

POWER SUPPLIES, KINGSLEY

Grievance

MRS C.L. EDWARDES (Kingsley) [9.51 am]: My grievance is directed to the Minister for Energy. Although this week the House has been debating the blackouts on Wednesday, 18 February, the concerns of the residents of Kingsley are far wider than that. They get a double whammy. Whether resulting from rolling blackouts, generators breaking down or fuses blowing, they are suffering constant blackouts. The area affected can actually be narrowed down to the area between Moolanda Boulevard and Barridale Drive, just touching on Kingsley Drive, on the northern side of the suburb of Kingsley. Some residents can suffer nine-hour blackouts, while two streets away the residents suffer nothing at all. On 17 February, which was the day before Western Power made its power restriction order, a nine-hour blackout occurred in the area. I had several calls about it. When I spoke to the office of the minister, I was told that two transformers had blown up due to overload. The response was that this can happen when there is an increase in load - for instance, if six houses in the vicinity installed airconditioning - or it can result from heat generated from outside the transformer. That is a bit stupid; it is not an answer at all. If Western Power knows there will be a 10 per cent increase in the number of houses in an area, what is it doing to accommodate it?

One of the serious occurrences during the nine-hour blackout on 17 February affected a family whose mother-in-law was attempting to make contact. One of the family's telephones is cordless and the other is attached to the fax machine, so both need electricity to operate. The mother-in-law, who needed emergency hospital treatment could not contact the family. She ended up being taken to the emergency department at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital and was placed in intensive care. The hospital could not contact the family for another 13 hours. That could have been a very serious issue and it was quite distressing to family members that they were not there for their mother when she most needed them. The other issue concerning residents is that they are constantly losing their frozen food. I know people in the Kingsley area who just empty their freezers straight into the bin on rubbish day, because they have had so many power cuts, and the food has been thawed and refrozen so many times, that it cannot be trusted. On 18 February, after Western Power had lifted its restrictions, the power went out in the same streets in the same suburb for a further five hours. The residents are not very happy at all. Two days ago, the power went out again for another five hours. This time, we are told, it was caused by a blown fuse. It is not unreasonable for people to expect to be able to use electricity, and there is no explanation for these streets having so much trouble with their power supply. One e-mail I received stated -

I would like some information on the power outages . . . I'm not looking for blame, but I want some answers that make sense, not just a lightning strike or not enough gas to power everyone, because this was not just a rolling stoppage.

The correspondent referred to Western Power's decision to issue the order as scare tactics. Another e-mail stated -

I want to make you aware of the fact that quite apart from the recent (this week) debacle with the power, the area of Kingsley in which we live, is subject to many power failures. In 3 years, we have experienced many power cuts for varying lengths of time. It is without a doubt the worst area that we have lived in. Previously we lived in Westminster, with overhead power lines;

The area of Kingsley I am talking about has underground power -

one would think there would be more failures in an area like that. In my opinion, surely there must be some fault with a grid or something.

This correspondent also seeks answers. Another letter I received states -

We moved in to Kingsley in mid May 2002.

There were several reasons for wanting to reside in Kingsley including primarily an underground power supply which we believe simply looks better, is safer and in practical terms should reduce the likelihood of power blackouts that stem from lightning strikes, pole-top fires or motor vehicle accidents involving power poles.

Since moving in to Kingsley however our home has been and is affected every time there is any mention of storms, possible power problems, rolling power cuts etc . . . whereas other surrounding pockets of exactly the same suburb are unaffected?

The correspondent goes on to state that, in conversation with work colleagues and friends in neighbouring suburbs, he discovered that those suburbs were not affected over the same period. He wants to know why they are constantly being inconvenienced by power cuts when surrounding homes are unaffected. The residents of Kingsley would like some answers. They do not want to know about fuses. They want to know whether the grid

will cope with that pocket of Kingsley. They would like a meeting with the appropriate staff who can tell them how the problem, whatever it is, will be fixed. It is simply not good enough to have a home in which the facilities cannot be used, and to bear the costs of constantly throwing out food. A short letter appeared in the *Wanneroo Times*, from David Martin of Kingsley, which reads -

For sale, one air conditioner, near new, suit home with available power.

Works best in winter months.

That obviously relates to the events of 18 February. Western Power placed a half-page ad in *The Australian* on 18 February, extolling the virtues of its green energy program. Obviously, some people want their money back.

MR E.S. RIPPER (Belmont - Minister for Energy) [9.58 am]: I thank the member for presenting the grievances of her constituents about the power supply in her area. Electricity supply is an essential service and I understand the concern and anger of people who have been unable to receive electricity, especially for extended periods. I have sympathy for the serious inconvenience, and the even more serious effects of the complete unavailability of electricity.

The electricity network in Western Australia has been built up over decades. It represents a very significant investment of taxpayers' funds. Nevertheless, in many places the network is ageing. It was designed for an earlier era when there were not the same levels of power demand as there are today. This problem has not emerged in the past three years; it has been building up in Western Australia over decades. Because of a number of separate complaints that have been raised with me, I have had occasion to look at the official Western Power statistics for reliability. I think they are probably available on the web site. These figures show that this is not a good year for Western Power's reliability of performance.

Mr R.F. Johnson: Nor was last year.

Mr E.S. RIPPER: That is interesting. There is a measure of average duration of outage per customer. That measure is above 200 minutes a year for the most recent year. In our first year in office the measure was much lower than that; it was above 100 minutes, but below 200. In our second year I think it was above 100 minutes, but below 200. Looking back over the history of that measure, it can be seen that the duration of outage per customer in some years has been comparable to the situation this year. In 1999-2000, the statistics were about the same as they are this year, and 1996-97 - I am only going from memory - was also a bad year. Based on the statistics, every two or three years there seems to be a period when the average outage climbs over the 200-minute mark. I have some advice from Western Power -

Mrs C.L. Edwardes: In relation to this little pocket?

Mr E.S. RIPPER: Yes, it is advice from Western Power.

Mrs C.L. Edwardes: Will you meet with residents?

Mr E.S. RIPPER: I will give the member the advice and I will talk about that. It is advice from Western Power, but everything that Western Power did in relation to events on the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of that week is subject to the investigation of the committee of review. This is preliminary information. The committee of review has been asked to look not only at the issuing of the order on the Wednesday, but also at the events that occurred on Monday and Tuesday.

Mrs C.L. Edwardes: But they had a five-hour blackout this week!

Mr E.S. RIPPER: Let me run through the information. The Sears Street transformer in Kingsley was overloaded during extremely hot weather on 17 February and eventually failed. Due to the configuration of the local network, two nearby transformers were also affected. While Western Power arranged for a replacement transformer, it endeavoured to restore supply to affected customers by switching them to three nearby transformers. However, customer demand at the time was such that these transformers had problems accommodating the significant additional load and each blew a fuse. The Sears Street transformer was replaced the following day. Western Power currently has data-collecting equipment on the low voltage network, which will help determine the most appropriate system reinforcement for the area.

So Western Power is investigating how it can avoid these problems in this pocket in the future. In total, three transformers were affected, each supplying 150 to 200 customers. That is what Western Power says. This is a matter perhaps for further investigation. Western Power's strategy for identifying potential overloads before they occur is generally quite successful. However, the recent and very rapid increase in the use of airconditioning resulted in an unprecedented demand for electricity on 16 and 17 February, and overloads occurred in several parts of the metropolitan area. Western Power is reviewing the process it uses to determine load increases at a local level with the aim of being able to predict them more accurately and avoid overloads in future.

If I might elaborate, a process to determine where airconditioners are being installed is needed. At the moment there is a disconnect between airconditioner installation and Western Power's information. Too often the fact that six houses in a particular street have put in airconditioners is revealed only when there is a network problem, and the situation is fixed up afterwards rather than being dealt with proactively.

Mrs C.L. Edwardes: Is the system so tight?

Mr E.S. RIPPER: Airconditioning demand is an increasing phenomenon on the system, and the advice from the engineers is that the installation of a significant number of airconditioners in a street can cause this type of problem. In hot weather the following types of problems also occur: in Adelaide during the week of 7 February, when there were 40-degree temperatures, the electricity utility had five distribution transformers blow up, each affecting approximately 100 homes. In addition, 50-odd low voltage fuses blew, each in turn affecting approximately 40 homes. In New South Wales during the heatwave in the week of 15 February approximately 100 blew, each affecting some 40 homes.

Western Power is investigating what can be done to reinforce the network in this area. I would be happy to organise a meeting between Western Power and the residents to discuss what is being done. The member for Kingsley might like to facilitate that through her office and mine so that we can get an engineer out there to explain to people exactly what happened and why they did not get the essential service that they deserve.