

Deputy Speaker; Mr Dan Barron-Sullivan; Mr Rob Johnson; Mr Tony Dean; Mr Jeremy Edwards; Mrs Michelle Roberts; Mr John Hyde; Acting Speaker; Mr Larry Graham; Ms Dianne Guise; Mr John D'Orazio; Mr Paul Omodei; The Acting Speaker (mr P.W. Andrews); Mr Phillip Pandal

FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEVY, CONDEMNATION OF GOVERNMENT

Matter of Public Interest

THE DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mrs D.J. Guise): Today I received a letter from the Deputy Leader of the Opposition seeking to debate as a matter of public interest the following motion -

That this House condemns the Gallop Labor Government for using its new fire and emergency services levy to reduce its own financial commitment to the provision of emergency services, resulting in significant cost increases for home owners and businesses throughout Western Australia.

This House calls on the Gallop Labor Government to cap the FESA levy so that those people who responsibly insured their homes and property do not pay one cent more under the new rates-based system than they would have paid previously.

If sufficient members agree to this motion, I will allow it.

[At least five members rose in their places.]

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The matter shall proceed on the usual basis.

MR D.F. BARRON-SULLIVAN (Mitchell - Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [3.45 pm]: I move the motion.

Something very interesting happened on 16 October 2001, during question time. In questioning the Premier on the premium property tax, on which the Labor Government had just caved in under pressure from the community and the Liberal Party, the Leader of the Opposition asked this very simple supplementary question -

Will the Premier rule out ever introducing a tax on the family home?

The Premier replied -

The premium property tax is dead.

Quite frankly, he did not answer the question, which is not unusual for the Premier. He is very adept at hiding, ducking and weaving from questions during question time. The reality is that he used those weasel words to avoid ruling out another new property tax, and we wonder why.

I turn now to page 192 of this year's budget document entitled *Economic and Fiscal Outlook*. There, on a table headed "Operating Revenue", under the heading "Taxation" and the subheading "Property taxes", is the item "Emergency Services Levy". Here is a property tax that the budget papers show was not there in 2002-03 or 2001-02, but that appears in this financial year as a whopping amount of \$76 million. In 2004-05, this new property tax, as it is labelled in the state budget, has increased to \$118 million. By 2006-07, it is valued at \$130 million. That is the equivalent of 13 premium property taxes. The premium property tax was intended to raise around \$10 million. This tax, by 2006, will be raising \$130 million, and the budget papers are honest enough to list it as a property tax.

When bringing in this new property tax, the Labor Party promised it would be a fairer system, based on an emergency services levy. Previously, insurance companies picked up the tab for the lion's share of fire and emergency services funding in this State. Local government contributed, and the State Government also contributed through a general taxpayer-funded allocation. The idea is that, over two years, this levy will take over the funding arrangements, and there will be a transfer from one system to the other. It is supposed to be fairer. We were told that around 30 per cent of home owners, for example, either under-insured or did not insure their homes. Why should the 70 per cent who responsibly insure carry the can for the other 30 per cent? We were told the business community would also benefit. One of the reasons is simply that many businesses were insuring offshore, and therefore their insurance companies were not contributing to fire and emergency services in this State. Most importantly, we were told that under this fairer system, by spreading the load and making everyone pay a fair share, many people would pay less. For sure, a home owner who had not insured his home previously would cop this new levy and end up paying more. However, for home owners and small business people who had previously insured their homes and small businesses, the idea was that, as a result of the transfer to the new system, their costs would go down.

The Minister for Police and Emergency Services reiterated this a number of times in a media statement on 4 December 2002. When she referred to the impact on insurance premiums she stated -

People who properly insure their properties are subsidising those who do not have insurance, under insure or insure offshore.

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...

“Now at last, we have a system where everyone will contribute their fair share.”

On 12 June 2002, the minister said -

Western Australians who responsibly insure their homes and property are set for a significant insurance discount under new funding arrangements announced today by the State Government.

She went on to say that -

“For those people who responsibly insure their homes and property, the new streamlined funding system will bring discounts of up to 23 per cent off their home and contents insurance premiums,” . . .

“This translates to an average reduction of \$80 for most fully insured residential property owners.”

She continued -

“In the case of commercial premises, there will be a reduction of up to 33 per cent off their insurance premiums.”

That is a bit of a coincidence. I am not sure whether they were the minister's figures because they happened to be exactly the same as the figures put out by the insurance industry. In fact, on 12 June 2002, the very same day, the Insurance Council of Australia released a press statement using exactly the same figures. I doubt very much whether the Government worked out those figures; rather, it relied on the industry and used the figures to its advantages. More importantly, the minister went on to say that not only would insurance premiums go down but also all costs associated with the risk of fire and the use of emergency services would be reduced. I will quote what the minister said. First, in the Chamber on 22 May 2003, the minister said -

By and large, because the system will be fairer and more equitable as more people will pay the levy, most people should pay less.

On 24 October she said -

. . . there will be a significant reduction in what the public will be paying.

That could not be clearer.

I remind members that on 12 June 2002 the minister said that those people responsibly insuring their homes and properties would end up with insurance discounts.

The minister said that the Government would bring in a fairer system that would reduce costs for home owners and businesses. On the face of it, that sounded pretty good. Indeed, when the legislation arrived in this Chamber, members of the Liberal Party gave it measured support on the basis of the information that was available to them at the time. However, something happened. We started to get the full facts of the matter and we found that business costs had skyrocketed as a result of this. I have just received the figures from a survey carried out by the Property Council of Australia, which indicate that the average increase for all shopping centres in Western Australia that were paying the existing levy and were properly insured is 147 per cent. That has occurred despite the fact that more properties are caught in the overall tax net. Of course, it is not shopping centre owners who ultimately pay the fees because they are passed on to small businesses. I might add that that figure discounted two responses that were removed from the survey by the Property Council of Australia on the basis that their increases were so large that they would have distorted the findings of the survey. I give the Property Council of Australia due credit for following up this issue with shopping centre owners. I understand that despite its attempts to meet the minister to discuss this huge increased impost on small business, the minister has ignored its request and has declined to meet with it on this important matter. That gives members an idea of the degree of transparency and accountability associated with the Government's handling of this matter.

Not only have small businesses been affected, but also home owners are copping the worst of it. I will provide a few examples. Last year, the owners of a four-bedroom, two bathroom home in Innaloo paid an insurance levy and council contribution of \$68.34. This year, their FESA levy will be over \$98 and their insurance will be additional. Last year, the owners of a three-bedroom home in Hillarys paid \$68.34 - precisely the same amount - towards insurance and council costs for fire and emergency services. This year, their FESA levy alone is \$60.44. That is slightly less than \$68, but members should bear in mind that does not include insurance costs. If we take insurance costs into account, they will be paying more. Last year, the owners of a home at Mt Tarcoola incurred insurance and council costs of \$65.47. This year, without insurance they will pay \$60.55, and if we add the cost of insurance, clearly they will pay more than they did last year. Last year, the owners of a home in Spencer

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Park, Albany incurred costs of around \$65; this year, the cost without insurance will be \$57.60. In 2002-03, the total cost of the insurance levy, plus the council rates for FESA, for a home in Carine was around \$74. This financial year the insurance levy to the insurance company, plus the FESA transitional fee, is \$140, which is almost double last year's figure. Next year the FESA levy will increase to \$168 for the couple who live in Carine. That is a 130 per cent increase or an increase of almost \$94 for people who have been insured, have done the right thing and have been responsible. They are the same people that the Gallop Labor Government said would pay less under the new system. Even though they have done the right thing, the couple in Carine will be faced with a bill that has increased by \$94. They paid a fire levy through their insurance company for not only contents cover, but also property insurance. Small businesses are paying more and home owners are being sluggish for six despite the fact that the net has broadened and the 30 per cent of people who did not insure or who under insured are now being roped in. What went wrong? Quite simply, members have to understand how the Labor Government makes its decisions. As members of the Opposition have begun to realise, the Labor Party uses three criteria when determining how it will make a policy decision. First, it finds out what the trade union movement wants and it abides by that decision. Secondly, it asks Brian Burke what he wants and it abides by that decision. Thirdly, it looks at the growing budget problems it is experiencing, the increasing cash deficit, the increasing government debt in this State -

Withdrawal of Remark

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: I believe I heard the member for Bunbury say that the Deputy Leader of the Opposition was lying. He knows that is unparliamentary. I think you, Madam Deputy Speaker, may have missed it. I hope he has the good grace to withdraw.

Mr A.J. DEAN: Last week the member for Mitchell said that we can tell when a politician is lying because his lips are moving. The member for Mitchell's lips were moving. I ask you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to rule whether he was lying. If I have offended the member for Mitchell, I shall withdraw unreservedly.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The member for Bunbury is aware of the standing orders. If he made a direct allegation as stated in this place, I ask him to withdraw.

Mr A.J. DEAN: I withdraw unreservedly.

Debate Resumed

Mr D.F. BARRON-SULLIVAN: The third reason explains the Government's approach to the new property tax. Very simply, it is as follows: in bringing in the new property tax, the Government stipulated that the arrangement had to be revenue neutral for state Treasury. That was extremely important, because it meant that a number of cost components were shifted from the state budget appropriation to the new FESA levy through a redirected appropriation. Those amounts add up to nothing short of \$21 million. Putting it quite simply, under the heading of Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia on page 717 of the *Budget Statements*, the figures reveal that FESA expenditure between 2002-03 and 2004-05 will go up by \$38 million. That includes a \$10 million increase in superannuation and salaries and approximately \$19.7 million in grants, services, administrative costs and capital works. It is an increase in expenditure of \$38 million across the board. It does not mean that all the money will be spent on the ground; that it is all going to the Fire and Emergency Services Authority. A lot of the money will be gobbled up in administration and so on. The revenue from the FESA levy and the levy on insurance companies has gone up by \$58 million. FESA's expenditure has gone up by \$38 million, but revenue from this new levy component has gone up by \$58 million. Where is the other \$20 million? The table shows that the appropriation from the state budget has been reduced by almost \$20 million. Putting it bluntly, the Government has told FESA that it should carry the can for the cost of the Government insuring its own properties and for the cost of concessions for pensioners, Homeswest housing, and the stamp duty that the Government is missing out on as a result of this. The Government believes the money can be raised through the FESA levy to cover the difference. The money will no longer be provided through the state budget; the state budget allocation has been reduced. I will quote the Government's weasel words. On 28 November Hon Nick Griffiths said -

It is important to note that the proposed emergency services levy arrangements will quarantine money raised through the levy for emergency services.

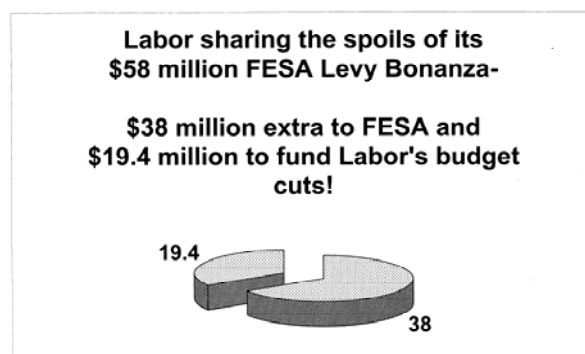
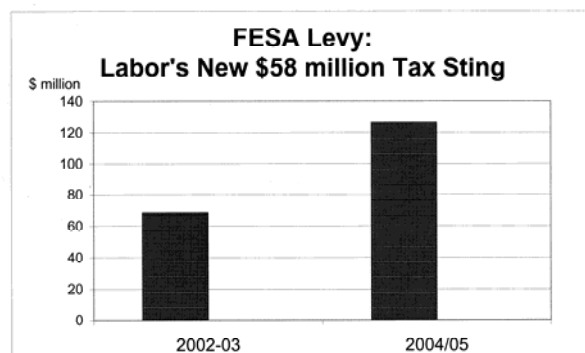
He is quite right. All the money raised from the levy will go to FESA. What he does not say is that the amount FESA used to get from the state budget in addition to the insurance levies and so on has been reduced by approximately \$20 million. It is a straight subsidy from home owners and small businesses to the Treasurer's budget to prop up his looming budget cash deficit and growing debt.

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I have some simple tables that demonstrate the situation. The pie chart shows an extra \$38 million going to FESA and nearly \$20 million being used to subsidise the State Government's budget. It shows a whopping \$58 million property tax sting on home owners and small businesses across the State. I seek leave to have the material incorporated into *Hansard*.

[Leave granted.]

The following material was incorporated -



Mr D.F. BARRON-SULLIVAN: We have \$58 million more being paid for a so-called fairer system. During debate, the minister referred to members on this side of the House - namely me - as ignorant fools for not understanding that. However, the proof is in the pudding. The budget papers proved conclusively what the Liberal Party had been saying about the matter, which was that the Government was skimming \$20 million off the top at the expense of home owners and small businesses. What is new? It is hardly the first devious thing this Government has done with this legislation. On 4 December 2002 the minister stated -

... our Government will also provide an additional \$18 million funding in recognition of, and support for, emergency services volunteers ...

That was not additional funding; that was \$18 million left over from the previous year's budget allocation that the Government had not ripped off as part of the dubious deal I have just referred to. The Government took \$20 million off the top and left \$18 million of the budget allocation and called that an additional \$18 million! It must be joking.

The Government has established an emergency services levy web site. I challenge anyone to go to the web site and find anything on the emergency services levy calculator that indicates that the emergency services levy being charged this year is only a transitional rate and that the following year - guess what - home owners and small businesses will pay more. Not only that, when the minister was in the House - I will give her the benefit of the doubt and say that she was confused and did not know the detail of the situation - she said that there would be a \$28 million budget allocation to FESA. As I said earlier, it is barely \$20 million. She stated that other departments would pay FESA the concessions referred to, in addition to FESA's normal budget allocation. We

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know that is not how it happens. We know how the concessions and so on operate through Treasury. We also know that the money never went back to FESA.

The bottom line is that we are supposed to have a system that is transparent. We are supposed to have a system that provides for the reduction in costs from insurance levies to be passed on to home owners across the State. We are supposed to see the reduction in council rates passed on, but there is no guarantee that that is happening. As people receive their insurance bills this year they find that those savings are not being passed on. If the Government is to live up to its word and assist those people who, sensibly and reasonably, insured their homes and small businesses before this levy came in, it must give a commitment to put in place a mechanism so those people do not pay one cent more than they did before. It must not be like the couple in Carine who are facing a \$94 increase and not like the small businesses in shopping centres that are facing a 147 per cent increase. The Government must live up to its word and provide some sort of a capping mechanism. We were told that the levy would not cost home owners any more. However, we find that it has been a massive con in order to introduce a new property tax.

I leave the minister with this thought: as we head towards the next election, not only will this levy take effect this year and not only are home owners and small businesses complaining and calling newspapers and the Liberal Party, but also the levy will go up next year. The Liberal Party will take great delight in reminding the constituents of Labor members in marginal seats of the new property tax. In Joondalup, it will cost more than \$8 million for home owners and small businesses. It will cost \$2.2 million in Mandurah; \$1.3 million in Albany; \$1.1 million in Bunbury; over \$1 million in Geraldton; and over \$3.9 million in Wanneroo. These are the direct costs of Labor's new property tax on home owners and small businesses in this State. This is a tax and a levy that the Labor Party said would reduce costs to people who were insured previously. They are now finding that it was nothing but an almighty scam.

MR J.P.D. EDWARDS (Greenough) [4.06 pm]: I support this motion. I will give the House some good news and speak on behalf of local government. Local government reluctantly took on the collection of the levy for the Fire and Emergency Services Authority. However, having taken it on, it seems from my inquiries that councils in rural Western Australia that have put out their rate notices have not received too much negative feedback. That may not be the case with metropolitan councils, although not all rate notices may have been issued.

The Deputy Leader of the Opposition raised the concerns of the Opposition, which were first noted during the second reading debate and consideration in detail. I will quote to the House a letter received from a constituent in Joondalup in respect of what he paid and what he is now paying. It sums up to some degree how the Government is pulling the wool over the eyes of the public. When he first heard of the Government's intention to replace the insurance levy with a levy that everyone would pay, he thought it a reasonable idea. He states -

After all if the impost was spread across more people surely it must cost less.

To most people, that makes a reasonable amount of sense. He remembers how the idea was sold to the public. When he received his rate notice last week, he saw he was to pay a levy of \$114. One year ago he paid an insurance levy of only \$68. That is an increase of \$46. He states -

You can appreciate that I am more than a little annoyed by this.

He understood that metropolitan areas would subsidise regional areas. Some people were to pay a larger levy than others. As that was his understanding, he researched the press releases of the minister. A press release of June 2002 stated that metropolitan areas would provide an \$8 million subsidy to the regions and that the levy would be property based. I suspect that the Deputy Leader of the Opposition left out one factor that should be added to the three that he raised. The fourth factor probably should be consultation. The Government is always telling us that it is very strong on consulting with the people, so much so that people have probably stopped believing it now because they hear it so often. He states -

I also noticed that the Minister had several community consultations selling her idea to the people in the regions - but I didn't see any evidence of consultations with the people in Perth.

Perhaps that was just a slip by the minister, or there was a reason behind it. He states also that he is not particularly happy with the way in which the levy has been implemented -

In short not only do I not agree that the policy is fair and equitable I also believe the implementation and community consultation has been totally ineffective.

Those are the words of an elector who actually voted for the Government at the last election.

There is no doubt that there is some subsidisation to rural Western Australia. Also, as the Deputy Leader of the Opposition has said, by dint of the fact that \$20 million of this money has been pulled out sneakily, the

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Government will not need to come up with that extra funding. That lends strong support to the argument that there should be a cap on the fire and emergency services levy. The levy was supposed to be revenue neutral. I do not believe that is the case at all. The business community and householders in this State probably did not realise in the first instance, but they are beginning to realise now, that the Government is taking much more money from them for the fire and emergency services levy than is required, and that money is going into consolidated revenue and therefore into government coffers. That is a dishonest way of getting extra money from the public. With that small contribution I support the motion.

MRS M.H. ROBERTS (Midland - Minister for Police and Emergency Services) [4.12 pm]: The concept of a fire and emergency services levy has been around for at least 30 years in this State. Many Governments have promised to put in place a fairer system of fire and emergency services funding, but most of them have failed to deliver. The fire and emergency services levy that we have introduced is a fairer and more transparent means of funding fire and emergency services in Western Australia. The previous arrangement was an antiquated arrangement that dated back more than 100 years. For at least the past 30 years anyone who has had any involvement with fire and emergency services funding, including just about every member of this House over that time, has commented that the system was not fair and was completely ad hoc. There were numerous loopholes in the old insurance-based funding system. One in three homes in Perth was either uninsured or under insured, and because some companies insured offshore or self-insured, tens of thousands of property owners had not been contributing to the provision of fire and emergency services, despite the fact that they were benefiting from those services. About 25 per cent of all call-outs are to vacant blocks of land. A high percentage of those vacant blocks are in regional areas. Of course vacant blocks of land are not insured; therefore, the owners of those blocks were also making little contribution to the provision of these services.

The fire and emergency services levy is budget neutral. That is what we committed to when we introduced the levy. We received support for the levy from all members in this House. The Government's contribution is set out clearly in the budget papers. I note that the member for Mitchell has chosen to misrepresent those figures. Provision was made during the estimates hearing in this House for the Opposition to ask questions about the budget papers so that it would not make ignorant statements about them. Unfortunately no members of the Liberal Party availed themselves of that opportunity during the estimates debate on the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia.

Mr P.D. Omodei: That is not true. I was there, and you ran out of time.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: No, the member was not. The member for Warren-Blackwood wanted to go home early, so he left the Chamber. That is his record. When I said during that estimates debate that surely, even if the member for Warren-Blackwood had to go home early, some member of the Liberal Party must be present, I was told the member for Mitchell was sitting at his desk in his office, which was around the corner. However, at no stage did the member for Mitchell come into the Chamber. Members believed that he was probably listening to the debate, but he did not come in here and ask a single question.

Several members interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr P.W. Andrews): Order! I will not have the voice of any member drowned out.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: I have clearly hit a raw nerve with opposition members, because they were absent when the fire and emergency services estimates were debated in this Chamber. Opposition members had the opportunity to ask questions, but they ignored that. Further, even though the best part of half an hour could have been spent on fire and emergency services, we finished the estimates three minutes early because there were no more questions from the Opposition. The vast majority of the questions on emergency services were asked by members of the Labor Party. Opposition members were absent from the field during budget estimates, and they also have conveniently forgotten today that they actually supported the legislation in both Houses of the Parliament.

Mr C.J. Barnett interjected.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: That is the record. The Opposition did not move a single amendment to the legislation. After all, the legislation was developed largely during the term of the former coalition Government. It was supported by the Liberal Cabinet. All we have done since that time is make the legislation fairer for pensioners and seniors. Unlike the proposal of the former Liberal Government, our system allows for a 50 per cent reduction in the amount paid by pensioners and a 25 per cent reduction in the amount paid by seniors. We have also made available to pensioners, seniors and others the full range of payment options that local governments provide for the payment of rates.

Mr R.F. Johnson: We would have done that as well if we had brought it in.

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Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: The fact of the matter is that is not what their legislation said. I had the legislation amended so that we could look after those people in the community who can least afford to pay. The aim of this levy is that it be as fair as possible. I highlight the fact that about \$2.5 million of the money that will be collected will go back to local governments to cover their fees. Under the levy local governments will no longer be required to contribute towards the career fire and rescue services. That fact has been conveniently forgotten by members opposite.

Members opposite talked about what people paid previously for insurance. I suspect that when they were talking about shopping centres they were talking about building insurance, not contents insurance. I suspect that in just about every example they gave they were not comparing apples with apples, because the insurance that was paid was for both building and contents. Shopping centre owners are likely to pay for building insurance, whereas individual shop owners pay for contents insurance. As far as I am aware the Property Council of Australia has not put into its calculations the amount of contents insurance that each of those small businesses would have been paying as part of the levy. Local governments were previously collecting \$10 million from their ratepayers and handing that to the career fire and rescue services. Ten million dollars of the money that previously went into the fire service levy, as it then was, came from local government rates. Therefore, not only the amount that had been collected from insurance companies but also \$10 million that had been collected annually from local governments funded career fire and rescue services.

Quite apart from those local governments which were previously funding the career fire and rescue services to the tune of \$10 million and which are no longer paying that amount, some local governments did not have a career fire and rescue service. They previously funded the running and capital expenses of bush fire brigades and State Emergency Service units. This year, though, the levy will provide \$15 million to cover those costs. Presumably, they were also paying almost \$15 million. Now that \$15 million will come out of the levy. That money did not go to local government from nowhere. Clearly, some local governments had raised that as a special levy on their rate notices, and others just incorporated the amount within their rates. They did not all highlight the fact that they were collecting part of the rates to cover their local bush fire brigade and SES, although many local government authorities were doing that. Some of those local government authorities have looked after their SES and bush fire brigade units very well. Unfortunately, others were not looked after anywhere near as well.

For the first time in the history of this State a system is in place that will distribute the funding to areas of need, so that irrespective of the financial ability of a local government authority, we will be able to fund those emergency services where they are needed. We will be able to ensure that people have the appropriate protective equipment and uniforms and that safety is not jeopardised. Perhaps those who are concerned about paying the levy will also give some thought to the fact that our emergency service personnel, which include those in the State Emergency Service, attend road crashes somewhere - unfortunately, as it seems now, just about every second day of the week. Irrespective of whether people are from Cottesloe, Kingsley, Duncraig or wherever, if they are travelling in the south west or the north west of this State and they have a car crash, they will certainly be grateful that the State Emergency Service has been properly equipped to deal with their tragedy. If someone falls off a cliff in the Karijini National Park or is involved in some other kind of incident, or if a member of a person's family goes missing and the SES turns out to help find that person, I am sure that the people concerned would not begrudge paying that money for the emergency services.

I point out clearly that under the legislation, which was supported in this House and the other House, all money raised through the levy is spent on emergency services. It is administered by the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia. Therefore, an argument that somehow this money is capable of being siphoned off to other sources is just not valid.

Part of the motion today suggests that we should put a cap in place. The Opposition has conveniently neglected to point out that we have put a cap in place. The member for Mitchell referred to the long-gone premium property tax. Again, he was trying to perpetrate a myth that we have an issue with people who own high-priced residential property. In fact, under this levy, the cap of \$175 advantages those people whose home is an expensive piece of real estate. As we have said, the rate of this levy is struck, and then it is multiplied by the gross rental value. If that comes to a total fee of \$200, \$300 or \$400, it is capped back to \$175. There is no penalty for people who own very expensive homes. Those people who would have been caught by the premium property tax are definitely not caught by this tax, because they are paying a capped fee of \$175. How are we able to do that? We are able to do it because we are now bringing all property holders into the net. Previously, some people were not insured or were underinsured, and others had vacant blocks of land. They accounted for about 25 per cent of call-outs, and those people had not made a fair contribution.

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Members opposite have not acknowledged the multitude of sources by which fire and emergency services were funded. Under the previous arrangements, funding came from building and contents insurance. It also came from local government rates and other local government contributions. There were also state government and Lotterywest contributions and volunteer fundraising. Sadly, many of this State's volunteer units, particularly the SES units and bush fire brigades, were left in a position of having to volunteer their time to turn out 24 hours a day, seven days a week for the good of their local community, but to be able to do that and to have the benefit of some decent protective equipment, they had to spend the little spare time they had on weekends fundraising - running raffles and lamington stalls or whatever - to ensure that they could keep their SES unit, bush fire brigade or volunteer fire and rescue brigade up and running. Fortunately, that can be a thing of the past, because under the new arrangements the units are funded on the basis of need. Therefore, those SES units, volunteer bush fire brigade units and volunteer fire and rescue brigades will not lack protective equipment.

In the past few weeks I have been able to hand over a lot of that equipment - much of it in the north west of the State, where it has certainly been welcomed by those volunteers. As always, I take my hat off to those volunteers who turn out 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They put so much into their local communities and they are to be commended. They are often the same people who volunteer in many other capacities in their community. Throughout the length and breadth of the State, there are some 26 000 FESA or emergency service volunteers. I thank each and every one of them for the fantastic job they do to make our State safe. I am very pleased to have been the minister who introduced a system under which they will be properly funded in a sustainable manner for decades into the future. Although issues will always arise in the implementation phase of a new funding system - one that replaces an old, antiquated funding system that came from about four different sources - in a decade people will look back on this as the best legislation that was ever put in place for emergency services in this State.

MR J.N. HYDE (Perth) [4.28 pm]: I also oppose this motion. A lot of misleading information has been put out about this levy. Clearly, the mover of the motion had no idea about the caps that were put in place on the various funding levels for members of the community. This is, in effect, budget neutral. What part of budget neutral does the Opposition not understand? This is a very transparent process that has been going on for a number of years in Western Australia, including the period of the one-time Minister for Local Government, the member for Warren-Blackwood. I remember that the member for Greenough, who was then representing metropolitan councils as well as country councils, and I had great debates, consultations and transparent discussions about this levy. At the recent local government conference, I was delighted to have so many mayors, presidents and councillors tell me how much better off they and their constituents are under this new system.

Let us examine how transparent it is. There is not any double-dipping. With the transfer situation at the moment, part of it is still on insurance premiums, and the rest is on local government rates. All the local governments that I am aware of are making it very transparent that this levy is not a local government levy but a Fire and Emergency Services levy. I commend the minister for embarking upon very important public education and transparent advertising on television and other media so that the community is informed.

Mr P.D. Omodei: Why did you need so much advertising if it was so transparent?

Mr J.N. HYDE: Clearly, all this advertising is needed because of the disreputable, misleading and lack of information coming from the Opposition. Let us look at the real world. Prior to this fair and just levy being put in place, people paid a levy under the insurance premiums that they paid that were based in Australia. Some people were not paying that levy. They were either not insuring or insuring overseas. More importantly, it was usually those of us who paid insurance premiums who also made donations to the local fire brigade and State Emergency Service group. I remember a storm that came through my area of Vincent, during which a tree fell on part of my gutter. The SES came out to my home and to the homes of a number of my neighbours. I made a \$100 donation from my own pocket to the SES. That is how the SES has been funded in this State: by personal donations. The members for Pilbara, Joondalup, Mandurah and I attended hearings in Port Hedland and other communities in that region. We saw very clearly that most volunteers had to spend their time fundraising by running raffles, cake bakes, races and other things to get very important equipment such as the jaws-of-life. This Government has got rid of that. People can now be encouraged to get back to volunteering and be part of an SES or fire brigade. They will be able to do their job of educating the community, saving lives, getting to emergencies quickly and not having to worry about fundraising. This levy has eliminated that worry as well.

I will look at some of the shires, towns and cities. Clearly, some are being very transparent about what this new system means. For example, the Shire of Swan web site states -

“With the levy in place the City has been able to cut about \$360,000 in costs from its budget . . .

Mr P.D. Omodei: Did their rates go down to that extent?

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Mr J.N. HYDE: Under the wonderful Local Government Act introduced by the member for Warren-Blackwood, the budget must go to a public meeting. There must be consultation with the local community on the budget. The local budget must be transparent. In that transparent budget of the City of Swan, it has done it the right way. There will be a \$360 000 saving. That council may convince its community that rather than getting a \$360 000 cut in rates, it would be better to have a \$360 000 boost in services. That is a decision for that local community to make. The Gallop Labor Government is about local empowerment. It wants local communities to make local, informed decisions. Clearly, councils such as Swan, Port Hedland and many others are doing very well and understand this levy. They have done the right thing and have been transparent and open about it. If we look at the consultation that has occurred throughout the community - it was happening throughout Local Government Week - the amount of transparency on this issue has been one of the great highlights of the Gallop Government. The City of Swan and other councils are informing their local communities that not only will there be a cut in the budget - that is, a funding decrease from ratepayers of \$360 000 - but also that the new levy is funding volunteer training programs, community safety programs, emergency management planning, which our committee found was lacking in this State, and FESA's emergency management services. Those issues are now being handled properly in local communities because of this new levy.

Amendment to Motion

Mr J.N. HYDE: This motion is so deficient and misleading that I move -

To delete all words after "House" and substitute the following -

congratulates the Gallop Labor Government for introducing the Emergency Services Levy to bring fairness and equity to funding for emergency services across Western Australia, ensuring all property owners contribute to vital services and that for the first time, all voluntary fire brigades, State Emergency Services and multi-skilled units will be properly funded and equipped no matter where they are located in the State.

Point of Order

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: I believe that the amendment moved by the member for Perth is a direct negative of the original motion and should be ruled out of order.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr P.W. Andrews): I rule that the amendment be accepted.

Debate Resumed

MR L. GRAHAM (Pilbara) [4.36 pm]: The amendment adds a bit of mischief to the motion. I want to speak to the motion. I must say that I am bemused by the attitude of the Opposition on the emergency services levy. I genuinely wish that I had received some notice that this matter of public interest was coming on for debate because I would have taken the time to bring down the file that is sitting on my desk in my office in Port Hedland. Only last week I was going through the schedules of some meetings from about three years ago when, under the previous Government, FESA was working up the levy. I was comparing what we would have got under the scheme proposed by the previous Government with what we get under the scheme that has been put in place by the current Government. Although I strongly support the current Government's emergency services levy, I can tell members that there is not much in it. There is not much difference in it for people in outback Western Australia. We would have done moderately well under the previous Liberal Government's ESL, which had a different name, and we have done very well under this Government's ESL. I wish that I had been given some notice of this matter because I would have dearly loved to provide that information. I may take the opportunity to do so on another occasion during general debate, because I have both schedules on spreadsheets and it is an interesting analysis.

I am bemused about why the Opposition has raised this matter. I genuinely do not understand it. I understand why the Opposition has raised it, but I do not understand why it has raised it in this context. The fundamental principle behind this levy is that people who were making either no contribution towards emergency services or were finding ways not to pay for emergency services have been made to contribute to the emergency services of this State. It seems that from the Opposition's rhetoric, they are the people who are complaining. The target has been hit.

Mr D.F. Barron-Sullivan interjected.

Mr P.G. Pandal: That is not quite true.

Mr L. GRAHAM: No, that is not true. The Opposition may be able to produce examples of individual cases, but I can tell members that, across-the-board, people are significantly better off under this levy. I do not often stand up in here and argue in favour of increased taxes. However, for the first time in the history of this State,

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my constituency has access to a pool of funds for emergency services. It has never had that access before. Would I have liked more? Absolutely. Both the minister and her chief executive have had their ears chewed about why we should get more next time around, and I hope that we do; however, we had never been in a position to argue for more before.

I have stood in this place over the years and spoken at length about a fire and emergency system that produced second-hand cars for people to work with in regional Western Australia. Vehicles had to be used by city fire brigades before people in regional Western Australia were allowed to access them. People in regional Western Australia had no uniforms. At one stage when Hon Bob Wiese was the minister, I raised the situation in this place of people with no hats going out in the middle of summer in the north west of Western Australia when the road temperature was in excess of 55 degrees to take dead and dying people out of a vehicle.

That absolutely absurd situation is being solved by this levy. However, there is room for some political inquisition. It revolves around division 3 of the legislation, which deals with the arrangements with insurance companies. So that people can get an idea of where they stand, I am happy to say that, on the Larry Graham hit list, oil companies are at the top and insurance companies are next, followed by central bureaucrats. Within 18 months of the commencement of the operation of the levy the minister is required by law to bring into the Parliament a report that demonstrates that the insurance industry has passed the savings on. I am looking forward to that. I cannot wait for that 18 months to pass, because I do not trust the insurance industry. The minister cannot deal with that now, but in 18 months, when she tables the report, I look forward to bipartisan support to pull that industry into line.

MRS D.J. GUISE (Wanneroo - Deputy Speaker) [4.42 pm]: I oppose the motion and support the amendment. I find it amazing that an attempt has been made to find some link between the fire and emergency services levy and what might possibly be conceived as a premium tax levy. Given the uproar from the opposite side of the House when there was talk about a different sort of tax on property, we were certainly led to believe that such a tax would be far in excess of something that has been capped at \$175. I find it rather a stretch of the imagination to link this levy with a premium tax levy.

What is this levy about? It is about something that is fair, equitable and transparent. When the minister spoke about the levy in the context of the budget, she indicated that the introduction of the levy would be cost neutral. It is therefore fairly easy to debunk the arguments put forward in support of the motion. This levy will be used to pay for services right across the board; for bushfire brigades; road accident services; sea rescues; responses to house fires, bushfires, cyclones and storm damage to homes; searches for missing persons; and cliff rescues. I do not know whether some members opposite have lived a sheltered life or I have had a colourful life, but I have been evacuated twice because of fire.

Mr P.D. Omodei: You are being disingenuous, and you know it.

Mrs D.J. GUISE: I am not. Members need to have some appreciation of what this levy will be used for. If the member wants to make a decent argument about it being a tax and not being fair, he had better think about what we are doing in this case.

This cost was accepted by people in the past, but was it fair? It was not, because not everybody contributed. Home owners are not the only people affected by the incidents to which I have referred. A person does not have to be a home owner to be affected by a bushfire or the devastating effects of a cyclone. People can get caught up in those circumstances and need the assistance of the emergency services, which do a wonderful job in our community.

I find the statements about the cost to be amazing. The levy is fair and equitable. Everybody is contributing across the board. A person made the comment to me last week that this will be the first time he has contributed to such a levy. Given where the money was going and the services which would be provided, he did not have a problem and thought it was a great idea. He accepted the cost because of what it meant for the whole community, not just for him.

For those people who want to argue about lack of consultation, maybe their argument is with their representative body. Maybe the consultation process and the lack of communication needs to be looked at rather than an attack being made on the Government. The member opposite asked about the return people would receive locally. An example from Wanneroo today is a classic. The emergency services levy will raise \$2.7 million and the remaining insurance levy will raise more than \$1 million, making approximately \$3.8 million in total. What is the Government giving back? It is giving \$4.2 million plus the amount of the fee to cover costs, plus the money that is going into the rest of the brigades that support it. I do not think it is too much to ask. Anybody who lives in my electorate will know that we rely on the services of the local brigade and in the past have relied on the

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services of other brigades for help. Often brigades cannot fight fires by themselves but need the support of surrounding brigades. I recommend that we oppose the motion and support the amendment. I congratulate this State Government for recognising a need in the community and making sure that everybody contributes in a fair and just way.

MR J.B. D'ORAZIO (Ballajura) [4.47 pm]: I oppose the motion and support the amendment. The members for Greenough, Warren-Blackwood and Perth, who have strong local government backgrounds, will remember the fights that we had about the fire levy. It was the scourge of most local authorities which hated paying it. The imposition of such a levy was brought to the attention of the Western Australian Local Government Association. The levy that has been brought in is quite acceptable. It is quite acceptable to raise between \$100 and \$150 per property for the services that are being received and for guaranteed funding. It is important that state emergency services are able to be supplied with sufficient equipment to do their job properly.

What is worrying me about the levy is the conduct of some of our colleagues who are in local government. The member for Perth said that the Swan City Council indicated there would be savings. That has not been the case for a couple of the councils I have dealt with. It is important that our colleagues who were in local government clearly identify -

Mr P.D. Omodei: Now we are getting to the nub of the question.

Mr J.B. D'ORAZIO: Let me finish. The crux of the matter is that there is a saving for those councils. We need to make sure that it is passed on. It is not fair to tell people to blame the State Government because the levy belongs to it when most of the councils received a windfall of between \$300 000 and \$400 000 each. It is fair that those councils should explain to their communities where the money is going. For one of the councils in my electorate the windfall represents two per cent of its rates. If the rate increase is still 4.95 per cent, an explanation is necessary. On top of that windfall, one council in my electorate is getting \$60 000 and another is getting \$80 000 to collect the levy. The question goes to the receipt of those moneys.

The question also needs to be asked of insurance companies. It is okay to say that insurance companies will no longer pay levies, but a process needs to be put in place to make sure that the savings are passed on to the community. People in the community show me their insurance bills and say that the levy has gone down but their insurance premiums have gone up. That is a danger in this whole equation. We need to ensure that pressure is brought to bear on insurance companies as well as local authorities, so that the local authorities are up-front about what they are doing with the windfall savings that they have collected through the introduction of the levy. In the case of the City of Bayswater the savings are between \$350 000 and \$400 000. When I was mayor of Bayswater it was a great bugbear that every time people received their rate notices they complained that they had to pay this money for no great benefit. This scheme is fair to everybody. Everybody knows what is being paid and what it is being paid for. It is fantastic that such a system is in place. More important is the fact that the levy is capped at \$175 and pensioners and concession cardholders can get a concession on the levy paid.

MR P.D. OMODEI (Warren-Blackwood) [4.50 pm]: I will clarify a couple of issues about the estimates debate. The estimates debates are scheduled for a period during the estimates week. I was to deal with the section on emergency services, which comes under the police and emergency services portfolio. I stayed back an extra day for the debate on that section, which was due to be completed by nine o'clock. The Minister for Police and Emergency Services filibustered during the police debate in an attempt to make sure there was no time left to discuss emergency services. Therefore, at two minutes to nine, I left. What did the Labor Party do? It was a typical Labor Party stunt. The member for Perth and a couple of his mates made some pretence about asking questions. Of course, the minister magnanimously allowed the time to be extended to make out she was prepared to debate the matter. If I had stayed there, the debate would have been cut off at nine o'clock, and she knows it!

I will get back to this debate. This debate is about a con job; the Ripper-Roberts rip-off. I will tell members why. I ask every member opposite to look at the *Budget Statements* - the member for Mitchell already mentioned this - and the emergency services out years, where it clearly shows that the budget comes down from \$38.693 million to \$23.94 million, \$19.5 million and then \$21 million. The allocation from the consolidated fund to emergency services has been reduced by \$20 million. It is as plain as the nose on a person's face.

The idea of getting everybody to pay is a good idea. Everybody on this side should read the estimate debates. We said that the proof of the pudding would be in the eating, and the minister agreed. Let us imagine that the budget was kept at the same level. The Fire and Emergency Services Authority of WA would have another \$20 million to allocate to all emergency services people and volunteers around Western Australia. However,

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what has happened? All the properties, including government properties and those owned by the not-for-profit organisations, the churches and the schools, were all lumped into the levy. The State Government now docks their buildings from the levy and loads up the costs incurred by other people.

The member for Ballajura touched on another issue. I ask any member in this House to consider how many local government rates went down this year. Given that local government had to contribute 12.5 per cent of its rate revenue to the emergency services levy, the rates should have gone down. Is any member aware of any local government rates that have gone down?

Mr L. Graham: Not in my lifetime.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: The member for Pilbara now understands what this argument is all about. I asked members opposite to ask their constituents if their fire insurance premiums went down because insurance companies were also contributing to the fire levy. Can any member show me an instance in which a person's fire insurance premium has gone down? Not one member can do that. We have the evidence, and the member for South Perth will also say that we are being inundated with letters from constituents who say that this is an unfair tax. They call it a tax grab and say that their fire insurance premiums have gone up by 84 per cent, 75 per cent, 91 per cent and so on. Their charges for insurance and their local government rates have gone up; that is why this is a tax grab. The minister knows it and she will not be allowed to get away with it!

Amendment on the Amendment

Mr P.D. OMODEI: I will move an amendment to the amendment.

Several members interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr P.W. Andrews): A short while ago I ticked off the member for Warren-Blackwood for shouting over other members. Now he wants to move an amendment that I would like to hear.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: I move -

That the amendment be amended by deleting all words after "congratulates" and substituting the following -

the Opposition for showing the Government up for its extra property tax grab in relation to the fire and emergency services levy.

The ACTING SPEAKER: The question is that the words to be deleted be deleted from the amendment moved by the member for Perth.

Points of Order

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: Mr Acting Speaker, have you accepted the amendment to the amendment moved by the member for Warren-Blackwood?

The ACTING SPEAKER: I have accepted the amendment moved by the member for Warren-Blackwood. I will read the first question slowly, as the process involves about half a dozen questions. I am sure my adviser will pick me up quickly if I do not get it perfectly correct. The question is that the words to be deleted from the original motion, as proposed by the member for Perth, be deleted.

Mr P.G. PENDAL: We are coming from the wrong end. Surely the motion that is before the House is that the words proposed by the member for Warren-Blackwood to be deleted should be voted on first. I took the Acting Speaker (Mr P.W. Andrews) to be saying that we would start on the amendment moved by the member for Perth, which I respectfully suggest is the wrong way about it. Surely, we must dispose of the amendment recently moved by the member for Warren-Blackwood, as an amendment to the amendment. I submit that that should be disposed of first.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr P.W. Andrews): The amendment moved by the member for Perth is in two parts - the words to be deleted, and the words to be substituted, and the amendment on the amendment by the member for Warren-Blackwood relates to the substitution of the words. I will put the question and get it under way. The question is that the words proposed to be deleted be deleted.

Mr P.G. Pendal: Those proposed by the member for Perth?

The ACTING SPEAKER: That is correct - that the words proposed to be deleted by the member for Perth be deleted. I will put the question.

Deputy Speaker; Mr Dan Barron-Sullivan; Mr Rob Johnson; Mr Tony Dean; Mr Jeremy Edwards; Mrs Michelle Roberts; Mr John Hyde; Acting Speaker; Mr Larry Graham; Ms Dianne Guise; Mr John D'Orazio; Mr Paul Omodei; The Acting Speaker (mr P.W. Andrews); Mr Phillip Pandal

Mr D.F. BARRON-SULLIVAN: I seek one further point of clarification. The words are to be deleted from the substantive motion, and we are simply saying - correct me if I am wrong - that we are voting on a motion to delete all the words after "condemns" in the original motion. In a nutshell, if members agree with the original motion, do we vote no to this.

A government member: The motion deletes the words after the word "House".

Mr D.F. BARRON-SULLIVAN: Whatever the word.

Debate Resumed

The ACTING SPEAKER: The amendment moved by the member for Perth has two parts. The first seeks to delete all words after "House". That is the first part, that the House will be voting on right at this moment.

Amendment (words to be deleted) put and a division taken with the following result -

Ayes (30)

Mr J.J.M. Bowler	Mrs D.J. Guise	Mr M. McGowan	Mr E.S. Ripper
Mr C.M. Brown	Mr S.R. Hill	Ms S.M. McHale	Mrs M.H. Roberts
Mr A.J. Carpenter	Mr J.N. Hyde	Mr N.R. Marlborough	Mr D.A. Templeman
Mr A.J. Dean	Mr J.C. Kobelke	Mrs C.A. Martin	Mr P.B. Watson
Mr J.B. D'Orazio	Mr R.C. Kucera	Mr M.P. Murray	Mr M.P. Whitely
Dr J.M. Edwards	Mr F.M. Logan	Mr A.P. O'Gorman	Ms M.M. Quirk (<i>Teller</i>)
Dr G.I. Gallop	Ms A.J. MacTiernan	Mr J.R. Quigley	
Mr L. Graham	Mr J.A. McGinty	Ms J.A. Radisich	

Noes (17)

Mr R.A. Ainsworth	Mr J.P.D. Edwards	Mr B.K. Masters	Ms S.E. Walker
Mr C.J. Barnett	Mr B.J. Grylls	Mr P.D. Omodei	Mr J.L. Bradshaw (<i>Teller</i>)
Mr D.F. Barron-Sullivan	Ms K. Hodson-Thomas	Mr P.G. Pandal	
Mr M.J. Birney	Mr R.F. Johnson	Mr M.W. Trenorden	
Dr E. Constable	Mr A.D. Marshall	Mr T.K. Waldron	

Pair

Mr A.D. McRae

Mr M.G. House

Amendment thus passed.

The ACTING SPEAKER: The next part of the equation is that the words proposed by the member for Warren-Blackwood to be deleted from the amendment moved by the member for Perth be deleted.

Point of Order

Mr J.N. HYDE: The motion of the member for Warren-Blackwood refers to everything after the word "congratulates". That word is part of the words proposed to be substituted by my amendment. Until we actually insert those words, we cannot consider a motion for them to be deleted.

The ACTING SPEAKER: The explanation is rather long and convoluted, and the member for Perth should trust me on this one, for the moment. Trust me, I am a politician! I am sure that during the dinner break tonight one of the more senior members of this place, and perhaps the adviser, will be able to give a very good explanation of that. The question, as I said, is that the words proposed by the member for Warren-Blackwood to be deleted from the amendment moved by the member for Perth be deleted.

Debate Resumed

Amendment on the amendment put and a division taken with the following result -

Extract from *Hansard*
[ASSEMBLY - Tuesday, 19 August 2003]
p10172b-10184a

Deputy Speaker; Mr Dan Barron-Sullivan; Mr Rob Johnson; Mr Tony Dean; Mr Jeremy Edwards; Mrs Michelle Roberts; Mr John Hyde; Acting Speaker; Mr Larry Graham; Ms Dianne Guise; Mr John D'Orazio; Mr Paul Omodei; The Acting Speaker (mr P.W. Andrews); Mr Phillip Pendal

Ayes (17)

Mr R.A. Ainsworth	Mr J.P.D. Edwards	Mr B.K. Masters	Ms S.E. Walker
Mr C.J. Barnett	Mr B.J. Grylls	Mr P.D. Omodei	Mr J.L. Bradshaw (<i>Teller</i>)
Mr D.F. Barron-Sullivan	Ms K. Hodson-Thomas	Mr P.G. Pendal	
Mr M.J. Birney	Mr R.F. Johnson	Mr M.W. Trenorden	
Dr E. Constable	Mr A.D. Marshall	Mr T.K. Waldron	

Noes (30)

Mr J.J.M. Bowler	Mrs D.J. Guise	Mr M. McGowan	Mr E.S. Ripper
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Dr G.I. Gallop	Ms A.J. MacTiernan	Mr J.R. Quigley	
Mr L. Graham	Mr J.A. McGinty	Ms J.A. Radisich	

Pair

Mr M.G. House	Mr A.D. McRae
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Amendment on the amendment thus negatived.

Amendment (words to be substituted) put and passed.

Motion, as Amended

Question put and passed.