

**ENVIRONMENT AGENCIES — PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

*Statement*

**HON TJORN SIBMA (North Metropolitan)** [5.20 pm]: In light of the enthusiasm in the chamber for taking advantage of this portion of business, I will once again demonstrate my capacity for compassion and keep my contribution reasonably short. I want to preface my remarks, very explicitly, by saying that I am not making a political or partisan point here. I am drawing attention to issues that concern me about public administration within the two environment agencies—the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation and the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions.

As exemplified over the last two days, but particularly this afternoon in questions without notice, in terms of the answers I received, we often lament the kinds of answers that we get, but it is desirable sometimes to get useful information in return. The issues are thus. A qualified audit opinion was made by the assistant Auditor General about procurement controls within the agency we now know as the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions. The audit identified some problematic weaknesses in the way that procurements are authorised, and it noted that there were potential weaknesses in procurement control and the capacity for fraudulent or improper activity to take advantage of those design weaknesses. I asked some very basic questions about the length of time that those weaknesses had been in place. The answer was, in a way, evaded in a masterful way because it demonstrated that it was only when the recent audit took place that they were detected. However, this is a mega-agency that was established after the machinery-of-government changes in 2017. There were problems that the Auditor General had previously identified in the transition and amalgamation of those agencies, and I think what the assistant Auditor General has done is actually detect a systemic weakness that potentially was not discovered until now but has been in existence since 2017. If we have had five years of organisational systemic weaknesses, I am not necessarily satisfied that no improper fraudulent or otherwise unacceptable transactions have taken place. If I were to give some advice—it is not gratuitous advice—to the minister, it would be that even though the accountable authority in this circumstance is with the director general and the chief financial officer, it is he as the minister who bears ultimate responsibility under our Westminster system.

Another issue that I would like to take this opportunity to draw to the minister's attention is the cessation of charging fees to conduct part 4 environmental assessments, which was an outcome of the passage of reform to the Environmental Protection Act that we dealt with in this chamber some two years ago. The capacity to charge, through regulation, has been in place only since January, but it was discovered yesterday that no fees had been charged because of an overwhelming volume of work. I sought some departmental advice on the quantity and volume of the assessments in the system, how long they are taking to produce and how many staff are allocated to this purpose. I was advised today that the production of this information would divert staff resources from their usual work.

That could be a justifiable answer if there were absolutely no system in place to track this kind of information, but for at least the last two or three years, the government has been at pains to tell us how it is revolutionising and making more efficient the assessment process in the environmental portfolios. It has red tape reduction schemes and is introducing digital platforms such as Environment Online to deal with this kind of work. With these frameworks established, I find it absolutely improbable to the point of being almost insulting that there is no capacity to provide a simple answer to my question about the number of assessments currently underway, particularly given that the minister, in a previous answer, advised that the workload was unprecedented. That descriptor needs to be substantiated and quantified in some form.

I will end here. Through the minister I want to give advance warning to both departments—the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation and the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions—that next week I will be picking apart the little elements in the answers that they were unable to provide today and I will present them next week in a more digestible format in an attempt—hopefully not a vain attempt—to extract some measure of transparency and accountability from the government in a key portfolio area.