

WATER CORPORATION — METER READING

Grievance

MR W.J. JOHNSTON (Cannington) [9.13 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Water concerning Bill and Jean Carless of East Cannington. I have written to the minister on this issue, and I acknowledge the minister's reply of 12 June on the matter. For the benefit of the house, I will explain the situation. Bill and Jean Carless are in their 70s and they have worked hard, raised a family and done all the things that we expect of people in our community. Earlier this year, they came to see me about a problem they had with their water meter. I make the point that the minister's letter to me was received just prior to Mr and Mrs Carless leaving to travel around Australia in a caravan for the winter, so I waited until they had returned and I was able to have another conversation with them before raising the issue with the minister again. This family's ordinary water bill is about \$60, for about 250 litres to 350 litres a day, but on 26 February, they received a bill for using 227 000 litres of water. They could not believe that their water use had been so high, so they contacted the Water Corporation. Basically, the Water Corporation told them that its meters do not go wrong and are never in error and therefore they probably had a leak on their property. Mr and Mrs Carless had a licensed plumber check their property and test the system, and no leak was discovered. Mr Carless checked the meter and it is his view that there had been a reading error on the meter; when one of the tumblers moves to 10, the next tumbler is supposed to click to one, but it was actually clicking to two. Mr Carless does not have any technical skills, but that was his observation of what was happening.

Mr and Mrs Carless were not necessarily very happy with the treatment they received from everybody at the Water Corporation, but I will not follow that path. I will just say that they were not satisfied with the way they were treated by the Water Corporation. They were referred to the Energy and Water Ombudsman, and they took action to bring the matter to the Energy and Water Ombudsman. However, the Energy and Water Ombudsman can only look at the information that is provided to it. The Water Corporation's evidence to the EWO was that effectively there was no trouble with the water meter, so it was inevitable that there was going to be only one result from that process; the Energy and Water Ombudsman said that unless Mr and Mrs Carless could provide more technical information to overcome the Water Corporation's evidence, it could not take any further action. Interestingly, while Mr and Mrs Carless continued to talk to the Water Corporation, which continued to say that there was no defect with their water meter, the Water Corporation, in any event, exchanged the water meter, and, funnily enough, there were no troubles in the next billing period. The very high level of water use included in the couple's February bill did not continue. The point is that the Water Corporation's argument that there was a leak at the property means that the bill with the new meter should have been very high again, because Mr and Mrs Carless had not done any work on their property subsequent to the changing of the water meter.

Bill and Elizabeth, sorry, Jean had their long holiday—I should remember Bill and Jean, because friends of mine have the same names. They tell me that they caught everything except fish on their holiday. Because they did not want to have any trouble while they were on holiday, they paid the water bill before they left. Although they dispute the bill, they actually paid it. On their behalf, I make the point that this bill has never been properly explained. They used a licensed plumber to check for leaks and they have done no work on their property subsequent to the change of the water meter. It is a tiny amount of money for the Water Corporation, but it is a large amount of money for Mr and Mrs Carless. It is in the hundreds of dollars, but less than \$500; for them, it is a large amount. I promised Mr and Mrs Carless that I would raise the issue with the minister in Parliament, and I am doing that. It has had a big impact on their lives, not only paying the bill, but also having to deal with the bureaucracy. In their view, sometimes—not all the time—they were not treated with respect by the Water Corporation.

I will just conclude by reading the last paragraph of the note that they wrote to me; I know they also provided the note to the minister and that she has the same document, which states —

While this bill has been on hold, our following two monthly bill has arrived at a mere \$60. We are still being asked to pay the previous bill but we do not believe that we should be made to pay for something we have not used.

That is a great summary of the situation. They should not be required to pay for something they did not use and I would appreciate it if the minister could use her discretion to ensure fairness in this case and look after an important amount for this family.

MS M.J. DAVIES (Central Wheatbelt — Minister for Water) [9.20 am]: I thank the member for Cannington for raising the issue. I acknowledge that the member has raised it with me previously and I appreciate that when things such as this occur and people have gone through the appropriate channels, they can feel frustrated. I offer an apology if the Carless family feel as though they were treated in a less than appropriate way by the Water Corporation, and I will take that on board and provide feedback to the Water Corporation.

To recap on some of the information that the member provided to me previously, my understanding is that Mr and Mrs Carless went to the Energy and Water Ombudsman on 5 March because their bill was 10 times the normal amount. That would be concerning to anyone, so I acknowledge that that was a difficult position for them to find themselves in. The Water Corporation visited the Carless property twice and it investigated the high water use account dated 25 February, which was right after a very hot period in summer. The Carlesses, as the member for Cannington said, provided meter recordings that they collected over March that they felt indicated the meter was inaccurate. In that case, the Water Corporation expressed to me that it thought that was unlikely, but it arranged for the water meter to be tested at the Water Corporation's water meter testing laboratory at no cost to the Carlesses. The meter was tested and it was confirmed as being within the permitted tolerance of plus or minus five per cent under the Water Services Act and the Water Services Regulations.

The member for Cannington made the point that the Water Corporation removed the meter and replaced it with another one. To save returning the meter that was found to be operating correctly, Water Corp installed another one, but it is not an admission that the previous meter was operating incorrectly; it was subsequently found in an independent laboratory to be operating correctly and it is more efficient to have one trip back to the residents' house instead of two. The Water Corporation returned that meter to somewhere else in the network.

Although the Carlesses cannot offer an explanation for the high water use, Water Corp visited them on a number of occasions and some possible explanations include that their bore was not functioning properly during that summer period. It was a hot and dry period so there could have been greater than normal scheme water use over that period. Also, they had extra family members staying at the residence at that time. I am not offering that as the explanation, but they are possible explanations, because it was found that the meter was operating appropriately. This government introduced the Energy and Water Ombudsman, which came into being at the beginning of this year. The Carlesses had an alternative avenue to go down if they were not happy with the outcome that the Water Corporation provided and they subsequently participated in that independent process. I do not have any influence over that process. From my perspective, it is good that a customer has the opportunity to go down that pathway. Unfortunately for the member for Cannington's constituents the Carlesses, I am advised the Ombudsman has dismissed this case. In that case, we receive advice only that the case has been dismissed. I do not have any further details on why the Ombudsman made that decision. However, it is the appropriate pathway for them to follow.

I am sympathetic to Mr and Mrs Carless' case. As the member said, this bill was much larger than their normal bill. Their usual bill is \$60 and this one was around \$460, which is a large amount. The Water Corporation has a number of payment plans and it has worked with the customers to clear that debt over a couple of periods. The Water Corporation was happy to work with them to clear that. I also point out that because we have moved to two-monthly billing, this issue was picked up much quicker than if we had not made those changes to the billing process. Again, it was a long and hot summer and this bill was for the billing period immediately after that summer. Therefore, there are some possible explanations, although the member for Cannington's constituents say that they cannot offer an explanation. I am sympathetic and it is unfortunate that this has occurred. It has gone through the appropriate processes. I apologise on behalf of the Water Corporation if Mr and Mrs Carless felt they were treated by a government agency in a way that was not appropriate, and I thank the member for Cannington for raising the issue.