster recovery funding arrangements to make sure that the communities of the midwest and beyond are supported in that recovery phase. Category C assistance has already been activated for Wooroloo. That is a level of assistance that is negotiated and co-funded between the state and the commonwealth. I am hopeful that we will reach a point in the near future at which category C assistance will be declared for the tropical cyclone Seroja event.

Although the focus has been on particularly the Shire of Northampton and Kalbarri, there has been significant damage right across the wheatbelt, parts of the Gascoyne and inland areas. Communities in the northern wheatbelt still have telecommunication impacts. People still do not have power. It is quite widespread. When I had a briefing from the incident management team in Geraldton on the Friday following the cyclone crossing the coast, some of the very experienced officers in that team stressed to us that they had never managed an incident as complex and widespread as the tropical cyclone Seroja event. I appreciate that, and I appreciate the strain that that has put on both our resourcing and our ability to respond. I support the motion and hope we can all work together to make sure that better outcomes are achieved.

HON ALANNAH MacTIERNAN (North Metropolitan — Minister for Regional Development) [10.31 am]: I thank the Leader of the Opposition and Hon Martin Aldridge for their very collaborative approach on this matter. We agree, Leader of the Opposition, that this is an important issue. Members may recall that the Leader of the House gave notice of a similar motion as our first item of government business, as we wanted this to be the first matter that the house debated when we resumed.

I reiterate that there is consensus that there has been an extraordinary endeavour up there. We have seen a huge response from government under the leadership of Commissioner Klemm from the Department of Fire and Emergency Services. We have seen an extraordinary response from Western Power and, indeed, the Department of Communities. An extraordinary amount of hard work has also been done by the community and the local government in the region.

When I went up there with Hon Kyle McGinn on Sunday to look at how the recovery was going and to meet with the small business owners in particular—I think 40 people attended the event that we held—I found it extraordinary just how much work had been done. It was extraordinary to see the tidy up, the Western Power linesmen activating the power to the last houses and the crews doing the asbestos work.

Hon Martin Aldridge talked about some of the properties in Kalbarri that have not yet had power restored. I understand from our discussions with the Western Power crew that the houses that have not yet had power restored have damage such that it would not be safe to restore power, so there needs to be a major repair of the property first. For example, if a property has lost its roof—in some instances, people are putting tarpaulins on the roof and still living there—Western Power's determination is that it is not safe to live it up with power. I understand that most of those people are using generators. Clearly, there are still issues with power across the region. I know that some farmers have lines down on their paddocks, which has interfered with seeding. The linesmen have told me that some farmers have taken a very pragmatic approach and are leaving four metres on each side and are getting on and seeding the rest of their paddocks. I think there are ways around it, but there is no doubt that this event has required the biggest response from Western Power. It has assessed 1 200 hazards and damage in the region, so it has been a big effort. So far, it has replaced 450 poles, and 150 crew members are still in the region. I think everyone acknowledges that there has been a tremendous effort by Western Power and DFES to restore things as quickly as possible.

As Hon Dr Steve Thomas has said, cyclones have positives and negatives, and autumn rain has traditionally been really quite important for many inland areas. Certainly, Kalbarri is out of the generally accepted cyclonic belt. We are obviously going to have to watch what is happening because much of the climate modelling is telling us that the cyclonic belt will move south as part of climate change patterns. That is something that we certainly will have to watch. I note that some tourism facilities, such as Pelicans Nest, remained totally intact when the cyclone hit. The owner of Pelicans Nest told us that he had built it to cyclonic standards, and that paid off. We very much appreciate that that adds cost to building, so we will have to actively watch the change in weather patterns.

When we met with the business community, obviously there was a lot of concern that the road was closed, notwithstanding the fact that quite a number of accommodation units were available, the asbestos clean-up had proceeded well, all the immediate power dangers had been dealt with and people were very keen to get a date and

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have some certainty about when tourists could return. We took those concerns back to government and met with Minister Reece Whitby, Minister David Templeman and the commissioner, and I am very pleased that that road will be open from six this evening, which I think will be a great positive for that community.

People wanted businesses back in town. Although some of the accommodation facilities have done okay because emergency workers have been there, retailers have suffered; for example, linesmen from Western Power are not buying surf gear from the retail shops. Many retailers and restaurateurs were relying on the tourism industry to return. I understand that the grey nomads are waiting at Jurien Bay for the road to open and they will be in there like Flynn. That will be a great positive. We are not saying that that will solve all problems. Hon Dr Steve Thomas quite rightly pointed out the problem of the houses that have been destroyed and the number of people who have to move out. I must say that quite a few people are hardy individuals and even though their homes have been declared uninhabitable, they are inhabiting them. The government is certainly working through this issue.

Melissa Pexton, a very competent and experienced person, has been appointed State Recovery Controller. In a meeting with Minister Whitby and the commissioner she made it clear that she saw that addressing the issue of providing emergency housing for those people was a key priority, as is sufficient housing, donga accommodation, to ensure that building workers who will need to come into the town to effect the repairs to those houses is underway. That is very important.

A lot of concern was expressed about the performance of Centrelink. There was concern that Centrelink had not made the assistance packages available. I have said that we will take that up with the commonwealth, but there is certainly a great deal of concern about that. We note that the Department of Communities has provided about \$1.2 million in relief to individuals and has been getting that information out. It is certainly the case that many small business owners have suffered significant loss. My understanding is that they are not necessarily eligible for assistance from the Lord Mayor's Distress Relief Fund, although I agree with the comments that it is extraordinary how generous Western Australians have been and how they have responded with so much generosity, to both this event and also the tragic Wooroloo fires. The government is investigating whether cyclone Seroja's assessment can be upgraded as a natural disaster, which then will expand the categories of assistance that would be available. We have heard the feedback from many of those businesses. Although the majority of them were more focused on getting the town reopened and getting back business, no doubt a number of businesses have copped it very hard. They have been making the case for some financial assistance and that matter is now being actively considered; that is, what is the best way that we can provide that additional assistance for those who have sustained significant businesses losses.

The issue of insurance was also raised. I give a big shout out to RAC insurance, a Western Australian company. Those who were insured with RAC said that its response had been impeccable. A number of non-Western Australian-based insurance companies that were cited have unfortunately been very unresponsive and we have undertaken to see whether we can raise those issues with the Financial Ombudsman. It is important for those insurance companies to step up and provide a timely response and timely assessment for their clients in their hour of need. Hon Reece Whitby has been to the area certainly three, possibly four, times, and the Premier went up there at the earliest opportunity. We have listened to what the community is saying. We have the town reopened. I note a petition from people saying that they do not want the town reopened. We do not think we can close this town when we have dealt with those major hazard issues, and we are very conscious that people there with businesses need to make a living and need to key create the opportunities for the rest of the community. We are working throughout the region, not just in Kalbarri, to ensure that we get all the problems solved as quickly as possible and that we have timely assistance available to those who need it. I thank the Leader of the House for the motion.

HON DONNA FARAGHER (East Metropolitan) [10.46 am]: I rise to support the motion on cyclone Seroja and recent bushfires. I wish to align myself with the contributions that have been made by other members already in recognising the devastation that has occurred in the township of Kalbarri, a place that I, and I am sure all members, have visited. I have visited Kalbarri since I was a little girl and as recently as last year it was our family holiday. It is a beautiful part of Western Australia and to see the devastation that occurred is truly felt. Like all members, I want to extend my thoughts to those severely impacted. As others have said, let us hope that the recovery effort, which of course will obviously take some time, will allow this fantastic part of Western Australia to rebuild and to move forward for its residents, for local business owners and visitors alike. I, too, was pleased to see in *The West Australian* today and also in the comments made by the minister in her ministerial statement that, effectively, Kalbarri will reopen as of tonight. That is a step forward.

Equally, I wholeheartedly support the motion as it relates to the Wooroloo bushfires that caused immense devastation across my electorate of East Metropolitan Region. Members in this house who have the privilege of representing the East Metropolitan Region know all too well that the danger of bushfires across the Perth hills and surrounding areas is always very real. In my time in this place there have been a number of devastating fires. I recall that only a couple of months prior to my first entry into this house in 2005 we had the devastating Perth hills bushfires, which

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saw more than 27 000 hectares of forest in and around Pickering Brook and Karragullen burnt. Notwithstanding the number of bushfires that we have seen, each has caused individual devastation and heartache for many. We would all agree that in the midst of the lockdown earlier this year, which created its own challenges, the entire Western Australian community was hoping and praying that those in the immediate and surrounding fire zone in the Wooroloo bushfires were safe.

In saying that, we know all too well that the fire was extremely erratic and intense and that the very strong winds and very, very high temperatures made the task for firefighters and other emergency personnel even more difficult. Once contained, we knew that 86 homes had been lost, countless pets and other wildlife had not survived, and families and individuals had lost literally everything, left with only memories of happier times. Knowing this—this comes to the second part of the motion—I want to recognise the hundreds of firefighting and emergency services personnel, both career and volunteer, and the Department of Communities staff, local government staff, non-government organisations and volunteers, for the incredible work that they did to protect lives and homes and for the support they gave to those who had lost so much. Their tireless work under extremely difficult, dangerous and emotional circumstances, often undertaken with little rest and through consecutive shifts, can never be underestimated. I must say that both as a local member and indeed, now some time ago, as a former environment minister, I have enormous respect for everyone who puts, effectively, their lives on the line to help and support and save others and to keep our communities safe. I must say that when I saw on the news or Facebook men and women whom I had known when I was environment minister, like Murray Carter and others, it gave me enormous confidence that they were doing everything they could to keep these communities safe. I want to acknowledge that.

I caught up just last week with the Mayor of the City of Swan, Kevin Bailey, and we talked at some length about the fire. Just to give members a snapshot of those involved, he shared with me, and we discussed, that 105 different fire brigades attended the fire, 58 volunteer bush fire brigades, 47 volunteer fire and rescue service brigades, 17 State Emergency Service brigades and 30 joint task force crews. I am told that the fire travelled 28 kilometres within 12 hours. That is how fast it was moving. Over 300 horses were evacuated to the Magic Millions facility. In total, more than 900 firefighters completed more than 177 shifts over 15 days, and saved over 200 homes and a whole range of other infrastructure inside that fire zone. It is quite incredible. The mayor and I also discussed the recovery effort and where things are at. It is pleasing that there continues to be very good collaboration between the various agencies, other organisations and volunteers. It is so important that this continues throughout the entire rebuild process. As I, and as other members, have said, the rebuild process cannot happen overnight—we know that—but we cannot allow a circumstance whereby devastation, whether as a result of cyclone or bushfires, is no longer front and centre for those who are not directly impacted and the recovery is delayed or hampered. I am certainly hopeful and confident that that will not be the case in either circumstance.

I again want to express my thoughts to those who have been impacted so severely by these devastating events and to also give my very heartfelt thanks to everyone who has been involved, whether they were career firefighters, volunteer brigades or volunteers across a range of spectrums, for what they did to keep these communities safe and for what they are continuing to do as they rebuild. Thank you very much, Madam President.

HON KYLE MCGINN (Mining and Pastoral — Parliamentary Secretary) [10.54 am]: I am very pleased to rise today to say a few words on this motion. I thank the Leader of the Opposition for bringing the motion to this place. It is very timely and a very needed conversation to have. I might just start with the bushfires. Interestingly, the bushfires actually touched part of my circle. It was Christmas Eve and we were heading out to my partner's parents' place in Bullsbrook. As we were heading out there, we noticed the big smoke plume that was coming up. It turned out that power had been lost and everyone was told not to evacuate but to be prepared and ready. It sent Christmas into a bit of spiral. Later on, when the big bushfire happened a few months later, the COVID lockdown was happening so I was caught up there. My partner and I went out to look after her mum, who had some medical issues. We took her to get an MRI and then came back. We were asleep at about 11.30 at night when my phone went off and it was actually the Department of Fire and Emergency Services contacting us to say get out now. It was so quick. To me, it was just unbelievable. I had not been in that situation before. As soon as we got the phone call, we got up and packed as much as we could. Obviously, my partner was really worried about the chickens, dogs and cats, and we did the best that we could. Once we went outside to go to the car, we could see all the people from the houses along Shady Hills Estate just packing up and getting out as much as they could. We took my partner's mum to our place. What we saw over the next three days in the updates on TV was intense, as was the feeling of not knowing what was going on. From all accounts, the firefighters and volunteers at Shady Hills did an amazing job. Looking at that bush as you drive up there, you can see that it is just so ripe as a fire source once it catches. I know that the first fire at Christmas was from a car fire that just spread out of control; the wind got hold of it and away it went. To the firefighters who put in the effort fighting the fires at Shady Hills, thank you so very much, because when we got back, the chickens were alive and the house was still there, which was really good. It was just such a mammoth effort. We could see the coordination happening with checkpoints and getting people out.

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At Christmas time, my partner's dad was down at the property and he was prepared to fight. He was set up and had all the gennies and the dam there. But when he was not there, we were not prepared to do that and we made the decision very quickly to get out. Being put in that position was really bizarre. In this chamber, I want to thank the amazing firefighters and all the SES people and everyone who put in the effort, because that could have been very devastating for my partner's family. I know people lost homes and lots of things; it is quite sad. I come from a background where cyclones were actually quite common. I was born and bred in Darwin, and cyclones are almost second nature there and out in Humpty Doo, and also in Karratha, where cyclones are pretty well known. One thing that shocked me around this was that people in Kalbarri were not prepared for a cyclone because they had never seen one before. That must have been really intimidating for them as it was coming in. One thing that I did appreciate was the response and preparedness of the people of Kalbarri around two days before the cyclone came in, because up north there is probably a little bit of overconfidence. They call it a cyclone party most of the time, and I may have attended one or two of them when I was younger, but they do not tend to see it with the seriousness that it should be seen.

My parents were living in Darwin during cyclone Tracy and lost a car and a caravan, and trees went down. I remembered all the museums and stuff that I had seen in Darwin of cyclone Tracy and it was unbelievable how similar the first image I saw of Kalbarri was to that in terms of the damage done—just the unbelievable ferocity of this wind. Even though the towns up north are built for cyclones, there tends to be this attitude of “She’ll be right; it’s not going to be a direct hit—it won’t be a category 5” et cetera. We saw this huge response in the media and on the ground, with people saying, “This is serious. Something is going to go wrong here.” People were well prepared. I think the towns, the communities, emergency services, the departments and everyone who was involved should be commended. No-one was saying, “It might miss us; it might hit up north or down south.” It was a case of “We’re prepared.” That is a huge reason we did not see any loss of life in what I can only say is a miracle. When we see the damage that can be done, particularly the damage that occurred from cyclone Tracy, it is a miracle that no-one was hurt or killed.

On Sunday, I travelled to the affected areas with Minister Alannah MacTiernan. We had great conversations with small businesses. Going through the town, it was interesting to see the sporadic way in which the damage occurred. Some buildings were barely touched while others just down the road were completely demolished. It was really bizarre to see the differences in the damage to buildings in Kalbarri just a small distance from each other. The people of Kalbarri have been so resilient, working together. As members who volunteer would know, nine times out of 10 the State Emergency Service crews were helping at someone else's house when their house was just as badly damaged. That was such a huge thing that was happening up there. I commend all those people who put their shoulder to the wheel and did what they did because Kalbarri is now looking completely different from how it looked just after the cyclone.

When we were in the affected area, we spoke to a couple of Western Power lads from Geraldton who were getting a business reconnected. They were pretty pleased with the response from their angle. They believed that work was getting done real fast. Obviously, it was dangerous in some places, which meant that connectivity was difficult. One of the Western Power guys told me a pretty amazing story about a massive silo that holds grain. He was trying to explain the size of it; it was huge. The wind had picked it up and pulled it out of its concrete bed. It was blown into the paddocks and wiped out a lot of power poles. This thing went “poof” and cut off all the power.

Hon Dr Steve Thomas: Presumably, it was empty.

Hon KYLE MCGINN: Maybe it was but who knows, the way the wind was blowing. I assume, Hon Colin de Grussa, that it may have been empty at this time of year. The wind picked up the silo out of the concrete bed. That is what caused the most damage to the power poles in that area—other infrastructure getting damaged.

There is a lot of work to do with the clean-up. I am very confident about the way the government is approaching this situation. I know that the minister is going up to that area on Sunday. The Minister for Emergency Services has made four visits. We will continue to work with the community up there and with organisations that are providing emergency relief. They are doing a fabulous job. They have set up at the golf club, giving out food and stuff like that. It was really uplifting to see. I will leave some time for someone else to say a few words. I wanted to put my wholehearted thanks on the record to all emergency services in this state that have gone through any of these disasters because, without them, people would have been far worse off.

HON COLIN de GRUSSA (Agricultural — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [11.03 am]: I want to follow on a little from the theme that Hon Kyle McGinn was talking about and acknowledge the great motion moved by the Leader of the Opposition. Obviously, members on both sides of the chamber are very supportive of the response we have had to tropical cyclone Seroja and the Wooroloo bushfires by the volunteers and emergency services representatives.

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I wish to follow on from the theme that Hon Kyle McGinn was talking about relating to the scale of the destruction. I think my colleague the Acting President (Hon Martin Aldridge) was with us when we had a little tour a few weeks back. I am sure he will recall the briefing we had at the emergency services facility at Geraldton Airport. Officers advised us that the damaged area from tropical cyclone Seroja was something like 300 kilometres long and 100 kilometres wide. While we obviously saw the impact on Kalbarri in the immediate aftermath as it bore the brunt of the cyclone crossing the coast—I understand it was in the north-eastern quadrant of the cyclone, which apparently has the strongest winds, hence the significant damage—the damage extended far beyond Kalbarri, although with different grades of severity as it did not hit so many populated areas with the same strength.

During our tour, we obviously had the opportunity to visit a number of farming properties and see some of the damage that occurred. It was quite apparent that the full strength of the cyclone caused damage to a number of those farming properties. On one of the properties, we saw a machinery shed, which was held up by 100 millimetre square rectangular hollow section steel, twisted into nothing. Rather than sheets of tin being blown across the paddock, the entire roof—trusses and all, which amounted to tonnes of steel—was hundreds of metres away. Hon Kyle McGinn made the point that it is a miracle no-one was injured. That is absolutely correct. It is a miracle that no-one was injured or even killed. I saw a portable grain silo, like a field bin, when we visited a farming property. We were standing in a house and about three kilometres away we could see the field bin on the horizon. The farmer pointed out to us that that field bin belonged to his neighbour three kilometres the other way. So, that field bin had been picked up and thrown some six kilometres in that wind, past his house or possibly even over the top of his house. How no-one was injured is a miracle. That in itself is testimony to how seriously the people in those regions took the warnings of the impending cyclone and acted accordingly to bunker down and stay safe.

On one of the properties we visited, we walked through what was left of the house. It had a brick structure, but it had no roof and no ceilings. They were completely gone. It was really interesting to see that the timber framing of the roof of that house was covered in mud. Not only had the roof been torn off, but along with the 90 millimetres of rain that fell in the area, the wind was so strong that mud was blown onto the timber frame of that roof. Again, that really illustrates the strength of the wind that came through that area.

As has been said, the buildings and other structures were not cyclone-ready necessarily because until this point, cyclones had not been a frequent occurrence. It may well and truly be something that we need to get used to in that part of the state. Hopefully that will not be the case but all these things point towards a change that will mean that we need to be more prepared for those things. It is a miracle no-one was injured. It is absolutely apparent that people took notice of the advice. The emergency services workers in the midst of it all responded to the hundreds of calls they received to assist with damage and so on. Again, it was fantastic to hear that they were able to assist without being injured themselves, or worse. We will obviously learn a lot from the impact of the cyclone on an area like this that is not necessarily prepared for it.

I turn to something that occurred as a result of the damage done around the Esperance area after the 2015 bushfire. Obviously, cyclones and bushfires are different. However, the damage to power supply infrastructure in Esperance was very similar—poles evaporated from the heat. In the case of Seroja, the poles were blown over and lines lay on the ground. To its credit, Horizon Power went out to the farms in that area and said that it would put the poles and wires back up. It said it was mandated to do that—that was its job. However, it offered an alternative—to put in a renewable system using a backup generator and batteries on properties, so it did not have to worry about the poles and wires that go out to the farms and the owners could have a reliable power supply and pay the normal power bill through Horizon Power. At first, there was a lot of scepticism about that. As I have spoken about in this place before, those who had it installed, which I think ended up being almost all of them, have realised that they have ended up with a very reliable power system. They know that if there is a problem, they can pick up the phone and Horizon Power will come out to fix it. From Horizon Power's point of view, it does not have to go and check every pole on the way out there either; it knows exactly where the source of power is, so it can easily repair it. In the aftermath of these events, we need to look at how those sorts of things can be facilitated to ensure a reliable power supply. Obviously, that is on a smaller scale in terms of individual properties, but, again, the midwest is a massive area for renewable energy; therefore, what an opportunity it is to look at entire communities there and how this could provide resilience to their power supplies.

Again, I take the time to acknowledge all those emergency services professionals and the community volunteers, who we saw many of in our expedition up there, who were just frantic and were doing whatever they could to provide assistance to those community members who had no electricity, homes or food. It is absolutely amazing to see how communities can pull together in times of crisis. The response from the government was swift. People were up there looking into these things. Obviously, there are some issues that will take time to resolve around the broader effects on the community and on mental health and general health and all those other things as well, but I think that although it may have taken a little while for some of those things to happen, in general, the response was very, very good. People are very happy to see that assistance. Defence Force personnel were up there as well. It was just

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tremendous to see everyone pitching in, cleaning up and doing whatever they could to try to get some semblance of normality back to the affected towns in the midwest.

I also have to acknowledge the professionals and volunteers who assisted in fighting the Wooroloo bushfires. It was fantastic to see the heavy air tankers providing support to fight those fires over here. I think it was a good demonstration of the usefulness of those aircraft in such circumstances. Perhaps we should look at how we might have more of those aircraft available and find other airfields to locate them at so that they can provide a faster response, rather than flying them in from Busselton as they had to during the Wooroloo fires. However, the aircraft were of great assistance, and I am sure that everyone would acknowledge that although the devastation will be felt for many years to come, those who did their best to help the community and put out those fires certainly deserve our praise. Our thoughts are with all of those who were affected by tropical cyclone Seroja and the Wooroloo bushfires.

HON LAURIE GRAHAM (Agricultural) [11.13 am]: I rise in support of this motion. First, I would like to acknowledge the volunteers. I happened to be in the stream of cars trying to get back to Geraldton on Monday morning, the day after cyclone Seroja hit, and I watched all of those volunteers in their cars pour through. I had some grandchildren with me and I was threatened that I should not take them into that atmosphere and told that my rightful place was to stay in Perth. Therefore, I spent the night in Perth and, fortunately, missed that event. We were very lucky at home and did not get any damage, but the City of Greater Geraldton was obviously damaged. The city now, of course, is some 120 kilometres deep.

I will limit my comments to the bushfire. It is a shame that we do not have three or four hours to talk about this motion. It is one of those things that people are passionate about. I know that the councils in the area, particularly the smaller councils, want to see this issue talked about, particularly from the disaster recovery point of view, and I will get to that in a few minutes.

I have made limited visits to the Northampton, Chapman Valley and Kalbarri areas. With the ministers being constantly there, and other high-flyers, I was getting distinct feedback from my office that what people wanted was to see those troops on the ground, repairing services, and they really did not want to be wasting time talking to politicians. If they have a problem, they will give us a ring. I received a number of phone calls from a number of councils, and I was glad to be able to help some of them navigate their way through the jungle. Many organisations gave assistance. I think it was the Tuesday after the cyclone hit when I was in Bunnings and I watched literally hundreds of generators being carried out the door because people thought that they were not going to have power. Bunnings took all the generators at its shops throughout the state and sent them to Geraldton. The very next day, power was restored. Then there was a call for the generators to go to Kalbarri, and some of those same generators that had been bought the day before were voluntarily given up by those people to go up to Kalbarri. It was fantastic. I do not know if I had had a very expensive generator whether I could have happily just put it on a truck and not known when I was going to see it again. But people just did it. That could not be organised in advance; it was something that was just done on a spur of the moment.

I was at a meeting the other day with a community organisation and someone on the floor said, “Let’s put \$5 000 into the mayor’s relief appeal.” Now, we could afford to put the \$5 000 in, but it was unusual to see a community organisation just pop that money in there when it could have directed that money to the community. But the organisation felt that it was better that the money went to the Lord Mayor’s appeal to provide services elsewhere.

I think the biggest problem and the biggest lesson learnt out of the event was that we need to back up the mobile towers. It became an absolute disaster. As I said, I was driving up that day, and when we eventually arrived at Leeman, there was no reception because the towers had gone down as well. That cyclone event pulled the towers down virtually everywhere north of Geraldton, and that is a real problem to have. There were farmers at meetings saying that they would happily go out to fuel people’s generators, even though it was a 300-kay round trip to recharge those generators. I am sure that Telstra learnt a fair lesson during this event. Although the generator stockpile was ready to go, there was no management plan to get them out there, and because the communications were down, no-one knew where anyone was, what the issues were, whether the generators had just run out of power or whether the towers themselves were down. Therefore, it was disappointing to see that it took so long to get that up. One of the reasons people in Mingenew thought that they had been forgotten was they had absolutely no communications. Powerlines were all over most of the major roads there and people were reluctant to drive over them. For some days, most of those powerlines were marked just with chemical drums.

Members have commented on the insurance industry. I have perhaps seen the pleasant side of the insurance industry. I happened to lose a fence at home, which is no great deal, and the assessor took a whole two minutes to do the assessment and said that he was doing another 10 that day. He went through and did a pretty effective job. After this cyclone event, representatives of the Insurance Council of Australia attended most of the community meetings that were held at Mullewa and Chapman Valley—the night I was there—and it was fantastic. People were told to just get on with their repairs and put their bills in later. They were told not to worry about putting in the claim but to just get on with life, and that was great to see. I am sure that there will be argy-bargy over insurance amounts.

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I am sure there will be issues for people who have insurance that says they will get accommodation if their house is uninhabitable, because if they cannot find a habitable house that is available within the next 100 days, it will make life fairly difficult.

I will touch on what happened in one shire. Although I am reluctant to do it, I will pick out the Shire of Mingenew as an example, as it has raised a number of issues with me and gave me some information as at yesterday. I know the shire has an assessment meeting today, and it may well be that this information will be out of date by the end of my contribution this morning. However, something like five per cent of people in the shire were impacted by the cyclone. Five per cent sounds like a huge number of people. In the Shire of Mingenew's case, it is 25 adults and four children, but over 20-odd houses were lost. The major concern is the loss of those houses. The shire needs to find temporary accommodation not only for people's immediate requirements, but also for seasonal workers when the cropping comes around and for tourists when they arrive. People are occupying accommodation that would otherwise be provided for visitors. If the shire is unlucky, it will miss out on the benefit of what could be a very good tourist season. Having only 25 people and four children affected seems to be quite a small impact, but as people have said to me, if those four children leave the district, that is another pressure on the school. It is another pressure at another level and the whole thing changes. It is five per cent of the population. If they go to live in Dongara, which it is only half an hour's drive away, it is another family gone to the coast, and we will have more drive in, drive out workers and less community. It is important that we retain these communities because, as I said, there is the loss of the football team, the hockey team and the basketball team. They will all end up in trouble.

The major problem was that no-one could talk to anyone. They assumed that that meant that everyone thought that they were okay and did not take any interest in them. In fact, most people realise there were major problems throughout the area. I am staying away from talking about Kalbarri and Northampton as I make these points because I think they have been talked about a fair bit by speakers on the motion this morning. That impact was devastating on those areas but it is important to talk about the other areas impacted. The latest information I have is that 350 Western Power staff are still working on the project. The previous update I had was that there were some 230 staff. Western Power has obviously put in more resources, but it is still weeks away from reconnecting those long powerlines. Hon Colin de Grussa raised the point that a large number of people are looking at the opportunity to convert to standalone power systems. I will finish my comments because I know that at least one other member wants to have a say.

HON MATTHEW SWINBOURN (East Metropolitan — Parliamentary Secretary) [11.22 am]: I want to use the short time that is left available to talk mostly about the Wooroloo bushfires because they started and finished in my electorate of the East Metropolitan Region. It was a significant and intense fire that burnt for some time and was difficult to control. Fires that start in the Darling scarp are always difficult because of the easterly winds that typically blow persistently over the summer and autumn months. In fact, autumn easterlies are sometimes stronger than those in summer, and by the time autumn comes around the forest has dried out considerably and not much moisture is left. It is also hard to extinguish the fires because they stay in tree stumps and things like that. Although the flames might be put out, the embers survive, and when the winds pick up again, it causes flare-ups. The most alarming thing about the Wooroloo fires was that fires were starting three kilometres in advance of the fire front. The gullies and hills in that part of the scarp, which is quite steep and difficult to get to, made it a very challenging fire to get under control for those who took responsibility for fighting it. The other factor with the wind is that it makes it hard for aerial firefighting to take effect. The fires create updraughts that combined with the winds means that helicopters and aerial fire appliances cannot be sent in to put them out. If the winds are strong, it increases the risk factors for an accident, and of course we do not want that. But we did get on top of the fire. We were fortunate in that we had only loss of property, not loss of life. Obviously, we cannot forget the impact on wildlife and animals. We do say there was no loss of life but we did lose the lives of a lot of family pets, livestock, and, as I said, wildlife through that area. We should acknowledge that.

It is always very impressive in this state that when an event like the Wooroloo bushfires or a cyclone occurs our volunteer emergency services, our professional services, government departments and community care services come together. We should not forget those care services; for example, the Salvation Army sets up kitchens and provides food to, and looks after, people fighting the fires. There is a group that looks after people displaced by the fires and there are local government services as well. I think we need to extend recognition of participation to those who support those who fight fires, not just those on the frontline, because exhaustion becomes a big issue for firefighters very quickly. I think the Acting President (Hon Martin Aldridge), as a former firefighter, can attest to that exhaustion in those conditions. Being able to look after those support people is really important as well.

I will leave the mover of the motion a minute to respond if he wishes. I commend the motion to the house.

HON DR STEVE THOMAS (South West — Leader of the Opposition) [11.26 am] — in reply: I thank Hon Matthew Swinbourn for a brief opportunity to thank members who contributed to this motion. I thank

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Hon Martin Aldridge, the Minister for Regional Development, Hon Kyle McGinn, Hon Colin de Grussa, Hon Laurie Graham and Hon Matthew Swinbourn for their contributions. I think this has been an excellent debate—one of bipartisanship and general support.

I have a couple of quick comments. Hon Kyle McGinn mentioned Shady Hills. I agree that there are areas in the hills in the East Metropolitan Region to which I would be very nervous about sending firefighters. It is absolutely a risk. I thank the minister for her contribution. I did not raise that powerlines are still down in paddocks, and I am glad that she did. I am glad that the contributions of Hon Laurie Graham and Hon Kyle McGinn raised a few issues that I did not think I had time for. I thought this was an excellent debate and I am pleased to see that the government is up in the area as much as it is, and I think in this case it probably deserves to be congratulated for its work—it is very convivial!

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.