

REMOTE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES — FEDERAL FUNDING

12. Ms J. FARRER to the Minister for Housing:

I refer to the ongoing uncertainty over commonwealth funding for WA's remote communities that is causing deep distress across my electorate.

- (1) Can the minister update the house on whether he has received a response from the federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs?
- (2) What would be the consequences if the commonwealth was to refuse to continue funding our remote communities?

Mr P.C. TINLEY replied:

- (1)–(2) I thank the member for Kimberley for the question. I wish I, like the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in his remarks around the ranger program, had some good news for the member and the house but, unfortunately, I do not. This is one of the most concerning parts of my portfolio and across government, in a range of areas of bilateral agreements with the commonwealth in which we are yet to get to some sort of agreement that would meet the outcomes of Western Australians.

I can advise the house today that I have made several attempts to both meet and communicate with the federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Senator Nigel Scullion. Despite my numerous attempts, including contact through meetings, messages and letters and so on, I have had no contact with the minister whatsoever in a formal way. All the contact with the commonwealth Minister for Indigenous Affairs has been via media announcements and odd comments in Parliament. I want to record on *Hansard* today the schizophrenic nature of the conversations with the commonwealth in this area. It is particularly concerning. Before I do, I should remind members that there are approximately 274 remote Indigenous communities in Western Australia that are spread across the state right out to the South Australian border, of which 165 are supported by the federal and state governments and have been for a long time. Of the remainder, there are about 114 that receive no assistance and many of those do not require any assistance; they are thriving communities. Minister Scullion has said on different occasions different things, and it is really important to recall them here. He has stated that he directed commonwealth officials to meet with WA officials on this issue. He did not. Commonwealth and state officials have not met on this issue since mid-December, despite our repeated requests for clarification. They continue to attempt negotiations in order to come to an amenable outcome. The Northern Territory announced a \$1.1 billion program. The minister was quick to state in a press release that he would match the funding. Today on his feet in the Senate he said, "No, not \$1.1 billion. It is \$1.1 million." We are all shaking our heads; I do not know which of those two stories—the one from the Northern Territory or the federal minister—is right.

The federal minister also advised that he had written to state and territory ministers last week regarding this issue. My office has received no correspondence. Across government there has been no correspondence received from Minister Nigel Scullion. He stood in the Senate yesterday and said that the continued provision of remote and Indigenous housing is solely a state responsibility. That would be to walk away from half a century of tangible commonwealth involvement in the housing of some of the most vulnerable Western Australians. Today in the Senate at question time he was unable to answer the most basic question from WA's Senator Pat Dodson on the future of funding negotiations and then—members might be interested to hear this—referred to the previous Western Australian government's spending in the regions as "racist". I am sure members opposite would take some exception to a federal minister on his feet in the Senate claiming that the former WA government was racist.

I now call on the Liberal Party's partners in opposition—the National Party—to do what they need to and represent the bush: all the bush, not just the wheatbelt bush, not just the farming bush, but all those Western Australians who deserve the support of this Parliament in this place. If \$100 million a year of federal funding is imperilled by the ineptitude or deceitfulness of this minister, we have a particular problem that the National Party needs to own. The reason the National Party needs to own it is that we are looking across the budget for savings. We are looking across the entire government budgetary process to try to find ways that we will meet our commitments to not forcibly close any of these communities and allow the First People of Australia to have the choice to live on the cultural lands they are entitled to.

Government members: Hear, hear!

Mr P.C. TINLEY: If there is a termination of this payment, we will have to find that funding somewhere. After inheriting \$42 billion worth of debt, what are we to do? What are we to do?

Several members interjected.

Mr P.C. TINLEY: I have a final point. Minister Scullion asked us what we are putting on the table. I can tell members in this place that we put \$86 million on the table last year, \$86 million the year before, and we have put hundreds of millions of dollars into remote and Indigenous housing for those 10 years since the Sorry national

apology. We will continue to support those organisations. All I can say is thank God the Liberal and National Parties do not have joint party love-ins, because there would have been a serious blue!