

*Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations — Seventy-eighth Report —
“2019–20 Budget Cycle — Part 1: Estimates Hearings and Related Matters” — Motion*

Resumed from 12 August on the following motion moved by Hon Stephen Dawson (Minister for Environment) —

That the report be noted.

The CHAIR: Hon Pierre Yang has the call, if he wishes to take it, for the balance of the time, since he was last interrupted.

Hon PIERRE YANG: Mr Chair, I understand that Hon Matthew Swinbourn was seeking the call, along with Hon Nick Goiran.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: The report before us at the moment is dealing with the estimates hearings and related matters in the first part of the budget cycle from the 2019–20 period. I hear on the grapevine that Hon Matthew Swinbourn has an immense amount of enthusiasm to speak about this report, and I am looking forward to hearing his contribution, so I will make my contribution short and sweet so that I can defer to my learned friend.

In the few minutes that I have, I just want to draw to members’ attention one episode that arose during this budget cycle of 2019–20. As members will be aware, there is an opportunity prior to the hearings to put in questions on notice for the relevant agencies to respond to. I took up that opportunity with the Western Australia Police Force portfolio and asked a series of questions. On 18 June, which was the day prior to the hearings, I was provided a response to those questions. However, there was a big problem, because my question was a multipart question. The question had 10 parts, yet the response that came back addressed only three parts of the question. Sometimes what happens is that, particularly with this government, which does not like to answer questions, the government collates all the questions and responds in one hit. We often get that from the Leader of the House when a member asks a five-part question and gets a response starting “(1)–(5)”, which provides one bulk answer to the five-part question. That is not the case here; this is different. What happened here is that I asked a 10-part question and the Minister for Police went to some effort to respond in an itemised fashion to the first three parts but did not respond at all to parts 4 to 10. Those answers were completely missing.

As I said, this information was provided the day prior to the hearing, the hearing taking place on 19 June 2019. The long-suffering Hon Stephen Dawson was the minister required to represent the government on this occasion, and I drew this matter to his attention. In his usual, accommodating fashion, he tried to assist, but, of course, understandably, as the transcript indicates, there was no ability for anyone to deal with those questions. That, of course, was particularly disappointing. It was no fault of Minister Dawson but was certainly the fault of the agency. What is the point in asking questions prior to hearings if the answer comes back incomplete—literally incomplete—and then the people who attend the hearing do not have the capacity to answer the question? I can understand that sometimes witnesses who appear at a hearing are not across the detail of a particular matter because it has some level of complexity or detail that the witnesses cannot reasonably have prepared for. However, here we have a situation whereby the agency was told in advance what the issues were, it provided an answer to three out of the 10 parts, and then, when asked at the hearing the following day, the agency representatives said that there was no-one there who was able to respond to that question at that level of detail.

What then happened is we waited for the information to come. In a very, very shifty fashion, the government decided to provide the information on 3 July, and it was made available by the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations on 3 July. Why is 3 July 2019 a very shifty day for the government to be doing this? Because on 19 June 2019, the chair of the committee, Hon Alanna Clohesy, concluded the hearing with —

If members have any unasked questions, I ask you to submit them via the electronic lodgement system on the POWAnet site by 5.00 pm, Friday, 28 June.

I have no criticism whatsoever there of the chair; what the chair said was entirely appropriate and set out the timetable for questions to be asked. But how does one then ask a question as a follow-up to answers that have not been provided to the questions provided prior to the hearings when seven parts of the answer were incomplete?

We then tried to ask the question at the hearing. Neither the representative minister nor the advisers were in a position to be able to answer the questions, despite the fact that notice had been given. Then we wait; we wait; we wait for the government to provide an answer, and what does the government do? It provides the answer in a very shifty fashion on 3 July, which is, of course, after the deadline set by the chair for further questions on notice.

Apart from the appalling state of affairs of being unable to properly and professionally conduct an examination into the police budget as a result of the actions taken by the government, the question I had asked was on the most serious matter of the multi-agency protocols for education options for young people charged with harmful sexual behaviours. It was not a small matter. This goes to the heart of the issue of those students in Western Australia who have to confront their attacker at school every day, and the role of the police and the Department of Education in the handling of this multi-agency protocol. That was the heart of the matter that was being examined. Questions were asked in

advance; incomplete responses were provided; witnesses were unable to deal with the matters, despite notice having been given on the day of the hearing; and then, in a shifty fashion, the final answers came through after the deadline for further questions to be lodged on notice, over an issue of this seriousness.

I particularly wanted to raise this today because not only is it consistent with the examination of the budget cycle process for the 2019–20 period in the estimates hearings that took place for that fiscal year, but also it was only last week that I asked the Minister for Education and Training what the current statistics are for children having to face their attacker at school every day. I was surprised to learn from the Minister for Education and Training that the number has, in fact, increased. I have raised this matter on more occasions than I care to remember, but on each and every one of those occasions, it has been brought to my attention by the Leader of the House that a number of students have had to continue to attend school and see their attacker every day.

The last time that I raised this issue was at the start of the school year. As best I recall, the Minister for Education and Training indicated that around six students continue to have to face their attacker at school every day. I was very disappointed about that given the results of a motion that the house had unanimously passed the previous year. There was some respite during the COVID period; of course, the students did not have to see their attacker at school during that period because they were having to do schooling from home. That was the only relief that they had. But then, when I asked the Leader of the House and Minister for Education and Training how many students were now having to see their attacker at school every day at the start of term 3, as best as I recall, the answer was seven, so the number has actually increased. It makes me wonder what the point is in passing motions unanimously that say that this is a problem. I would like to take this up on another occasion, but I know there is an enthusiasm to get to some other reports today. Hon Matthew Swinbourn is very keen to discuss this particular report, but I, for one, would like to take this matter a little further on another occasion.

Hon MATTHEW SWINBOURN: I thank Hon Nick Goiran for that introduction. I know he will be waiting with bated breath for the enthralling contribution I am about to make!

Hon Alanna Clohesy interjected.

Hon MATTHEW SWINBOURN: Thank you. The committee produced a very important report. I must admit I do not understand everything that is in it, but that is my lack of economic literacy! When I looked at the report, I was interested to see the number of agencies that were asked to appear at the hearings. That is contained at appendix 1 of the report. Quite usefully, the committee has summarised the nature of the evidence that was given by each of these agencies. It is not, in my experience, a practice that a lot of committees do. It might be because the evidence given by many witnesses before committees is extremely long and it is not prudent to seek to summarise it in this way. In the nature of this report, I found it quite helpful. I was particularly drawn to the summary about the evidence given relating to the Construction Training Fund. As most members will know, I have some connection with the construction industry through my time working as a lawyer and an industrial officer with the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union. The CFMMEU is an organisation that is represented on the board of the Construction Training Fund, along with industry representatives and other unions, and people with expertise in training. The reason that it interests me is that the Building and Construction Industry Training Fund is quite unique in the levy that is collected. The industry, through the levy, funds its own training. That is unique in Western Australia. I am not aware of any other industry group that funds its own training, which is done through the levy that is collected on construction. This was legislation introduced under the Labor government in 1990. It was very progressive legislation. It has helped to increase the number of trainees and apprentices in the construction industry, which has been problematic. The fund does not just go to the traditional trades-type training; it goes across the board. It includes any kind of training through TAFE—for example, a draughtsperson; people who price up jobs; all sorts of training. It goes across the board. The Construction Training Fund operates a skills training centre out in Belmont, which I have had the pleasure to attend and was there when it was formally opened. At that centre, students get almost hands-on experience with what it is like to work in the construction industry. As I say, it does not deal with just the traditional construction trades; it deals with all sorts of things. The training centre has a virtual crane.

Hon Alanna Clohesy interjected.

Hon MATTHEW SWINBOURN: Yes, it is a virtual tower, or a hammerhead crane, as it is called. Students put on virtual reality goggles and pretend they are a crane operator. I must admit that I am subject to a bit of vertigo and I suffered vertigo whilst operating the VR crane and had to take the goggles off!

Hon Alanna Clohesy interjected.

Hon MATTHEW SWINBOURN: I believe she can, actually. As an East Metropolitan member, Hon Alanna Clohesy would be more than welcome to visit that facility in her electorate. If she gets an opportunity to go out there, she will see that some brilliant work is done there. It appeals to young people who want to work in the construction industry. Obviously, it is not all digging holes and all that sort of thing—although that is a very important part of it.

Critically, evidence given to the committee during the hearings related to the extension of the levy to the resources industry. Members may know there has been what I would describe as an anomaly in the legislation in that the resources industry was excluded. That is not the normal operations of the resources industry. That is not the activities of mining, including gas and oil production; it is the construction phase—the work that goes into building the facilities to do the processing of these things. Thinking about the Gorgon and Pluto projects, those kinds of things did not attract the levy. The proponents of those projects were drawing from the construction industry the skills that we normally rely on down here, particularly during the boom phase, but making no specific contribution to the training of new people in the industry. There was a great drain on our trades particularly during that construction boom. Most of us can remember trying to get an electrician, plumber or carpenter to do some work on our house. If we managed to find one, we were charged an arm and a leg because they were so rare. The old supply and demand in a market economy meant they were able to charge very large amounts. It resulted in a gap. We did not have the correlating contribution into the training fund. Hon Martin Aldridge made a good point to me about it: a person building a house worth more than \$20 000—no-one can build a house now that is not worth more than \$20 000—pays the levy on the construction of the house, but if a mining or gas company built a construction project, they did not have to pay the levy. Legislation that was passed earlier in the term of this Parliament adjusted that. This committee obviously was going through the consequence of that.

The second dot point under “Construction Training Fund” in the report states —

The Building and Construction Training Fund Levy (levy) is expected to raise \$4 million in 2018–19, \$10.6 million in 2019–20, \$7.3 million in 2020–21, \$3.3 million in 2021–22 and 2022–23 from the resources industry.

They are obviously estimated amounts that would be raised, and would be dependent on the level of construction activity. My maths indicates that that is over \$20 million in additional funding towards training in those industries. It is support that employers can receive for training young people in that industry. In my view, that is a positive thing. It has a positive outcome for all.

I recall the Minister for Education and Training using a certain phrase when she spoke about this during the debate. She said that there is no taxation without representation, and she has made provision for the resource industry to be represented on the board. Part of what the board does is determine where the funding is allocated to in the industry. I believe that that is submitted and tabled in Parliament each year. We all get an opportunity to see whether the fund has been accountable for the money invested in it. One of the opportunities in having a look at this report was the opportunity to revisit that issue and how important it is to the industry. I must say I was a little inspired by Hon Kyle McGinn’s contribution on this report last week, so it has given me the impetus to get up and make a contribution.

A government member interjected.

Hon MATTHEW SWINBOURN: I might have been the only one who was inspired! I certainly was—getting up and giving it a go.

As I say, having perused the report and having seen these things, it is important to bring attention to them. A number of other agencies gave evidence, which members should turn their mind to. The estimates committee plays a very important role. Unfortunately, I doubt it is very well understood outside Parliament. It falls on us as members of Parliament to talk about the important work of estimates. I know members of course quibble about a number of aspects and the responses they give, but overall, estimates is the opportunity for Parliament to hold the government to account for the way that public money is spent. With that contribution, I hope it satisfies Hon Nick Goiran in relation to the quality of its content. I will leave my comments there.

Consideration Postponed

Hon AARON STONEHOUSE: I move —

That further consideration of this report be adjourned to a later stage of the sitting.

Point of Order

Hon PIERRE YANG: I understand that Hon Samantha Rowe and Hon Darren West were seeking the call as well to continue on this report.

The CHAIR: Yes, and if they wish to vote against the motion that has been moved, they are free to do so.

Committee Resumed

Question put and passed.