

ESTIMATES OF REVENUE AND EXPENDITURE

Consideration of Tabled Papers

Resumed from 22 October on the following motion moved by Hon Stephen Dawson (Minister for Environment) —

That pursuant to standing order 69(1), the Legislative Council take note of tabled papers 4389A–D (budget papers 2020–21) laid upon the table of the house on Thursday, 8 October 2020.

HON TIM CLIFFORD (East Metropolitan) [2.15 pm]: I rise today to speak on this year's state budget. I think everyone in this chamber can agree that the circumstances this year have not been normal; therefore, the budget has been tabled late in the year. I note also that its tabling is not far out from the next state election. Noting some of the commitments in the state budget, and after reflecting on every state budget since I have been in this place, from what I have seen, not much has changed. Housing, transport and the protection of our green urban spaces, which I have spoken about at length in this place, are still not on the priority list. There is no indication of any urgency to address the climate crisis. I note that many economists, academics and health experts in this country have articulated that the COVID-19 pandemic could be seen as a unique opportunity to move to a zero carbon economy. It is an opportunity for our state and country, generally, to take advantage of the great natural resources in this country to put us on a path of prosperity by enhancing our renewable energy industry, tourism and other areas to ensure we provide jobs and protections for the community. Sadly, I note that at the federal level there has been a void of leadership in this space. Although I note that the health response to COVID-19 has been adequate, the pathway out of the COVID crisis has not been adequate, given the hundreds of millions of taxpayers' dollars spent subsidising the oil and gas industry rather than on the community or on opportunities such as renewable energy.

That brings me to what the state is doing. Given what is going on in the federal space, we would think that the state government was looking to pick up some of that slack. However, unfortunately, climate change is not a government priority. The Treasurer made no mention of the climate crisis in his budget speech and next to no mention of the steps the government will take to mitigate and adapt to the greatest existential threat to our communities. In fact, the only time action was mentioned was in a small line stating that a climate policy will be finally released this year. I note that that is after three and a half years of the Greens asking when the actual policy will be tabled.

With regard to other priorities we have looked at in this term of government, I note that between this and the previous budget, the Premier came out in full support of the oil and gas industry instead of the wonderful initiatives that the government could put forward to address the climate crisis. I note that there were no long-term or interim emissions reduction targets and no renewable energy targets, and there was no real vision for large-scale efficient retrofit programs to decarbonise commercial and residential builds so we can take advantage of that. That would have also provided jobs for many people in the community. I note that the government highlighted opportunities in the renewable hydrogen space, and I think it is important that if we go down that path, we ensure that we do not utilise gas to produce that hydrogen.

There is a disappointing investment in large-scale renewable energy, particularly wind energy. Without wind-generated energy or large-scale storage to balance the gaps left by solar, we will be left relying on gas, which is unfortunate. I note that concerns were outlined around the announcement of the power station that is being proposed in the south west. That power station near Esperance has been put on the table. It will reduce emissions—from what I understand, it has a life span of 20 or so years—but a large part of its generation will still come from fossil fuel and gas. That is not where we need to be. We cannot commit to long-term, 20-year projects that commit our state to emissions when we have alternatives that we can put on the table.

I turn to Bush Forever sites. I note that the \$60 million earmarked for conservation activities is not enough to prevent the erosion and support the rehabilitation of Bush Forever sites. We know that tree canopies and green spaces are critical to reducing the heat island effect on our urban areas, and with Perth's temperature set to rise by 2.7 degrees by 2030, it is critical that we invest in the rehabilitation and protection of these sites. I take my hat off to the Urban Bushland Council WA, from which I have received a lot of correspondence. It is beside itself with disappointment. There was a lot of hope going into the 2017 election that these urban Bush Forever sites would be protected and enhanced for our community and future generations, but, unfortunately, they have been allowed to run down and have not been protected. In the long term, it will cost our community dearly if we do not protect these spaces. I give a shout-out to the Urban Bushland Council and the people who dedicate much of their time to pulling together the information we need to inform us so that we can put forward the policies necessary to protect these spaces. That is why I think it is important that the government listens to the Urban Bushland Council and many other groups like it. At the end of the day, these are community spaces and resources and they must be protected.

I move on and look north to Chevron. In the budget, I have concerns that WA taxpayers are still subsidising Chevron's failed carbon capture and storage at its Gorgon facility. I note that the federal Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction, Angus Taylor, cited the success of Chevron's carbon capture and storage as a reason we should be using taxpayer dollars to subsidise carbon capture and storage technologies at a federal level. I think that if the federal

minister actually picked up a report or got on the phone to anyone in this state, he would know that people would be quick to highlight the fact that Chevron has failed absolutely miserably in its attempt to sequester any carbon on that project. As I said before, the government has committed at least half a million dollars to subsidising the Chevron carbon capture and storage project. For more than three years, this facility has failed to comply with its environmental conditions. It has failed to adhere to the conditions of its operation by not sequestering emissions, as it was first intended to do. As a result of this, more than eight million tonnes of emissions have been vented into the atmosphere, contributing to the climate crisis, risking the health of the WA community and compounding the fact that we are not going to meet the conditions of the Paris Agreement as long as companies such as Chevron continue to fail in their commitments. In the future, when Chevron is long gone out of this state, the community will have to carry the negative impacts of that project.

Companies are not being held accountable for their actions. Not only was this project initially approved on top of an A-class nature reserve, which is absolutely galling, but also the company is working in a space in which it can do whatever it wants. Last year, when the Environmental Protection Authority made its recommendations, Chevron was the first company to get on the phone to the government to say, “These conditions are unjust. It is going to cost us thousands of jobs.” Then, months later, we found out that Chevron has, in fact, failed to meet its obligations. I would have hoped to see a more forthright approach from the government condemning Chevron and its partners and ensuring that they are held accountable going forward. It is important that we do these things; otherwise, the impact of Chevron’s emissions is going to compound another bushfire season such as that we had last year.

This budget spends \$40 million on propping up Synergy’s ageing coal and gas infrastructure, with a further \$72 million being spent over the forward estimates. As I said before, \$15.4 million will be spent on the new gas-fired plant in Esperance, as well as \$642 000 on the Australia–China natural gas technology partnership fund. There is another \$21.5 million for the Dampier to Bunbury natural gas pipeline, and another \$7.6 million over the forward estimates for Pilbara port charges concessions for LNG. There is further funding for the LNG jobs task force, despite the fact that LNG companies in WA have laid off hundreds of staff during this pandemic, and another \$4.7 million over the forward estimates for the Future Energy Exports Cooperative Research Centre to support further LNG research. If we look across the world, we see that Japan recently announced that it has legislated a net zero emissions target by 2050. From what I understand, 51 per cent of our gas is exported to Japan. I note that the Burrup project was projected to go to 2070. I am wondering where we are going to sell that gas if not to one of our major trading partners. I fail to see any sort of transition plan, and that is really concerning to me and many people here in WA.

I turn to the impacts of climate change. Since May 2019, more than \$3.3 million has been spent on carting emergency water to 12 areas in the great southern that have been declared water deficient. Another \$10 million has been allocated to finalise the expansion of the groundwater replenishment scheme to provide greater certainty for the Perth water supply as it continues to be impacted by the effects of climate change. This project has an estimated total value of \$305 million. Another \$18.6 million will be spent connecting Denmark to Albany’s lower great southern towns water supply scheme via a 42-kilometre connecting pipeline to provide security of supply in the changing climate, and this project has an estimated total value of \$25 million. The Department of Fire and Emergency Services spent \$22.6 million more than in the 2019–20 budget to deliver frontline services due to the impacts of climate change. As I mentioned before, Chevron is failing to sequester carbon, which is the exact thing that is creating this crisis that we are pouring in taxpayer dollars to mitigate. There is a bit of cognitive dissonance going on here. We cannot keep dumping money into supporting failing carbon capture and storage projects and not hold to account the company that is actually responsible for the drying out of the precious lands that we have in the great southern. It is shocking to think that water is being carted into Denmark, with the associated costs to the taxpayer. If there is no comprehensive plan to deal with that, it shows where the government’s mind is at in dealing with the climate crisis.

I turn to housing and energy costs. The \$600 credit is welcome. When, at the beginning of this term of government, the Treasurer; Minister for Energy outlined a plan to push to full cost-reflective electricity prices, I said that it would be great to scrap the tariff equalisation contribution. I was advocating that the government support low-income earners so that the full cost-reflective prices would not impact them and vulnerable communities. If that had been more targeted, it would have been really effective, but it was not. It was just a blanket approach. Obviously, it impacted everyone, but it disproportionately impacted low-income earners, especially after household electricity supply charges rose by almost 20 per cent in the first two years of this term of government. It is galling to think that in the first year of its term, the government promised a lot of energy reform, but we did not see it until the COVID-related electricity reforms came through earlier this year. We supported the reforms because there was work to support decentralised energy systems, battery storage and so forth, but it is frustrating that communities are still being impacted by full cost-reflective prices. The impacts of those prices were felt for two or three years before the credit was announced just weeks ago.

I cast my mind to housing in the state budget. There is serious frustration about there being no further investment in social housing or affordable rentals. None were announced in this budget. Since coming to power, the WA Labor government has decreased public housing stock by more than 1 100 dwellings. This has exacerbated the affordable

housing crisis in WA, bringing the shortfall to almost 60 000 homes. Without a concerted effort to provide more housing, the projected deficit will rise to around 118 000 homes by the year 2036. More than 23 000 people are on the social housing waiting list. That is shocking. Many people who have been impacted by domestic violence and a range of other things in this COVID pandemic—the list goes on—have dropped into the office. Without a roof over people's heads, it is very hard for them to get ahead. The fact that things are getting worse, not better, says that the priorities are just not there, which is very sad for so many people sleeping rough or couch surfing every night. People do not expect it, but sometimes life is out of their control and they find themselves in those situations. Some of my friends lost their jobs in the first global financial crisis and they found themselves close to homelessness. The boom–bust cycle of the WA economy is brutally harsh on so many people in this state, especially those who are forced to sleep rough, because it is definitely harder to get back from homelessness when people do not have any safe accommodation to set up a base from.

We also need affordable social housing that is efficient and comfortable to live in. It is disappointing that 80 per cent of state housing stock fails to meet the national energy efficiency standard. I note there is some investment in retrofitting existing stock, but considering that 60 per cent of low to moderate-income families frequently or occasionally cut their heating and cooling to save money, I would argue that it is nowhere near enough. I have spoken to pensioners who do not turn the heating on in winter and do not turn the air-conditioning on in summer because they cannot afford to pay energy prices. They cannot afford to do those things because that extra bit of money is spent due to the shortfalls in efficiencies in our builds. That hits people in the hip pocket and it is terrible.

Transport is another key area in which the budget has missed opportunities. Transport emissions contribute to 17 per cent of Western Australia's total greenhouse gas emissions. Despite \$6 billion being spent on road infrastructure, we need to ensure that we move our ageing bus fleets towards electric vehicles. We need to decarbonise our transport system to save costs for not only people accessing these services, but also the taxpayer. It is where a lot of jurisdictions are moving to, and it is where we should be moving. Instead of revamping our bus fleet with diesel vehicles, we need to look at electric vehicles. We also need to invest in cycling infrastructure. We need to ensure that public transport is accessible to all, because at the end of the day if people such as students and pensioners cannot afford to get on public transport, they will not use it. Yes, a big feature of this government has been trying to get the Metronet infrastructure moving, but without it being connected it is very difficult for people to move around the city. A city that is connected so that people can get to work in a reasonable time without waiting hours for buses or spending too much on transport is a city that is prosperous, because people are willing to move. They are willing to go to places on the weekend where they can spend money. They are willing to travel the extra mile to get to work if they can be plugged into these spaces.

In the week leading up to my budget contribution, which I will summarise, a lot of announcements were made. Earlier, I noted that a lot of countries are moving towards net zero emissions targets. Deloitte Access Economics released a report earlier this week. One of the articles mentioning the report had the heading "Australia risks \$3.7 trillion in lost GDP by 2070 unless it acts on climate change: Deloitte". I quote —

Not only would the cost of inaction devastate Australia's bottom line, but a new report has estimated nearly 900,000 jobs will be shed from at-risk industries within 50 years under a business-as-usual approach.

Deloitte Access Economics' report, called *A new choice: Australia's climate for growth*, found Australia is primed for an economic contraction of 6 per cent and \$3.4 trillion in lost GDP by 2070 if the worsening effects of climate change remain unchecked.

Given that we acted so quickly on the COVID crisis and listened to health experts, it is really important that we bridge the political divide. In fact, a member of the Liberal New South Wales government really tried to bridge the political divide in the climate space. They said that regardless of what side of politics someone is on, acting on climate change is not only good for prosperity and makes sense to many people, but also shifts the economy towards jobs in new technologies, making businesses more efficient, saving costs for business owners, making sense for the economy and making our exporters more competitive through reducing energy costs. These are the things that people would like to see in the budget. A few weeks ago I asked a question about whether the government would table its climate policy this year and the answer was yes. I hope there is a substantive road map towards some of these things and that the government looks at some of the reports that outline massive job losses and negative impacts to our state's economy, in not only the metropolitan area, but also regional areas across the whole state. There will be negative impacts, but if we take advantage of the direction that has been outlined to us by experts, we will be put on the road to prosperity. It is important that the government comes up with a substantial plan, puts money forward and puts in place the structures needed to ensure that not only the community is protected, but also the economy is safeguarded.

HON TJORN SIBMA (North Metropolitan) [2.40 pm]: I rise to make my modest contribution to the assessment of the recent state budget. Life comes at you fast! These are exceptionally dynamic times. They are dynamic to the degree that some of the fundamental assumptions that underpinned the construction of this budget in response to the

COVID-19 pandemic have altered. One of those assumptions, which is implicit in the budget but never explicitly mentioned, was the status of the Western Australian border and whether that border would remain in its hard-set position. That, at least, is how it is referred to, despite the fact that there have been some 70 000 movements across the border in the time since the policy was brought into effect until what I must say was the weekend's welcome announcement of the transition from a hard border to a controlled or more managed border—a so-called smarter border.

It would be remiss of me not to make mention that it would appear that the fundamental health advice provided by the Chief Health Officer to the government of Western Australia has, for at least the last month or so, remained unchanged and has focused on the capacity to enter into a set of border arrangements that the Premier has now decided to, effectively, undertake. I find that odd because not more than two weekends ago, on the front page of *The West Australian*, the Premier shared his personal anxiety that any relaxation or modification of the border policy that he had determined for his government could well result in mass deaths. I think the phrase “mass deaths” was used by the Premier himself in what was, essentially, a confessional style of exchange.

The cynic in me grows with each passing day and does not diminish. In time, I think it will corrode the very essence of my soul, but that is the burden that I bear. I mention this cynicism not so much because of the content of the Premier's then disclosure, but its timing, because it came after there was a chink in the armour—a little ray of light—and a gap between the advice that had been provided by the Chief Health Officer at a meeting of a committee managed by the other place and the Premier's view and his government's policy position. Three weeks ago or so, it was clear that the Chief Health Officer was of the firm view that a managed border arrangement was absolutely compatible with the maintenance of public health and that it could be done—not at zero risk, but certainly at a manageable risk. At the time, there was some embarrassment and contorting. There was the strange incident of revised advice being provided by the Chief Health Officer. It was for an unknown reason that that advice was proffered. One might speculate as to why that clarification was needed. I thought the Chief Health Officer's testimony to that committee was probably very clear in itself. It was with a measure of cynicism that the Premier came over the top of that official health advice. He had maintained for the entirety of the pandemic that the health advice was the sole fact upon which he was devising his entire strategy; it was purely based on health advice. When the health advice was demonstrated to be inconsistent with the political determination, there was a measure of embarrassment.

If we fast forward to this point, we have some measure of relaxation and a measure of certainty so long as we manage these new arrangements professionally and in a clinically adequate sense. There is now a measure of optimism among families in Western Australia and their loved ones who have been isolated from them in other Australian jurisdictions that they might soon be reconciled. That is all to the good.

However, coming to my central point, this most recent budget, which was provided in the first week of October, has a fundamental assumption that has shifted. It shifted in less than a calendar month. That demonstrates my central thesis that life is very variable at the moment and we need to be nimble in our response. We have to be nimble as well in understanding the prevailing economic circumstances. I will reflect on some recent news. The Reserve Bank of Australia has dropped the official cash rate to 0.1 per cent, which is the absolute lowest on record. It behoves members in this place and people who wish to talk about this budget, which is a budget for the trade-exposed state of Western Australia, to reflect on what movements made by central banks in their response to global uncertainty and to the recession-like effect of COVID-19 on the broader Australian macro economy will really mean for us. Are we focused on ensuring that, to the best of our ability, the Western Australian state government is preparing the community and the economy that underpins it with every chance of success in getting through these uncertain periods?

I was expecting the recent state budget to be an extraordinary budget for an extraordinary time. I must say that it left me feeling somewhat flat. In the context of all that has gone before us, I thought there was the opportunity for the government to demonstrate some resolve, to show some ambition and, basically, to lift. That was not there. This budget was a rather lacklustre and exceedingly disappointing contribution this time around. It was a budget that neglected entire sectors and entire groups of people. I find it very strange. There was not much in this budget for seniors, for example, or people who have been battling with year-on-year increases in the cost of living. I will get to the \$600 electricity credit soon. There was not much in this budget for the agricultural sector. This budget was disappointing for mental health issues and did nothing to outline a jobs plan.

Hon Darren West interjected.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: I am glad Hon Darren West is here. What a joy it is that we have returned to our conventional seating arrangements! I have missed these useful intellectual interjections! I hope there are more to come. While the member is here, I will give him some advice. Madam President, I will take this interjection.

The PRESIDENT: Actually, you should not. You know that interjections are unruly and that that would be inappropriate. Perhaps you should focus your attention on me rather than others in the chamber. I know you are adjusting to returning to normal arrangements.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: I will dutifully do so, but I might make a temporary diversion by reflecting on the contributions of unnamed members in this chamber over the past four years. Some members have distinguished themselves with

a certain level of contribution that might best be described as mediocre or imbecilic; one or two members seem to meet that all the time. But I will come back to the central thesis.

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Member, you might actually want to turn and face me rather than facing the back of the chamber, and perhaps you might think about the relevance of those comments to the matter before you.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: Sure, Madam President; thank you very much.

Hon Simon O'Brien: I wouldn't have called the honourable member mediocre.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: I am a charitable person!

A central claim in this budget that is worthy of some analytical examination is that this is a very big infrastructure spending budget. I must say that in comparison with most budgets it is, but it comes off year upon year of underinvestment in infrastructure. When we compare this budget with budgets over the past four years, there is certainly a large spend, but it is not as large in real dollar terms as the Barnett government's infrastructure response to the global financial crisis. I would argue that the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, as we have experienced at the local, state, national and international levels, have demanded a focus on and investment in infrastructure that I think this budget sadly lacks; in fact, there is not much in the way of new spending in this budget. I was expecting some big bangs in a budget that is leading into an election. I do not know whether surprises are still being withheld for the campaign or whether the Premier and the government feel so comfortable that they just thought they would take this budget process for granted, as they seem to be taking the next election for granted. I think that that is a dangerous place to be, if I might provide some gratuitous advice.

I mentioned earlier that there was an opportunity in this budget to do something that would drive economic reform at least from the perspective of government regulation in this state. I have made the assessment previously that "reform" is probably the most used and abused word in the entire political lexicon. Indeed, it is, but reforms that commenced with a measure of gusto in portfolio areas for which I have responsibility seem to have dissipated over time. To give the Minister for Environment some credit, he commenced this term with great enthusiasm. He had an agenda, but it seems as though that agenda has petered out over the course of subsequent budgets. This budget is an indication of that, and if I have time, I will dive into that matter in more detail later.

I will talk about planning issues first. There has been no sustained commitment to planning reform to speak of over the last three years except for the kick that the COVID-19 pandemic gave particular agencies and particular ministers. I will speak about that shortly, as I will speak about issues in the veterans issues portfolio—a portfolio that is not spoken about very frequently in this house—and reflect on the way in which government has been run in terms of its openness, transparency and accountability, because there is a long way to go.

I was encouraged to not proceed with an earlier exchange, but a very good question was asked. It was: are we reading the same budget? One might ask: are we reading the same budget and how can one can form this very negative assessment? It is not only my assessment; a number of credible organisations have identified deficiencies in this budget. Honourable members might not agree with the positions that those organisations put or with my assertion that they are credible, but I will quote what the Australian Medical Association of WA said. I hear no-one saying that it is not a credible source, so I will quote it. The title of its statement in response to the budget is "WA State Budget a slap in the face for healthworkers". It starts with a question —

"Where are the extra doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers we need right away?"

WA Health's lack of a workforce plan and miserly 4 per cent share of the record \$27.1 billion investment in infrastructure over the next four years outlined in today's WA State Budget is a lost opportunity ...

It goes on. I could be more withering, but I do not have the time to go through it.

The Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia is perhaps not the ideological fellow traveller of some on the opposite side of the chamber, nevertheless it is a credible interlocutor in this space. The title of its statement about the budget is "Business overlooked for central role in economic recovery". That is a fundamentally accurate assessment. It is not as though this document is not an even-handed assessment, because it is actually quite complimentary in some respects, but the central thesis of this document is, and I quote —

The Budget however misses the opportunity to incentivise the business community to power up the economy.

This is in clear contrast with the approach of the Federal Government, which delivered a strong prescription of measures to support business investment and job creation efforts.

Given the State Government forecasts unemployment of 8 per cent this financial year, there is a missed opportunity to enact measures that would ensure the entire WA business community plays a central role, alongside the government, in fighting the economic challenges.

The Government should begin dismantling the monopoly in retail electricity, by letting small energy customers above 20 megawatt hours per annum choose their own retailer.

That is a really good suggestion. It continues —

That competition would encourage private investment in new generation assets and technology and would see electricity prices fall in much the same way they have in the gas market.

I might quote the assessment of this budget by WAFarmers. I do not know how members feel about WAFarmers, but its opinion piece on the budget is asking a central question that is unanswered in the budget, and that is —

How is it that there is enough money to run a \$1.2 billion dollar surplus, give every household a \$600 credit on their power bills, employ 800 —

This is WAFarmers' language —

more cops ... increase state debt by another \$4 billion to a record \$40 billion and roll out a \$27 billion dollar infrastructure program and yet allocate almost nothing towards major new projects to support either what's left of the old Ag Department, or the key infrastructure that supports farmers.

WAFarmers is an industry stakeholder.

Hon Darren West interjected.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: I put it to members that not everybody shares Hon Darren West's sunny upside assessment of the qualities of this budget.

Hon Darren West interjected.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: I am just reflecting on the responses of different industry stakeholders to this budget two weeks ago. I am sorry that I am interrupting government members from the pats on the back!

Several members interjected.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order! I will give Hon Darren West the call immediately when the current member sits down and then he can tell us all about it, but for now Hon Tjorn Sibma has the call.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy President.

One might not necessarily subscribe to every written or spoken word of these stakeholder views, but they are out there. What cannot be said with any credibility is that this budget has been met with wide acclaim, is an unalloyed success and everybody is happy, because that is patently not the case.

No budget will ever satisfy every single constituent or every single group. However, it underscores the main point of my thesis, which is that this is a lacklustre budget. Much could have been accomplished in this budget, but it was not. I do not know why that is the case; all I can do is assume that the government is now taking so much for granted that it has lost all care.

I foreshadowed earlier that in the time available, I want to address some issues in the portfolios for which I have responsibility. I will commence with planning. I said recently that in the last three and a half years of this government, it has made no sustained commitment to economic reform in the planning portfolio. When I say "sustained", I mean sustained. Planning is one portfolio area that should always be under some measure of continuous improvement. Although a lot of spinning of the wheels has taken place behind the scenes, not much of it has percolated through or had any results. The only exception was a recent bill that essentially comprised omnibus amendments to the Planning and Development Act. That bill was nothing but a collection of apparently easy wins that could have been made in a far more orderly process at any stage during the three years leading up to that bill. That bill also contained COVID-19 emergency response measures to create a new approvals pathway for significant developments. The bill was reasonably controversial. It sought to override other lawful planning instruments and expedite planning approvals for a subclass of built-form construction.

My point is that the former government—of which I was a staff member for a short time—was central in driving the establishment of development assessment panels. Although those panels were controversial, it has been proved that they have largely achieved the purpose for which they were established. There will always be a need to improve the transparency and governance of those panels. The planning legislation that was introduced recently to implement the new approvals pathway is in no way superior to the development assessment panel process. One of the benefits of the development assessment panel process is that the decision-makers were obligated to make their decisions within statutory time frames and according to certain thresholds. During the debate on the planning bill, some modifications were made to the thresholds under which the new planning process would take place. The advantage for significant developments is that professionals, such as architects and people who are experienced in the building trades, must look at projects analytically and make their assessment within a prescribed period. The system that has been provided by the government is unusual. If the government deems a project significant, it can put it through a process that is effectively

a law unto itself. However, that does not obligate the decision-maker to make a decision within a certain time frame. As I expressed at the time, that is a fundamental deficiency in the process. There are serious governance concerns about the way in which the Minister for Planning or the Premier might shepherd or encourage the assessment of a planning proposal through this specialised mechanism. We were successful in gaining the support of the chamber for amendments that will ensure that any advocacy and decision-making on the part of the minister and the Premier must be disclosed. We were also successful in being able to circumscribe to some degree the legacy impact of providing that a developer will be given up to four years, or 48 months, within which to undertake significant commencement of construction. That term was not defined in the bill either. We were successful in modifying some of the rough edges of that legislation.

I am not sure whether one single determination has been made under that new planning process. I think one proposal may have been determined in this way; however, we have no insight into what that is. The reason I talk about statutory time line obligations is that there is emerging concern that in the key performance indicators in the budget papers, the threshold for the accomplishment of decision-making is set too low. The problem is that not only has the bar been set too low, but on certain occasions the government is failing to meet the bar. That indicates an obvious impediment to decision-making and to ensuring that Western Australia remains a place in which people have confidence and want to do business in building and construction and the like.

The government now has a unique opportunity. It can lift its aspirations. It can put greater store on accomplishing and enforcing mandated time lines. It can also improve one of the greatest impediments in the planning system, which is the process of interagency referral. A person who wants to do business in Western Australia has to navigate their way through many acts, regulations and regulatory instruments, and any number of government agencies. A number of agencies are mentioned in dispatches as being very difficult to deal with, both in the way they interpret their own guiding legislation or regulations, and in the character and culture of the organisation. During the earlier debate, I mentioned Main Roads Western Australia as being a particularly problematic partner on occasion in navigating a way through planning approvals. The government has conceded this; it recognises this. I refer to a brochure that was provided to the opposition to assist us to understand the planning reform bill. It has seven parts. Part 4 is about cutting red tape in the planning system. It states that one of the desired outcomes of planning reform is —

Establishing a new system to resolve conflicts with Main Roads Western Australia following development approval. The current system is lengthy, and often ends at the State Administrative Tribunal, without formal and final resolution.

That is quite damning. That is effectively saying that Main Roads WA is dogmatic and is preventing proponents from getting on with their project even after a development has been approved. If members opposite do not consider that to be problematic, I am sorry; I think we are singing from a different song sheet. That is diabolically problematic. By happy coincidence, the Minister for Planning and Minister for Transport reside in the same person. The same person is the minister responsible for both those portfolios. If ever there was an opportunity in the approvals process to resolve around 20 per cent of planning disputes—I am anecdotally advised that is the right number—and for one minister to cut through this red knot, it would be Hon Rita Saffioti. I asked a question in this place that drew attention to the very passage that I have just quoted and said, “What has happened?” The answer to that question was effectively that the relevant officials have spoken at length to discuss the issues. No. I am sorry. If we are serious about economic reform, we have to come to grips with some of these concrete issues and impediments. Three years ago, the government had an opportunity to do something about this problem. The government does not need me to highlight the issue. That is a challenge.

There is a real opportunity for the state government to reform its land use planning processes in a way that actually encourages economic growth. There is another point, too: in the development approvals pathway, we often focus on built-form construction as the only thing that requires approval. There are long lead times for land use planning, land use certification, regulations, rezoning and the like, and they need to happen before the point at which a proposal is put in to build any particular construction. I am disappointed that there has been no focus on improving land use planning and on solving this interagency referral puzzle, particularly as it relates to structure planning and scheme amendments. There is an opportunity for gain here. Processes that should take around 15 to 18 months to complete can take anything up to three and a half years, and potentially land in the same place. I do not think that is particularly good for government. It is not good for local government, it is not good for the community, and it is certainly not good for the developers involved.

I have mentioned previously that there appears to be something of a cultural problem within the overall planning portfolio. I am not referring specifically to the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage, the Western Australian Planning Commission or the development assessment panels, but to the entire framework, which is considered by some in our community to be very, very unhelpful, unfriendly, difficult to navigate and opaque, and people’s experiences with the system are often bruising. That is not to say that the government does not understand that there is an obvious and unmet need to improve the quality and consistency of public consultation on planning issues. Again, that was identified in the planning document that I referred to earlier.

Indeed, there was a time when these issues were addressed by way of a second tranche of planning and development amendment bill reform. That was initially due to come to this chamber by the end of this year, but we have now missed that opportunity. When I refer to the department's website, it appears that that bill will not be prepared until sometime in 2022, and I think that is another missed opportunity. As much as we want to encourage economic growth and facilitation through planning, we actually need to build and bring with us community consensus, and that opportunity has been missed.

I will speak very briefly about an area that has been mentioned in passing. It relates somewhat, but not exclusively, to planning. I refer to the central business district of the City of Perth. There is not much in this budget that speaks to anyone's ambition for Perth to fulfil all its potential; it is not there. There are passing mentions made of the Perth city plan, which is effectively 50 per cent funded by the commonwealth government, and the welcome proposal for an inner-city university campus. These are good things, but although they are important to a city, they do not a city make. Anyone who has spent time in the City of Perth over the last two or three years will have appreciated very quickly that it is a shadow of its former self. We have had debates in this chamber on homelessness, the absence of community safety and a complete drop-off of business and retail life in the CBD; we were talking about these issues prior to COVID-19. Some areas of Perth now look like a ghost town, and we see social dysfunction writ large, but it need not be this way. I anticipated a far more ambitious plan for the greater CBD of the City of Perth than has been presented in this budget. Again, that is a missed opportunity.

I will reflect on one thing in passing: I anticipate the official opening of the WA Museum Boola Bardip in the Perth Cultural Centre Precinct, and I make the obvious observation that that project was driven largely by Hon John Day, when he was Minister for Culture and the Arts. He understood, as indeed previous Liberal governments understood, that we need to invest in cultural institutions and infrastructure in our community, particularly in the City of Perth.

I reflect also on probably the last cultural set piece that was delivered in the CBD, the State Theatre Centre. That was absolutely an initiative of the Carpenter Labor government, and it is to be applauded for that. However, I recall the approach the previous Liberal government took to celebrating the opening and commissioning of that theatre centre: it was a state occasion, and it was not dressed up as a Liberal project, because it was not; it was, quite rightly, an initiative of the previous Labor government. It has become a legacy item that we all benefit from and can all rejoice in. That is probably a longwinded way of saying that I am still waiting for my invitation to attend the opening of the new Museum, which is due to open at the end of this month. I also hope against hope that the Minister for Culture and the Arts, Hon David Templeman, the Premier and everyone else in government who is very excited about its opening, do not do the crass thing and dress it up as their own achievement. I suspect that the government will do that, because it has unfortunately proven itself to be that kind of outfit. It is with some reluctance that I make that observation, but I hold it absolutely to be true.

The Minister for Environment is now in the chamber; I do not intend to be unduly critical, but I do wish to reflect a little on the environment. The intended order of proceedings today has probably undercut the need for me to put out an encouraging media statement to say that it would probably be a good idea to get on with the environmental protection amendment bills, because we support them and they are largely economically sensible. However, they have been marooned on the *Daily Notice Paper* for months and months. It is true. I think the last time we spoke about those bills was in August.

Hon Sue Ellery: What have we done in between?

Hon TJORN SIBMA: Indeed; that is a good question: what have we done in between? There has been a lot of re-prioritisation of business the priority of which is debatable. That might include the retrospective omnibus bill that legitimised administrative decisions taken by a range of agencies. It also included a cheeky attempt by the Premier—at least, initially—to rule by decree. Let us not forget that. I think that was the bill that got in the way of us reflecting upon the environmental protection amendment bills—bills in which there are amendments that need to be considered, debated and thought through in committee. We could do that in a matter of days, but those opportunities have presented themselves and the government has not taken them. I am, however, encouraged by the fact that they now seem to be floating to the top of the list. I mean that genuinely, because there is absolutely an opportunity to expedite decision-making in this state in a way that will preserve ecological value while making Western Australia the destination for business, construction and development. However, a lot of this is predicated on the expertise, hard work, knowledge and resourcing of staff in the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation.

I say that with the caveat that I understand that a lot of these larger projects, particularly those relating to one-touch approvals and referrals and the like, involve a measure of commonwealth government commitment. Keeping that caveat in mind, I was encouraged to see some funding for the environmental online portal, because this is the third budget in which it has been mentioned. If no funding was attached this time, I was of the disposition not to believe that it would ever come, so I am happy that the funding is there. I am sure it will still take time to operationalise and I am still concerned that the minister does not have enough staff in his department to make good the kinds of

obligations, commitments and aspirations that industry has in Western Australia. I will cite an example. In the budget papers, there is a recorded boost in full-time employees. My areas of concern are the functions in environmental regulation and the environmental impact assessment service lines. Those are the two specific service lines that I am talking about now. I am pleased to see, at least on paper, a boost in employees undertaking those environmental impact assessments, but I note that that recorded increase itself has a caveat. There is a note below that says it is due to a change in allocation methodology, which always worries me. It is also true that that figure comprises a range of fixed-term contractors who are engaged only until 31 December this year, so I am worried about what will happen on 1 January because it is unlikely that we are going to have any bilateral arrangement with the commonwealth before then. I hope we will have an arrangement, but is unlikely. There is an absolute necessity to stop the defunding in the service lines, which have been defunded, consecutively, across budgets. We have an obligation here—whether members are of the Green bench or the Liberal bench—to ensure that the department has adequately trained and equipped staff to deal with it. At the moment, I am not encouraged that that is the case.

I also want to talk about another signal issue in the environment portfolio. It is not particularly pleasant, but it is important. It is about waste and waste management. It is critical. I have brought with me an article that appeared in *The West Australian* of Saturday, 3 October. It is by Ben Harvey and is called “Rubbish rules may be a total waste” and the subtitle is “Container-deposit confusion masks how our landfill program is the area that needs more rigour”. I would commend that article to anybody who is interested in these kinds of issues because it is not necessarily a critique of the minister nor this government’s administration, but an exposé of the quality of data that is captured by agencies. It gets to their grip of the fundamental issues, it gets to their market awareness and it gets to the integrity of public policy, because, effectively, people are avoiding the levy through some dishonest means. After reading this article, talking to people who are knowledgeable in the field and waiting for some time, I put a question to the minister on 21 October. I referred to this article and I raised a series of questions. They state —

- (1) In reporting by category of waste, please advise on a yearly and cumulative basis from 2016–17 to 2019–20 what volume of waste has been diverted from landfill in Western Australia.
- (2) Please advise the levies collected for the above years.

I noted this particular article and asked —

- (3) ... how does DWER account for the reported discrepancy between claims of landfill volume diverted and levies collected?

That is an essential question because millions of dollars are missing. The fourth and final question states —

- (4) Has the minister directed an evaluation of those discrepancies and, furthermore, has he sought a review of DWER’s compliance and reporting protocol; and, if not, why not?

Those final words are the standard end point for most of my questions.

The response from the minister was that I was seeking too much information and I should put it on notice. I chose not to put it on notice, not to be impolite or churlish, but in sheer recognition of the fact that when I put questions on notice, through the regular system, I do not get answers. I am not speaking of the Minister for Environment specifically; I am speaking of the larger “Borg”. As we head into an election, I am unlikely to get that kind of information before Parliament rises.

The question that I did put—I do not ask it of the minister now; I think he will be in a position to respond to it sometime, perhaps during estimates when we have the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation in—was whether, not necessarily as a consequence of this article, but certainly after reflecting the kinds of issues that are raised in this article, the minister has directed an evaluation of the claims made around landfill volumes diverted and levies collected and whether he has sought a review. I think that demands a fair degree of attention, if I might put it that way.

There is more that I wish to say on the environment that will hold over for another moment. That might please some—not the minister—but the 15 minutes will be over soon, Hon Darren West.

I want to reflect very briefly on a portfolio issue that is unlikely to ever get much attention and it is largely because of the differences in responsibility between the commonwealth and state under a federated system, and that is the veterans issues portfolio. I will open by saying that I think the Minister for Veterans Issues is an exemplary fellow. His history of service is absolutely unquestionable. His commitment to his duties, whatever they might be, is certainly not in prospect. In fact, when he released a document titled “Veterans and Families Strategy” in September last year, I thought it was a very good start to try to comprehend what it is that a state government might usefully do in the veterans space, how support to veterans might be provided and how support to those support networks might be provided.

I am minded to do this for two reasons. First, I noticed in the budget that responsibility for the portfolio had transitioned from the Department of Communities, which I think is to the benefit of veterans, frankly—for any subpart of Communities to escape Communities, I think, would be a blessing. Nevertheless, there was a transition in the service line from the Department of Communities to the Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innovation.

I noticed this in the budget and, effectively, it had received one line of funding around a quantum of \$130 000 a year. To me that looks suspiciously like a full-time equivalent salary. The service has been transited to a new department, which is fine, but my question is: is there only one person? This is a portfolio of the state. A minister of the Crown is responsible for the administration of that portfolio in that jurisdiction and my assumption is that of the more than 100 000 public servants, and growing, in this state, there is but one solitary FTE responsible for these issues, such as providing advice to the minister and the government. I put the question to the minister and was told that, yes, that is right; there is but one person. Anticipating that this would be the answer, I thought that that would be quite a burden for any individual to bear, so I asked the minister to provide me with information about what their job description form might be because that would give me an indication of how the government intends to discharge or fulfil its obligations.

I was advised that the job description form was currently being redrafted in anticipation of the position being advertised to be filled on a permanent basis. Therefore, I think that the veterans portfolio has been put into something of a deep freeze. Alarmed by this, I thought: how, then, is the government implementing the strategy? It is a good strategy. It is the kind of strategy that I would adopt—it is that good. There are five streams to this strategy and I asked the minister to advise in tabular form the progress that the state government has made in implementing those initiatives, and I outlined what they were. The answer I received was that the information was not possible in the time required and he asked me to place the question on notice, to which I reverted to my position as advised earlier: there is no point doing that because I will not get an answer back.

In the 11 minutes available to me, I want to touch very briefly on the issue of accountability. If, indeed, the government is successful in its aspiration to win a second term, I fear for the nature of governance and accountability because I think at that point, the government will be under no pretence of even attempting to demonstrate any commitment to accountability and transparency. I will note that with the sole exception—it is a good exception—of the Office of the Auditor General, which has had a supplementary increase to provide for a forensic audit function, which is to be applauded, integrity agencies and access agencies such as the Office of the Information Commissioner, have been largely forgotten.

Before I go on to the Information Commissioner, I might just reflect on the impediments placed on the Auditor General. The Auditor General has made clear in various reports and statements tabled in this Parliament that she and her officers are impeded by a lack of access to critical documents. That is not the experience of Auditors General in other Australian jurisdictions and it is certainly not the commonwealth experience. I have had some experience at the commonwealth level when auditors have surveyed cabinet documents. They do not take them away, but they at least understand the nature of decisions, the intent of the decisions and the supporting information that went into the decisions so they can arrive at fair, reasonable accounting and acquitting. That is not the case in Western Australia, and there is absolutely no reason for that not to be the case. However, at least the Auditor General now has a forensic audit function that I think will be to the benefit of all accountability agencies from this time onward.

As I said, the Office of the Information Commissioner has probably borne the brunt of workflow as a consequence of this government not providing information to this house. Without indulgence, I will reflect very briefly on the personal experience I have had in attempting to elicit from the Public Transport Authority two documents that I know the names, dates and purpose of, but that I cannot see, despite the fact that an external review has upheld my decision to access them. It is now six months after I was, effectively, provided approval to access the documents, but I still do not have them because of last-minute third party appeals and equivocation over interpretation of certain exclusion clauses and the like. The two documents are the planning tender evaluation report and the actual contract between the PTA and the consortia Huawei Australia and UGL for the PTA's radio systems replacement contract. We have spoken in this place on a number of occasions about the desirability and the like of the Huawei contract. It has now completely fallen over as a consequence of Huawei's inability to fulfil certain undisclosed aspects of the contract because it is, effectively, a prescribed provider of infrastructure and services. It has cost the taxpayer nearly \$200 million, yet we are in no better position to understand, through access to critical documents, what went on and why than we were nearly two years ago when this story first emerged. In my dealings with the Information Commissioner to try to get this information out of the PTA I have been thwarted time and time and time and time again. It is completely and utterly unacceptable. It should not be tolerated. It is not out of any sense of personal indulgence or entitlement other than the fact that, as we all are, I am imbued with a duty to uphold and maintain the public interest and to interrogate these issues of public concern as we determine it fit to do so, which I have done, but I have absolutely no access to these documents and I am unlikely to get access any time in the future.

In the six minutes I have left, I will continue on the accountability theme. I was hesitant to do this, but I will do so now because I do not think I will get much of an opportunity, considering how enthusiastically government members have decided to take up consideration of committee reports on Wednesday afternoons. There has been a deafening silence for years and all of a sudden there has been an eruption of enthusiasm, but I do not know why. Again, the cynic in me that refuses to die and grows with each moving day causes me to reflect on the eighty-second report of the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations, "The Local Projects Local Jobs Program and

the Establishment of a Parliamentary Budget Office”. There is a budget connection that I am happy to deliver upon for all members. This report is worth reading for a number of reasons, but I want to take members through some of the findings. There are 32 findings and 23 recommendations, and they are worthy of members’ cogitation. I want to reflect on some of the key findings for the benefit of the house. Bear in mind that the Local Projects, Local Jobs program was referred to in this government’s first budget as a job-creation measure. How many jobs do we think it created?

Hon Peter Collier: Zero.

Hon TJORN SIBMA: Yes, it is a round number! How did the program get to be named this? Finding 20 states —

The jobs aspect of the Local Projects Local Jobs program title is attributed to a branding exercise.

There is a reference to page 40 of the report, so if I go to page 40, will it tell me anymore? The committee formed that view because the Leader of the House told us so. We asked whether it created any jobs and why it was called that. The Leader of the House answered —

So, I would say two things: one, this was a branding exercise.

It was a branding exercise; it was never a genuine commitment. Nearly \$40 million of taxpayers’ money was spent on a job-creation scheme that was never intended to create any jobs, but “Don’t worry; it was just a branding exercise.”

Finding 21 states —

The Committee did not receive evidence to demonstrate that any new jobs in the form of sustainable or on-going employment were created by the Local Projects Local Jobs program.

Finding 22 states —

The Local Projects Local Jobs program created an expectation that new, sustainable and on-going employment would be created as a result of the implementation of the program.

To me, the key finding of the whole job-creation dimension is finding 23, which states —

Job creation was not measured or tracked by the Government or the administering departments throughout the implementation of the Local Projects Local Jobs program.

There was not even the effort made; we know that is not what the program was about, do we not? I found that quite bracing. If my memory serves me correctly, that advice was provided by way of the government submission authored by the then director general of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Mr Darren Foster, who, for undisclosed reasons, has gone on to another pasture at, I think, the same rate of pay.

I will, hopefully, get an opportunity to speak to the content of that report because it canvasses some very important issues of governance. It also assesses the desirability of establishing a parliamentary budget office, which is a serious policy suggestion worthy of contemplation. I hope that this house gets the opportunity to speak to the report during consideration of committee reports, if at all this year, if not only for the government response that it elicited. One in government might consider certain committee interrogations to be problematic, unwelcome, unhelpful or not politically friendly perhaps, but that is just the price of being in government. It is a price worth paying because if governments do not pay it, there is absolutely no prospect of accountability or contestability. But this report, which took months of work and staff time, came in at over 170 pages and made over 30 findings and 20 recommendations, generated this response. It is double sided, because there is a paragraph and a signature block on the second page from the Premier of this state. It was juvenile in its tone. It absolutely debased the office of the Premier to provide such an adolescent note noting the committee’s work, cherry-picking and misinterpreting a finding about the professionalism of the administration of the program by agencies, and conflating that with a sense of self-congratulation and endorsement of the program. It is absolutely shameful. Stuff like this should never stand in this house or the other house.

Debate adjourned, on motion by **Hon Ken Baston**.