

**COMMUNITIES — MANAGEMENT**

*Motion*

**MS M.J. DAVIES (Central Wheatbelt — Leader of the Opposition)** [4.00 pm]: I move —

That this house condemns the McGowan government's dangerous management of the Department of Communities, placing the health and welfare of the state's most vulnerable people at risk.

We continue to ask questions on this very important matter, which was the subject of yesterday's matter of public interest and of questions the opposition has been asking, which culminated after two weeks of questions being asked in the media since this issue of child protection first emerged. That builds on the history of dysfunction in the Department of Communities since this government came to power in 2017. Today the opposition will delve a little further into some of the challenges this department is facing and why it is so important to highlight these issues and bring them to the Parliament.

When the McGowan Labor government came to power in 2017, it made sweeping changes to the public service. The Premier made a commitment at the time to implement machinery-of-government changes. He asserted that the major changes had been introduced to create a more efficient public sector. Essentially, the government created a number of mega-departments that significantly reduced the number of departments. That was done on the premise that it would create a more efficient public service to deliver better services for the community. The media statement that the Premier issued on 28 April 2017 says at the top that the changes would —

... create a more efficient public sector to deliver better services for the community

The Premier also said that the reform was —

... aimed at creating collaborative departments focused on whole-of-government objectives and delivering services in the most efficient way, including using new technology.

They are great words and it is a great aspiration, but the reality is that none of that has been delivered. We have seen complete chaos in a number of those departments and very professional, well-meaning and dedicated public servants put under stress and pressure to deliver on the agenda that the Premier set out five years ago. The government aspired to bring about these changes to create these mega-departments and gave a commitment to create cultural change. If the cultural change that we have seen emerge as a result of the creation of the Department of Communities is what we can expect going forward, I think every Western Australian should be very, very concerned.

As I said, the Department of Communities was established when the machinery-of-government changes were first announced. The changes brought together a number of different departments: the Department for Child Protection and Family Support, the Department of Local Government and Communities, the Department of Housing, and the Disability Services Commission. Essentially, those departments are in charge of the most vulnerable people in the state. It would be fair to say that since then there have been some challenges in bringing to bear the aspirations the Premier laid out in his media statement of 28 April 2017. The stakes are very high when we have charge of all these very vulnerable clients and their responsibilities. Failures were brought about because of the policy changes implemented by this government. It is incumbent on every government of either political persuasion to ensure that the portfolios in their charge are acquitted properly and that the government does not inhibit the public service from doing its job properly. This government proceeded to kick off bringing all these departments together, which added a significant amount of stress and strain to the public service. I think it would be fair to say that there has been a fair amount of confusion.

Outside the issue of the Department of Communities and the suite of portfolios that fall within human services portfolios, I recall that every year in the estimates process for the first four years of this government I asked for the Minister for Regional Development, through the Premier, to provide an organisational chart of the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, but I could not get one. There was no clear organisational chart that identified what that new department looked like, what the bodies were in each role and what each body was delivering. The anecdotal evidence that I got from the people on the ground around the state with whom we had developed relationships was that people in that department were simply carrying on doing whatever they felt like because they were getting no direction from either the minister or the senior hierarchy because the structure was still being created. The accountability mechanisms in that process meant that it took nearly four years before I could get the director general of DPIRD to give me a finalised organisational chart. I would hate to think what the Department of Communities looks like. That is a more complex proposition again. Certainly, some serious matters always exist within the human services portfolios. We are not ignorant of the fact that these are difficult issues to deal with, but when the government adds greater complexity to this suite of portfolios through its policy decisions, the government must take responsibility for the outcome. The outcome is that the department is in disarray and is unable to provide very vital and important support to very vulnerable cohorts in our community. That is why, from the opposition's perspective and that of the broader community, this is an important issue to focus on.

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It is true to say that, consistent with the Labor Party's playbook when it forms government after having been out of power for some time—I know the member for Cottesloe will endorse these comments—this is what happens. Mega-departments are created and wholesale machinery-of-government changes are implemented. That makes things very difficult. Certainly we have experienced that as an opposition. I know that many in the media who were trying to follow the changes in policy funding and the continuity of services through the estimates process found it very difficult to get clear accountability after going through such an enormous structural change. We need to set the context that there has been an enormous change in the public service, driven by this government under the guise of making a more collaborative department with whole-of-government objectives. I want to make sure that that is on the record because when we talk about some of the reports that have been done into this department in the intervening years, we still hear comments about siloed thinking and about collaboration not being delivered as a result of these changes. The Premier, in his own words, announced that the first step was to drive cultural change. As I said, that cultural change within the Department of Communities is a failed experiment because five years on, we are now dealing with some very serious matters under this government.

Paul Murray wrote an article in *The West Australian* 18 months after the Premier's first announcement of the machinery-of-government changes, and he wrote another one 12 months after that. The first article was written 18 months down the track, which I do not think is being too critical or does not give the government a chance to settle into the new role after a change of government. The article written by Paul Murray on 28 November 2018 was reflecting on the machinery-of-government changes 18 months down the track. The article is titled "Cogs of change turning slowly in government" and the first line states —

The first report card on Mark McGowan's centrepiece Machinery of Government public service changes is in—and it's not good.

...

Nearly 18 months into the process, the Auditor-General is unimpressed with how the program is performing.

Again, this is the government making big promises but failing to deliver on the detail and the aspiration, so grabbing the headline but then being unable to continue through with the policy and the requirements behind it to actually make it all work. The article quoted an Auditor General's report that was released on 8 November 2018 —

"Progress with amalgamating systems of the various constituent entities is slow, with most departments continuing to operate on several financial, human resource and administrative systems," ...

The article continues —

That ministers would accept department heads failing to establish new KPIs more than a year down the path from the amalgamations is strange indeed. It suggests a lack of enthusiasm for driving the MoG process.

This article is written off the back of a report that was conducted by the Auditor General. The Auditor General is independent of government, the opposition and the Parliament. The Office of the Auditor General reports to the Parliament. When we hear issues like that being raised by independent observers who have the power to investigate and report, it raises concerns. This is 18 months down the line. I think that Mr Murray was generous in his article. He said that it was too early to call the machinery-of-government policy a flop, but "this is an inauspicious start and there are echoes of the Gallop government's Office of Shared Services debacle". Anyone who has been around long enough knows that that was a complete machinery-of-government and public service reform failure that was driven by a Labor government. I think what was emerging back in 2008 was further evidence that there was so much focus going into trying to deliver this machinery-of-government change that there was very little focus and attention on or accountability back to the actual key performance indicators that the departments were supposed to be delivering. When we think about that in the context of the Department of Communities with child protection and family services—all these very serious matters—we start to understand why such a disastrous picture is being painted five years on.

The article quoted the then Department of Communities head, Grahame Searle, who at the time of this article was reporting to five ministers. In an estimates hearing in the first year after the amalgamation, he said —

"We started with four finance and payroll systems, four HR systems and three record management systems," ... "We are down to three finance and payroll systems. We are targeting 2020, when we move to Fremantle, to get down to one of everything.

Members can imagine that, at this time, there was such an enormous focus by the leadership of these departments to try to put into place all these structural changes that the thinking around policy changes and making sure that things were not falling through the cracks with vulnerable clients and all the other issues that one would expect government to be on top of may well have been falling through the cracks. It was interesting when one of our Liberal colleagues in the upper house asked a question of the Labor Leader of the House, Hon Sue Ellery. The questions were about

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when we would see an end to machinery-of-government changes and when they would be completed, and the answers were nonsensical. In fact, Paul Murray reflected that it is really a response directly out of *Yes Minister*. Any student of politics knows that that is not a compliment.

The first reflection on those machinery-of-government changes that were being considered by the opposition 18 months after the government came to power was that it was not looking good. Then, 12 months down the track, Mr Murray came back on 20 November 2019 and did another review of how it was all progressing. I bear in mind that there were issues around the Paul Whyte concern—I am not going to paper over those concerns; they are real, that was happening at the same time—but this is in addition to those challenges. We had machinery-of-government changes, we had emerging serious issues of corrupt behaviour, and Paul Murray made the comment in his article of 20 November —

Communities was one of the hardest hit by the MoG tsunami with its new director-general ending up responsible to five different ministers from amalgamated portfolios, something many seasoned public servants said was unworkable.

Clearly, that has continued on through these five years, because there are real concerns that attention is not being paid to meeting even some of the most basic KPIs for some of these departments, particularly when it comes to child protection.

It was not only the opposition, *The West Australian* and the journalist Mr Murray making those observations, but also the Auditor General. Again doing some very good work, the Auditor General released a report into the way that the Department of Communities was complying with recommendations from a review carried out in 2014 under the previous government that had been criticised for the working with children check systems. The new report that was released by the Auditor General at that point and is reflected on in this article by Paul Murray found that it was quite shocking, particularly about what it found inside the department itself. The report is reflected in the article, which states —

“Communities does not know the total number of its employees who require a WWC Card.

“Since the Machinery of Government changes in July 2017 it has not been able to provide a breakdown of staff from the previous Department of Housing or Disability Services Commission who require a Card.

“Furthermore, it does not effectively monitor or report to senior management on its own compliance with the Act. Communities does not know if it complies with the Act it is responsible for administering.”

That is again reflecting back on the significant changes that the acting director general at the time was faced with in amalgamating the finance, payroll, HR and record management systems. We have heard already this week about the very complex record systems that are kept within the Department of Communities. It would have been no small task to try to do that in addition to everything else.

The article continues —

The recent report by the Auditor-General outlined the human toll of that chaos:

“Communities needs to more effectively mitigate the inherent risk of unsuitable people working with children while their application for a WWC Check is assessed.

There is a whole raft of things in that finding that show that the department is not coping with its most basic responsibilities. The observation at the end of the article is that public sector reform is worthwhile, but it is only worthwhile if it creates a better and more effective system. Quite clearly, in 2019, two years after the government came to power, there was more than enough evidence that these machinery-of-government changes were causing great, great problems within the department.

The issues have been compounded by the fact that this government has chosen to pursue those machinery-of-government changes. That is all on this government and the Premier. In addition to all this, perhaps the minister can shed some light on this. Some of these changes happened in May 2019, in the first term of the government. Grahame Searle, with whom I worked when I was on the government benches—he was not in my department directly, but there were crossovers in some of the projects that we were dealing with, and I had great regard for him and his professionalism—was the acting director general appointed up until September 2018. We then had Ms Michelle Andrews, who was appointed on 30 April 2019. A media statement was issued by the government of the day and Ms Andrews was given a five-year contract. That was a five-year term appointed as the director general for the Department of Communities. Then, in May 2021, shortly after the last election, which caused a few changes on our side and probably was not picked up at the time, there was a change in director general to Mr Mike Rowe for the Department of Communities. We had an acting director general and two directors general as senior leaders and I am not entirely sure why, after the appointment of Ms Andrews, there was a change because that contract was for five years. At the time, the media statement from the Premier announced that she was an eminently qualified and appropriate person for the role. It impacts on the continuity of leadership. Clearly, there are issues within the department. I place on

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record, again, that I know Grahame Searle or I had dealings with him when I was a minister. He was and is a very professional individual. I know Mr Mike Rowe, having been the Minister for Water when he was the director general for the Department of Water. I do not know Ms Andrews but have great respect for anyone who reaches senior levels in our public service. They work incredibly hard.

The criticism from the opposition is squarely framed at the policy decisions that this government has made about the machinery of government and the resourcing of departments. The expectations were wholly unrealistic because, with machinery-of-government changes came instructions to all the directors general and the senior public servants to cut the public service and significant efficiency dividends were applied across the board. One of the challenges faced by the Department of Communities at the moment, particularly within child protection, is that there are not enough people on the ground. This issue is not being fed up to senior management, or the minister is ignoring it because that has not been addressed by this government. That is evidently so because we saw workers walking out of their workplaces yesterday to demonstrate just how stressed and stretched they are and because they were so concerned that they could not get the attention of the minister and the government.

The government created this monster of a system, this monster of a department. The Minister for Child Protection, as part of the number of ministers responsible to the Department of Communities, has been there for five years. There cannot be any escaping responsibility when we start talking about why there is dysfunction and what has been done to try to address that or to push those issues aside, saying, “It is a complex area.” Yes, it is a complex area, but this government created the monster we are dealing with at the moment and it is certainly causing some concerns for the staff and also the clients that the department is supposed to be serving.

I will fast-forward to the leaked internal documents that emerged over the last two weeks. The documents outline the fact that there is a report that states there has been widescale and endemic racism within the organisation and the organisation itself is at crisis point. The author of one of those reports is Dr Tracy Westerman, AM. This is just one of the issues the department is facing, but it is a serious one. For the record, Dr Westerman is a psychologist. She was the 2018 Western Australian of the Year and she is an expert in cultural competency. It was shocking, yesterday, when the minister rejected the findings of this report, which were very explicit in stating that there was endemic and widescale racism within the organisation and that it was at crisis point. The minister went as far as to say that these comments, that reflection and those findings were ludicrous. I gave the minister the opportunity again today to walk back from those comments, but she did not. She did not walk away from those comments. Obviously, she believes she is more qualified than Dr Westerman, who is an Aboriginal woman and a professional contracted to conduct the report and the review and she delivered it. It was not made public and, as a consequence of the concerns that were raised and the clear dysfunction within the department, we saw a series of events that culminated in the leaking of the documents.

That was one report. Another report was done to say that nothing had been done about the first one, which was conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers. Further to that, a media statement was released by Professor Andrew Turnell. He is a professor of social work and he identifies himself as the principal co-creator of the Department of Communities’ child protection practice framework. He released a statement with a bit of a preamble when he saw the commentary that was emerging in and around the discussion of Dr Tracy Westerman’s article. There is a two-page statement from Professor Turnell. In the first sentence he says —

As a Professor of Social Work and the principal co-creator of the Department of Communities’ child protection practice framework, I am ashamed. The recent actions by WA government against an Indigenous Communities’ staff member as reported in *The West Australian* this Saturday past were appalling. It is hard to find words to intelligently speak of the damage this action represents and will likely reap.

It is a powerful statement and I wonder what the response of the minister is to the words of someone who has dedicated their life to child protection and creating structures and supporting families in need. He has worked internationally. His primary focus since 2016 has been on whole-system transformation in relation to child protection systems in Ireland, the Northern Territory, Uzbekistan and Cambodia. He is a social work professor of practice and the founding CEO of Elia International.

The minister did not walk away from the commentary yesterday in response to the questions asked by the opposition around the fact that there is a report into her department from a professional who works in cultural competency saying that there is widespread and endemic racism. There was no response, and I am very happy to have one, about the comments that were published by Professor Andrew Turnell, which are equally damning. I think this is an opportunity for the minister to reflect, again, on her statement and actually acknowledge that there is real pain within the department and say that perhaps the last two weeks and the events preceding it may have done some serious and lasting damage. Only the minister and senior leaders in the government can really start to repair that damage.

Why do we, as the opposition, focus on this challenge and why are we asking these questions? Why is our shadow minister, Hon Nick Goiran, relentless in his questions around children in care, case load management and all other

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manner of questions? I know he has been asking questions around children in care and the fact that, at times, there are children in the care of the department who cannot be found. It is not known where they are. I will tell members why we ask these questions. It is because dysfunction in the department leads to poor outcomes for these children and the families in the department and the government's charge. It limits the assistance that can be offered to other families in need.

The union is calling for 200 extra workers. I have just seen an article that was published by the ABC at about lunchtime today—I am not sure whether members have seen it. It says 200 workers could be sent to the Kimberley tomorrow. The article, written by Jessica Hayes and Vanessa Mills, published on the ABC Kimberley website, is titled “Operation Regional Shield identifies almost 600 at-risk children in Kimberley police crackdown”. This is an issue that we could not get any action from the Minister for Police on either in the Kimberley or the north west. We got ridiculed in this place for raising it. Police resources have finally been sent up there to start dealing with the soaring youth crime and criminal violence in the regions. The Kimberley district superintendent, Craig Parkin, is quoted in this article, saying —

... many of the 578 children police had come into contact with were out late at night without supervision, while others had never been enrolled in school.

...

“Many of these children have never been registered or enrolled at any school in the Kimberley, which is quite concerning because we're talking about kids who are eight, nine, 10 years of age.

The government could literally send the 200 extra workers the union is calling for to the Kimberley. Having spoken to people who have worked in the environment up there—I am sure the minister is familiar with it—I know that people who work under difficult circumstances in those environments get burnt out really quickly. That is one of the issues that has been raised again and again—when there are complex cases and issues, people become burnt out. When there is no support or adequate resourcing, they simply either leave or become disengaged. We saw that culminate yesterday when the union finally said that it was starting to take critical action. The government could put the extra 200 workers anywhere in the state. That is the most recent example I could find of unmet need in our community and a department that is not geared towards providing that level of support. The department is already crying out for additional resources. We have seen significant challenges in supporting the workers who are already there.

The last thing I will reflect on in what has been a litany of disasters and crises in this department is the fact that we have had not one, but two reports, plus a number of Auditor General reports, that reflect on what the government should be delivering through the Department of Communities, particularly within child protection, and in every one of those reports concerns have been raised that it is not doing the job. In one of a number of articles published in *The West Australian* on this issue over a period of time, Angela Pownall reflects in an article on 19 January —

It's hard to say what is more appalling: the damning findings of both these reports, or the fact that the Department of Communities was told about these very serious problems in 2019, only for another report to conclude two years later that not much had changed.

She rounds out the article by pointing out why it matters, and I have just gone through that. There are vulnerable children and families in our communities who deserve support. Quite simply, this department has not been able to deliver. The government has introduced policy changes that have increased the dysfunction and the minister has ignored the internal concerns, the serious cultural issues, the changes of leadership, the failure to meet key performance indicators and the external assessments in reports by respected and professional individuals, so we see the outcome of what we have been discussing over the last two days. It is simply not good enough.

I remind members that this government is sitting on a significant surplus. If there is not a reason to spend some of that surplus on the most vulnerable people in our community, I am not sure why we are all here. It is inexcusable when we read articles or hear reports like the one that has come from the Kimberley today—that there are 600 kids who have never been engaged in school and are out on the streets. That has been discovered just in the last month, after the government finally decided to send some police resources up there to deal with an issue that the community has been struggling with for the last five years. We fear greatly for the most vulnerable in our community. The buck absolutely stops with the minister. I hope that she is in the office of the Premier; Treasurer every day between now and when the budget cut-off is set to make sure that there are additional resources for that department so that it can start addressing some of those structural concerns.

**Ms S.F. McGurk** interjected.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** You are not doing it, minister; that is exactly why we are raising it!

**Ms S.F. McGurk** interjected.

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**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** You are not doing it, minister! Sorry; you have been in charge for five years.

**Ms S.F. McGurk** interjected.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** This is under your watch—for five years! It is crisis and dysfunction and chaos, and the children the department is charged with looking after are falling through the cracks. It is not good enough.

**DR D.J. HONEY (Cottesloe — Leader of the Liberal Party)** [4.34 pm]: I rise to strongly support the motion put by the Leader of the Opposition. Yesterday, when the minister was asked about the deplorable police raid on the house of an Aboriginal senior department staff member and whether she was ashamed of the dysfunction and toxic culture that had been exposed during her time as minister, she said, “I for one make no apology about that.” I think that really goes to the heart of this matter. I have been fascinated by the responses from members on the other side of the chamber. They clearly think that they are going to bury this and that it is just going to disappear because they can give a few examples and a few salacious details about what may have been contained in some emails. Can I say that they were some emails that a member of the minister’s department sent to herself; they were not distributed all over the countryside, but were sent to a personal email address. The warrant related to—what was it?—seven documents. There was no evidence whatsoever that any of those documents were distributed elsewhere, and that was reinforced by the journalists from *The West Australian*. Members opposite are focusing on that and they think that is their defence.

Watching the Minister for Police was like watching Sergeant Schultz: “I know nothing!” That is all we heard. The Minister for Police is so gormless that he did not even ask the police about the raid. This was after the raid. Just imagine you were the Minister for Police and a civil servant—not some crazed gunman or terrorist who is making bombs in their house—leaked some information to *The West Australian* and there was a police raid on the house of that Aboriginal civil servant and her partner and child. There were 10 police, and some of them were armed. If you were even one-fifth of a police minister, you would be contacting the Commissioner of Police and saying, “Commissioner of Police, can you tell me about this? Can you explain to me why you needed so many resources?” As I said, yesterday the police minister was doing his Sergeant Schultz act: “I know nothing!” He knows nothing. In fact, it has been up to the Commissioner of Police to provide some protection to the minister by sending him some unsolicited information. How pathetic! He is a minister of the Crown, as is the Minister for Child Protection. An old department management saying is that the fish rots from the head. If someone has been in charge of a department for five years and that department is riven with dysfunction, it is their fault. If there is a completely unnecessary and overblown police raid, it is their fault and the fault of the Minister for Police. Clearly, he is not in charge of his portfolio. Clearly, he is not doing his job. Practically everything that has been said by members on that side of the chamber since this issue was first raised by the opposition in this place has not put concerns to bed; it has exacerbated and expanded those concerns about ministers who do not know what their rights and responsibilities are and do not know what their job is in this place.

I want to address some of the comments made by the minister in her weak defence in this place yesterday and also to the media. As we have said, 10 police officers, some of who were armed, raided the home of an Indigenous employee and traumatised the family. The minister talked about thousands of documents and other records, yet, as I said, the employee sent them to herself, not to all and sundry around the place. We can contrast that with the final affidavit, which was for seven documents. Then the Director of Public Prosecutions said that there was no point in going further. So we go from 10 police officers raiding a house to there being no need to go further. In what world was that an appropriate response? The government cannot duck this. It cannot say that it was the police.

As I will demonstrate, the Labor Party and this government have recent and ongoing form on this issue—that is, using the apparatus of the state to intimidate anyone who dares criticise them and what goes to the core of it because they are so virtuous and such fine people and care so passionately about all of these issues that they are beyond questioning, beyond reproach and beyond anyone challenging them and saying that they are not doing a good enough job. They cannot stand it. Their egos are too big. What we see consistently is a heavy-handed and over-the-top response to this.

The Minister for Community Services was asked whether she had read the 450 pages of the report and she made comments along those lines. She said she also wanted to talk about the allegation or the claim that had been thrown around with abandon by opposition members that there was widespread racism in the Department of Communities. She said that personally she had always found that to be a ludicrous proposition and she continued to reject it. In fact, if I heard the minister correctly yesterday, she said, “Yes, actually, it is there.” In any case, she is rejecting it. Clearly, it is a major problem in those departments, and in the minister’s five years she has not dealt with it.

There are denials of all of this. It is a pathetic attempt by members on the other side to dismiss this with a wave of the hand: “Nothing to see here.” As I pointed out yesterday, just imagine the hysteria on that side if the shoe was on the other foot and it had been a Liberal government that had done that. Liberal governments do not do this.

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Liberal–National governments, coalition governments, do not do this. But this government has a history of it, as I will point out.

We heard about the recommendations, and the Leader of the Opposition has taken us through some good detail about them. It was revealed yesterday in question time that the minister was advised of the referral to WA police of a possible data breach on 25 January, three weeks before the police raid. The minister always has options in front of her. The minister can always ask questions of the director general. The minister can always understand what is the consequence of that. The minister can always ascertain whether that will result in a police raid and what will happen in relation to that. Knowing the details about this that the minister must have known, she has that option to find out that information. However, again, we are getting, “I know nothing. I know nothing. I am the minister, but actually, really, I do not do anything. I do not have any control over this department.” In relation to the information that the minister found embarrassing, ultimately when the raid occurred, the report had already been released. That was released publicly by a very frustrated and respected member of our community and it contained the details about the second report and the lack of follow-up by this minister.

Opposition members are not alone in our concerns about this; many respected people are concerned. Dorinda Cox, a Greens senator, has raised issues about this. *The West Australian* of Thursday, 3 March, reports her comments as follows —

“(The raid) sends a clear message to Aboriginal people that we are not trusted, that we are not able to question the government systems which govern our lives every day,” ...

Another article states —

“The action by WA government against an Aboriginal Communities staff member reported in Saturday’s *West Australian* was appalling. It is hard to find words to intelligently speak of the damage this action represents and will likely reap. It is unfathomable for a department of government charged with delivering care to be so completely careless.”

The Leader of the Opposition has already quoted Professor Turnell’s comments, so I will not go through them.

Let us look at the comments made by former WA police commissioner Karl O’Callaghan. He is well placed to expose concerns about this issue because this is a person who was clearly at the pinnacle of the police force and knows how the police force works. As he says in the opinion piece that was reported in *The West Australian*, it is how the police choose to respond to this matter. The Minister for Police and other ministers are entitled to ask those members about such matters. Karl O’Callaghan has made it very clear in his comments that he believes there is something fundamentally wrong when the police divide such resources. As he points out, the view that the minister knows nothing, can do nothing, sees nothing and knows nothing after the incident occurred is more an avoidance than the truth. He states —

The Commissioner has quite rightly pointed out that police have no choice in responding to criminal complaints.

They do have a choice, however, about how those inquiries are conducted, how they are prioritised and how much resourcing is necessary.

The raid seems to have occurred soon after the complaint, which indicates that police have assigned a much higher priority to it than they have to other crimes which have real victims with real victim impact.

We know that the only victim in this case was the ego of the minister.

**Mr P. Papalia** interjected.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** If the minister was half as active in his job as a minister as he is in making smart comments in here, maybe he would have a better response to an issue like this.

**Mr P. Papalia** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms R.S. Stephens):** Minister! Excuse me, Leader of the Liberal Party.

**Mr P. Papalia** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Minister!

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** We will go through the minister’s form on this in some detail. I really wonder, and it is an important question to ask: why did the police feel the need to respond so urgently with such overwhelming force?

A member: What are you talking about?

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**Dr D.J. HONEY:** It is an open question. Why did they? Did they feel pressured to protect the government? Did they feel pressured to look after the minister? Why did they do it? Why did we see 10 police, some armed, turn up at a civil servant's house early in the morning, traumatising the family?

**Mr P. Papalia** interjected.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Minister, you do your job as a minister and I will get on with my speech here. It is an absolute disgrace.

**Mr P. Papalia** interjected.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** You can answer later. You have every opportunity. Answer later—you have every reason to do it, because that is how they chose to respond. You are a minister who is too gormless to even ask the commissioner after the incident has occurred. You did not even have the wits to ask him afterwards. It is appalling behaviour by a minister. You failed in tourism and you are failing in police. How you got promoted into this position is absolutely beyond my comprehension!

As I asked, why did the police do this so quickly and respond with such overwhelming force? The priorities of the government and the police are clearly misplaced. In a free, open, democratic society like our state, there is no place for what we have seen in response to whistleblowers. I do want to go on, because this is not an isolated incident by this government in intimidating anyone who dares question it. The history of this glass jaw Labor government is that there is virtue signalling at every turn, but when push comes to shove, its ego is more important than Aboriginal people. Its ego is more important than the way children are dealt with. It is more important to the government than dealing with systemic issues in the department. People could characterise this as harassment and intimidation of the centres. Why are department heads leaping straight to this sort of action? Any competent, sensible minister would have decided the actions that were planned were excessive in the context of the search, but instead, we saw the response we have seen. Ultimately, I might say, because we have heard it defended in this place, the Premier condones this. The Premier thinks this is A-OK—that this is a perfectly fine response. He thinks it is perfectly fine for 10 police officers to rock up to a civil servant's house at six o'clock in the morning and intimidate them in this way. It fits the pattern of the government's heavy-handed attitude. As I said, we see a history of this behaviour. In the 1980s we saw police raids on journalists looking for evidence of who was leaking information about Labor's corrupt WA Inc deals. The government could not stand it then, and brought in the police. What about the Labor government in the 2000s? Under a Labor government, there were police raids on the two major newspapers, *The Sunday Times* and *The West Australian*, trying to find out sources of information—again, not dealing with the problem, but raiding newspapers. What about the government's treatment of whistleblowers? Some members may not remember the issue of Jean Thornton in 2003. She was a whistleblower exposing the misuse of moneys in the department of Aboriginal affairs. There were reports in the newspapers and union concern about bullying of Ms Thornton by Minister Bob Kucera.

That is what we have seen from this government in the past, but what about more recently? I have a report here from the ABC news, dated Friday, 10 December 2021.

[Member's time extended.]

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** The article is titled "East Kimberley education worker cleared of criminal charges after leaking dire school attendance figures". This goes to the truth of the glass jaw of this government—its inability to allow anyone to say anything that might embarrass a minister. In this case, we are not talking about the leaking of thousands of documents with children's details. The article states —

An East Kimberley worker at the Department of Education who leaked dire school attendance figures in Halls Creek has been cleared of criminal charges.

Criminal charges! What was the crime this person committed? The article continues —

After a two-day trial in Kununurra Magistrates Court, Brock Burston was found not guilty of improperly releasing confidential information, after he sent an anonymous letter detailing the figures to the Shire of Halls Creek.

Those figures were the participation rate in the school at Halls Creek. It was reported to me that four police officers went to his house—he did not quite score 10 police officers coming to his house—because he had the temerity to tell the Shire of Halls Creek the true attendance figures at the school. He was very frustrated that the Minister for Education and Training was reporting incorrect figures for attendance at the school in Halls Creek. How disturbing. I reflect very much on the excellent contribution of the Leader of the Opposition. The Minister for Community Services in this place is supposed to be doing her job, and the Minister for Education and Training in the other place is supposed to be doing her job as well, and yet, in Halls Creek, regular attendance at the school in years 11 and 12 is eight per cent. If that is not ministers not doing their job after five years in office, what is? That dedicated civil servant, out of frustration, sent a letter to the Shire of Halls Creek alerting it to the real figures, because he



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was frustrated that the figures being repeated by the minister were false. Four police officers came to his house, and he was taken to jail. I have great faith in our courts, which had the good sense to throw out both charges, but, under this glass jaw government, he is still under an integrity investigation by the department. Tell me that that is not intimidation of someone releasing information that can hardly be called sensitive government information. He released the real information about the appallingly low attendance rate of students in Halls Creek.

I will not go too far down this path, but what a fuss was made when the Minister for Police told us about his exercise to solve all the crime in the Kimberley. He had been told about the problem months, if not years ago, but all he did was criticise and ridicule the people on this side, and did nothing about it. In May last year I spent just one night in Halls Creek, and in that one night I saw dozens of children roaming the community, cars being raced up and down the street, and fires being lit in the street. None of those kids were going to school, and yet the minister's department knew nothing about it, and nothing about the cars being burnt in Broome, Kununurra, Halls Creek and Fitzroy Crossing. Nothing was done at all until a meeting was held of the shire presidents in the region. The minister was in denial again. There is no problem if he cannot see it. It was an abrogation of his duty, and an abrogation of the duty of the Minister for Child Protection.

What will happen to those kids? We heard today that some of those kids were not even enrolled in school. What future will those poor, darling little kids have? That is a government responsibility. I do not pretend it is trivial. I have respect for the Shire of Halls Creek. What a fantastic shire. It is busting its guts to try to help those Aboriginal kids. Every single child who completes years 11 and 12 gets a chance to work in the shire. It has a fantastic work crew that is repairing the Tanami road on a continual basis. The shire is working hard to teach kids how to turn up for work, and how to get fantastically well-paid jobs in the community. The temerity of Brock Burston! Imagine that—releasing the facts to the shire, which deeply cares about the people in its community, that attendance at that school was eight per cent. Four police officers came to his house, he was taken to court, for God's sake. The minister had to be aware of that. They took him to court, and the case was completely thrown out. The department is still harassing that person. He still cannot do the job that he passionately cares about.

That is the government's record. As I said, this is not an isolated incident. The Labor Party, through history in this place, and in the present government, has a record of heavy-handed overreaction to issues. It will not deal with the problems or the dysfunction it is facing. Look at the homelessness problem. Under this government, there has been a 40 per cent increase in homelessness in metropolitan Perth. There are 1 000 people on the street. Look at the public housing waitlist. If members want me to go through this, I will do so. Figures on social housing released in the other place yesterday show that the number of people on the public housing waitlist has increased by over 8 600 since June 2020. That is a 36 per cent increase. We have seen a parallel increase in homelessness. When I was a member in this Parliament in the last term, I had more time on my hands than I do now, so as a routine, during lunchtime I and a couple of colleagues would go for a walk around the streets. Over the term of this government we saw more and more homeless people on the street.

**Ms S.F. McGurk** interjected.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Absolutely, minister, and we will go through that. The minister has made a great to-do about the Boorloo Bidee Mia centre, which was going to deal with homelessness, but it is only 50 per cent occupied. What we see in this place —

**Mr J.N. Carey:** That is a blatant lie.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Thank you, minister!

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** What a disgrace of a minister. The Minister for Housing comes in and talks about compassion when, in fact, more than 1 000 people will sleep homeless on the streets in metropolitan Perth tonight. That is what we have with this government. People are dying in the streets every week because of your inaction, because you are not doing your job!

**Mr J.N. Carey** interjected.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** As I said, like the Minister for Police, if you put one-fifth the effort into your job that you do in yelling in here, maybe we would be a lot better off.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Member for Cottesloe, are you accepting interjections?

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I am not. I will finish on this: we have a Labor government that is full of virtue. Labor members are the people who are there for the small people, they are the people who are going to help people out and so on, but what we see in this place —

**Ms A. Sanderson** interjected.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Good on you, minister! Who am I patronising?

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Several members interjected.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I will patronise you, minister—a minister who worries more about fashion than she does about doing her job in health!

Several members interjected.

*Withdrawal of Remark*

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms A.E. Kent):** I ask you to withdraw that statement, please, member for Cottesloe.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I withdraw the statement. Thank you very much.

*Debate Resumed*

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** A minister who does not care —

Several members interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Minister for Housing, the member for Cottesloe is on his feet. Just let him finish, please.

**Mr J.N. Carey** interjected.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Do I? What I do know is that a Minister for Health is not doing her job and is not dealing the issues properly, like the previous Minister for Health. We have a Minister for Child Protection who is not protecting children in the state of Western Australia. We have a government —

**Ms A. Sanderson:** You have exposed —

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Yes, yes —

**Ms A. Sanderson** interjected.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Madam Acting Speaker —

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Member for Cottesloe.

**Ms A. Sanderson** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Thank you, Minister for Health.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** You know, minister, sometimes in the heat of discussion —

**Ms A. Sanderson** interjected.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** No, no; are you going to listen?

**Ms A. Sanderson** interjected.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** No, no; are you going to listen? Sometimes in the heat of discussion, people say things in debate. I withdrew that comment and I apologise to you, minister, for making that comment. It was an inappropriate comment to make.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Thank you. It was, and thank you.

**Ms A. Sanderson** interjected.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** That is fine—you do not have to, minister, but I want to make it clear that it was an inappropriate comment to make and I withdrew it. But what I will not withdraw is the criticism of this minister, the Minister for Child Protection, and the Minister for Police because you have not done your jobs. In either case, what we see is a pattern of intimidation of public servants who have the temerity to criticise you or embarrass your government; that is what we see. As I said, I definitely do not resile from the contention of this motion. Your behaviour is unacceptable.

**MS L. METTAM (Vasse — Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party)** [5.03 pm]: I rise to also speak to this motion that was moved by the Leader of the Opposition —

That this house condemns the McGowan government's dangerous —

Several members interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Ministers!

**Ms L. METTAM:** I continue —

management of the Department of Communities, placing the health and welfare of the state's most vulnerable people at risk.

I rise to contribute to the comments made by the Leader of the Opposition in this place, focusing in particular on some of the cultural issues within the department and some of the concerns that have been raised by staff members, which has led to extraordinary action —

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**Mr P. Papalia** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Minister for Police!

**Ms L. METTAM:** I am not taking interjections —

*Point of Order*

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** I would like to hear from the member for Vasse, not the Minister for Police. He will have an opportunity to make a comment later on.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms A.E. Kent):** There is no point of order. Thank you.

*Debate Resumed*

**Ms L. METTAM:** Thank you, Acting Speaker.

I will refer to some of the concerns raised by staff within the Department of Communities and also some of the issues as they relate to children and their concerns within the child protection portfolio. As we have heard in this place, and as raised by many others who have an interest in the Department of Communities and the outstanding workers who are continually being asked to do more with less, there is a range of issues that challenge staff in this under-resourced department. There are significant issues within the department and it is certainly shocking that the minister has tried to sweep these issues under the carpet, particularly in light of a range of damning reports in the portfolios under her watch.

The minister has been quick to dismiss the issues and concerns that have been raised, particularly those by Dr Tracy Westerman, a former Western Australian of the Year and an eminently qualified and well-respected psychologist. The findings in her report, which was undertaken in 2019, were never publicly released. It is concerning that the issues raised by Dr Tracy Westerman were dismissed by this government. Dr Westerman revealed that after surveying 295 child protection staff, not a single one believed that the organisation ensured a culturally safe work environment. That is quite a damning finding. That 2019 report and a more recent report from 2020 were leaked to *The West Australian*, revealing a range of internal concerns that have highlighted not only dysfunction within the department under the minister's watch, but also a range of issues that point to the department being at crisis point.

The Leader of the Opposition was not here for all of the debate, but she pointed to some of the issues as they relate to the machinery-of-government changes. In 2006, on the back of the tragic death of Wade Scale, the Ombudsman released a report and a review of the department was undertaken by Prudence Ford, who recommended a standalone agency for child protection. That recommendation was adopted by Premier Alan Carpenter in 2007 and implemented by the former Liberal–National Premier Colin Barnett. It was reversed under the McGowan government in 2017 as part of the machinery-of-government changes and became the mega-department that is the Department of Communities. There has been no shortage of concerns raised by those agencies and their staff, who are supporting vulnerable people. Many of them are under the purview of the Minister for Community Services; Child Protection. The way in which these issues have been managed under the minister's watch highlights the fact that the agency and these workers are not getting the support they need.

I have heard locally from child protection workers who have left the department because they found it so frustrating. A former child protection worker was interviewed recently on 6PR. She said that she had been broken by the system. She said that she had lost her career, her car and her mental health after she had spoken publicly about what she had described as dangerous working conditions in the department. She talked about the fact that she had been threatened with jail and fines, and that she had lost her career. She said —

I think the culture is terrible. It needs to be restructured from the top down. I think that Minister McGurk knows exactly what's going on ... It's not being addressed at all.

Yesterday, as we saw, there was another reflection of this failure. Frustration has been felt amongst workers. The union that the minister used to represent took drastic action in the face of these workers not being heard and severe resourcing issues. The union spoke out about its frustration with the government's inaction. I think other members have also quoted this article, which states —

Ms Hendon said the union had provided Minister for Community Services Simone McGurk with evidence of understaffing in October without response.

...

“Our members have provided critical information to Minister McGurk about the risks of understaffing and have pleaded for manageable case loads that enable them to give every child they work with the time, energy and culturally appropriate support they need but are still waiting for her to act,” ...

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That was the comment from Rikki Hendon: that they are still waiting for the minister to act. The article continues —  
“Child protection workers cannot continue to wait politely for Minister McGurk to take the action necessary to ensure the safety of WA’s most vulnerable children—industrial action is now on the table.

Former police commissioner Karl O’Callaghan has also commented on this situation, backed by his experience as not only a police commissioner but also a foster parent. He stated —

It is plain that, on any measure, things are not quite right at the Department of Communities.

Whether that is to do with culture, resourcing, strategy or leadership remains to be seen but a sure sign that things are going awry is a reluctance by anyone to speak publicly and clearly when simple questions of public interest are asked.

Annabel Hennessy has written much about this. On 9 March, she wrote about leaked internal messages from a regular online meeting that is held to allow staff to give feedback to senior staff. She wrote that staff were disillusioned and had been failed by a leadership that lacked kindness. There are obviously issues within the department. It is concerning to hear the minister brush these issues aside and that she fails to address these real concerns within the department. Concerns have been raised since wholesale changes were made as part of the machinery-of-government changes, which, as I stated earlier, were a step away from the recommendations made back in 2006 in response to the Ombudsman’s review and report by Prudence Ford about the importance of standalone agencies for the most vulnerable.

In relation to children at risk, we know that children are frequently moved between different caseworkers, with three-quarters of them having between four and seven case managers over a period of two years—an extraordinary figure. Most of the children—65 per cent—had been a monitored case at some point, which meant that they had not been allocated their own caseworker. We know from budget estimates hearings that the department is knowingly exceeding case loads, with an order from the Western Australian Industrial Relations Commission allowing that. The union claims that workers are sometimes tasked with up to 40 cases. We know that a team leader had 58 cases at one point.

A report undertaken by the Commissioner for Children and Young People contained some damning findings. The six findings pointed to young people being exposed to people who had exhibited dangerous behaviours. The now former Commissioner for Children and Young People, Colin Pettit, said in his report that the young girl’s placement in 2017 in a residential care home with another child with a history of sexual assaults was not a unique event or an isolated practice in WA, and —

... case records, department policies and the experiences of Department and CSO staff demonstrated that other children and young people with HSB have resided in out-of-home care settings with other children.

Although the minister has addressed the issue of offenders who have been charged not being housed with known victims, very little has been achieved and there is still some uncertainty around what is happening when vulnerable children are exposed to those who exhibit inappropriate behaviours. The report by the former Commissioner for Children and Young People contained a number of damning findings. The first finding read —

The rights of children and young people to be effectively engaged in the planning and decision making that impacts their lives and to be supported and empowered to know their rights, raise their concerns and have these responded to in a timely manner are not routinely upheld.

The damning findings include that the government housed victims with known perpetrators despite repeated pleas for help. We look forward to hearing an update on those recommendations in the minister’s response. We are concerned about this report and what it represents. Mr Pettit also found —

... management systems of the Department are not fit for purpose and impede decision making for children and young people and organisational accountability.

The report also urged the state government to implement all the recommendations from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

I touched very briefly on the issue of foster parents earlier in relation to child protection staff who deal with foster parents. An issue was raised recently on 6PR with Liam Bartlett. He had been speaking to Katie, who had been a foster carer for more than 15 years and had raised some real issues about the children under her care—one was aged one and the other was 18 months old.

*Point of Order*

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** I am having a great deal of difficulty hearing the member for Vasse.

Several members interjected.

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** There is a lot of chitchat going on over there and I cannot hear the member on her feet.

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**The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms A.E. Kent):** Ministers, would you mind keeping the noise to a minimum while the member for Vasse is on her feet.

*Debate Resumed*

**Ms L. METTAM:** I quote —

It got to the point where we were at complete breaking point. We went through all our case workers all the way up to the director-general, and constantly told we were too attached or don't understand Aboriginal culture.

What a damning quote. Again, there were references from an ex-employee of the then Department for Child Protection and Family Support.

I have also heard from local foster parents about their concerns with the department. I will quote an email that I received from a local constituent who is the foster carer of three children who have been in his care since August 2018. The department intervened and removed the children from their parents who had been living in a car at no fixed address. They had been exposed to abuse and their poor attendance at school had meant that they were falling behind.

[Member's time extended.]

**Ms L. METTAM:** I quote —

The crux of my issues have come from a lack of measurement and continuity of resources being allocated to the case. We've had several case managers come and go. Play catch up on case, then disappear to a new role or exit DCP altogether.

He raises real issues and says that because of a lack of resourcing in the department, the department is effectively overseeing the reunification of children with their biological parents in sometimes very dangerous circumstances. I quote —

New boyfriend has known criminal history. Staying at Mums house when visits commenced, although not approved. DCP know they can't prevent it so invite him to come to a DCP meeting as a support person. Mum not doing the urine analysis as requested by DCP —

She is taking drugs —

... Meth to dexies to cannabis). Yet living arrangements were deemed "Good enough, Safe enough". We found crack pipe next to Mums bed on a visit. Yet kids were having overnight visits at this point. Mum driving without license ...

The email goes on to detail a range of issues. These issues have been raised with the Department of Communities. The constituent included correspondence in which he raised issues with a caseworker about his concerns about the reunification. I quote —

At the very least, —

This mother —

... has serious drug charges clouding over her future, and incarceration can't be completely ruled out. Pretty hard to mother from a jail cell.

He raised a range of issues regarding the drug use. The response of the caseworker was quite extraordinary —

Post reunification planning is what is meant to be happening.

The foster parent points out that this is what he has seen since he has been involved with the department over several years. He really fears, like many, for those children who do not have the same level of support that he is able to provide. It is certainly very concerning.

I have also heard many concerns from within my electorate. The department for child protection in Busselton is certainly challenged by a lack of leadership and resources. I know there has been a revolving door of staff there as well. We spoke to former department for child protection workers who talked about the pressures of working within that department and some of the challenges they faced under the structure put in place by the McGowan government.

I have raised a grievance in this place before with the Minister for Child Protection about a distressing case that resulted in the coordinator of the youth centre in Busselton contacting my office because she could not receive adequate assistance from the department for a 14-year-old child who was living in a tent with a man.

**Ms S.F. McGurk:** I'm not going to talk about individual cases in the Parliament. We never talk about individual cases in the Parliament, but it doesn't stop you exploiting the situation.

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**Ms L. METTAM:** It is not exploiting; it is certainly not.

**Ms S.F. McGurk:** It is exactly what you are doing.

**Ms L. METTAM:** It is certainly not.

**Ms S.F. McGurk:** No care for the detail about what occurred—no care at all.

**Ms L. METTAM:** I am not taking interjections, Acting Speaker. But I will say that we raised this issue about this 14-year-old with the Minister for Child Protection on behalf of the youth centre in Busselton, which was frustrated because it felt that this child was not getting the support that he required.

**Ms S.F. McGurk:** Most members raise it privately with departments and work to resolve it; not you.

**Ms L. METTAM:** We have.

**Ms S.F. McGurk:** But not you.

**Ms L. METTAM:** We have—we absolutely have done that.

It is very disappointing, minister, that the child is now homeless and on the streets in Bunbury. All those others who are surrounding and trying to provide support to this individual are at a loss to understand what happened within the department and why so many staff have been leaving and the fact that there has been such a lacklustre response by this minister.

**Ms S.F. McGurk** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Minister!

**Ms L. METTAM:** Despite the fact that the minister and the government have had every opportunity to respond, yet again we see these issues falling on deaf ears.

The feedback from the coordinator at the Youth and Community Activities Building in Busselton is that a number of homeless children living on the streets have been presenting at the youth building in Busselton since it opened in 2018. When they reappear and the youth centre staff raise the matter with the department, they have been told that the children must self-select—in other words, recommend it. The fact is the centre is overseeing kids basically couch surfing. As I have said, the coordinators and those involved at the youth centre in Busselton are frustrated. They see a department that is severely under-resourced. I spoke about one individual, but we also hear from many others. Many young people are presenting at the centre. In the absence of any support from the department for child protection, local police are being tasked to look after these homeless and vulnerable young people at the police station throughout the night. That is the feedback I have received.

**Mr P. Papalia:** When?

**Ms L. METTAM:** When? It has been happening since 2018.

Several members interjected.

**Ms L. METTAM:** Government ministers can dismiss these cases all they like, but I urge them to get in contact with the City of Busselton and also those involved in the youth building.

I have raised this before with the Minister for Child Protection and I have raised these issues with the Minister for Police.

**Mr P. Papalia:** What have you raised with me?

**Ms L. METTAM:** I raised the need for youth crime intervention officers.

**Mr P. Papalia:** Did you say there were police keeping children overnight in Busselton Police Station?

**Ms L. METTAM:** The feedback that I have here —

**Mr P. Papalia:** That is not true.

**Ms L. METTAM:** The feedback that I have been provided by the youth centre in Busselton is that local police have been tasked with looking after these homeless people.

**Ms S.F. McGurk:** You have only raised it with me once in a grievance and never since. You've only ever raised it once, just before the grievance when it suited you politically, and never since.

**Ms L. METTAM:** I have also provided a ministerial on this case.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Member for Vasse, if you are not accepting interjections, you should not be debating.

**Ms L. METTAM:** That is right; I am not.

I have raised these issues on a number of occasions, as have local agencies. They certainly are very much frustrated with the status quo. Clearly, there are major issues within the child protection department of the Department of Communities that are certainly very broad. In the estimates hearing that I was part of it was revealed that the

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whereabouts of one child under the care of the department had been unknown for at least 100 days, while another had been missing for more than 50 days. It was reported in September last year that the government had admitted that as of 31 August 2021, the living arrangements of 11 children aged between 13 and 17 who should have been under the care of the department were also unknown.

The McGowan government certainly has a lot of work to do in this place. There is no shortage of people from within the department who are willing to speak to the opposition about a system that they see is under extraordinary pressure. There is also no shortage of people who are leaving the department because they feel that they are not being heard. They are feeling the mental anguish of working in a department that is under-resourced because the Premier is not listening to those issues. As I have pointed out, there are a range of concerns among those working within the child protection department of the Department of Communities about the pressure they are under. They are being asked to do more with less and they do not feel that they have the support of the government. There are a number of issues and a number of situations in which the whereabouts of children is not known by either the minister or the department. We hear in the foster care space that children are being allowed into dangerous scenarios with parents, and that because of the lack of resources, the department is not fulfilling its obligations to reunite children. We saw the damning Department of Communities 2019 and 2021 reports, which the minister has ignored, and, of course, the Commissioner for Children and Young People's report and the six damning findings that were made into how the department is managing some of the most vulnerable children under its care.

**MR P.J. RUNDLE (Roe)** [5.34 pm]: I certainly would like to support the Leader of the Opposition and other members on the motion that this house condemns the McGowan government for its dangerous management of the Department of Communities and for placing the health and welfare of the state's most vulnerable people at risk. The calls for the resignation of the minister over the last couple of days have been well founded. I am certainly pleased to stand and support this excellent motion.

I think the Premier is probably feeling some relief that the Minister for Community Services is taking the heat this week. The Premier is grandstanding in his hotel room in self-imposed quarantine, which no-one else in the state has to do. He had his text messages and his efforts with the Attorney General revealed at last week's court case. I think the Premier is probably quite glad that the Department of Communities has taken the heat off him.

**Mr W.J. Johnston** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Order, minister!

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** I do not know where to start with the Premier's claim of gold-standard transparency with so many questionable things happening in this government. There are so many issues going on at the moment. As I said, despite the fact that the Premier is grandstanding in his hotel room, we have other issues to bring to the fore.

The police raid that was carried out and the conduct of the Department of Communities over the last few weeks really concerns me. I would like to highlight the government's very own strategy 02 from the *Integrity strategy for WA public authorities 2020–23*. Strategy 02 is titled "Model and embody a culture of integrity". Paragraph 2.6 is headed "Promote a speak up culture" and states —

Share good practice in managing reporting to facilitate positive outcomes for those who speak up.

We have seen what happens to people who speak up—they get raided by 10 police in the morning. As the member for Cottesloe said, Rob Thurston from Halls Creek reported the correct truancy figures. That did not suit the Minister for Education and Training, and four police turned up at his house. Seriously! "Model and embody a culture of integrity and promote a speak-up culture" is in the government's own strategy 02 guidelines. The government is nowhere near it. Another paragraph is headed "Embed practice", which states —

Embed good practices and mechanisms to encourage and support staff who speak up.

That is from the government's own public sector guidelines. What happens when someone does? We see police raids and charges. Speak up, all right. We have seen what has happened in the last few days. We have seen child protection workers go out. We heard the minister talking today about the culture of child protection workers that is going well. Actions speak louder than words, I am afraid. The culture within the Department of Communities is very concerning. The government's action has been orchestrated and has effectively slapped a ban on over 120 000 workers in the Western Australian public service from ever speaking up, because we have seen what happens to them if they do.

**Mr R.S. Love** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Member for Moore.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** This government thinks that it is a law unto itself. We have seen the Premier talk about gold-standard transparency, except not in some elements. "We'll only have gold-standard transparency when it suits us!" I am just quoting from this government's strategy. "Speak up! Embed these good cultures!"

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What I would like to talk about, if I may, is the super departments. I think this is the crux of a lot of the problems that are developing in this government. I am sure we will see it come out in the Perth Casino Royal Commission. We will see that come out as well. That is another super department that has failed. The super department —

Several members interjected.

*Point of Order*

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** Madam Acting Speaker, the Minister for Police is continually interjecting on the member for Roe. It is making it very hard for him to make his points. I ask that you ask the Minister for Police to stop interjecting and allow the member for Roe to make his contribution.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms A.E. Kent):** Minister for Police, the member for Roe is on his feet. You will have your opportunity. No point of order.

*Debate Resumed*

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** Thank you, Madam Acting Speaker. I appreciate that. I am making some points here that this government needs to take into account. We have a culture: speak up and you are in strife! Speak up and you will have a police raid turning up at your front door!

Several members interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Ministers!

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** I want to talk now about the super departments. We have here a scenario whereby the McGowan government set up the super departments, cleaned out the existing knowledge, cleaned out the people who knew what was actually going on in their departments and left the departments in chaos. I quote from Gary Sturgess, the former New South Wales cabinet secretary. He said —

“I know of no evidence that super-departments deliver lower costs,” ... “The economies of scale proposition is entirely dubious. People who push that line are talking ideology.”

That was from an article in 2014. He went on to say —

“There are enormous problems in having one director-general reporting to five ministers. It creates enormous complexities.

That is exactly what we have seen here. Super departments do not allow for conciliation. The top is heavy with too many agendas and too many people trying to get their say in. One director general cannot possibly oversee all the projects and compliance for the extensive list of responsibilities within the Department of Communities. That is exactly what we have seen here with the director general. There are too many departments to handle and too many ministers. On the Department of Communities website, we have 10 portfolios managed by one director general and five ministers. Anyone can see that this is a recipe for disaster, confusion and burnout. I cannot honestly see how a director general can handle a super department like that with such important portfolios.

**Mr P. Papalia** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Minister for Police, the member for Roe is speaking.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** As I said, Madam Acting Speaker, I am not taking interjections.

**Mr P. Papalia** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Sit down. Minister for Police, I cannot hear the member and I am sure everybody else cannot. You will get the opportunity. Please do not interject so much. Thank you.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** Thank you, Madam Acting Speaker. What we have here is a couple of very important departments. Communities is incredibly important. Housing is incredibly important. The housing portfolio deserves its own department. It deserves its own director general. We have five ministers vying for the attention of their director general. This super-department scenario of this government is not working. Now we are starting to see things unravel. They have cleaned out all the existing knowledge and the people who knew what was going on, and now we are seeing what is actually going on. Housing is a perfect example. Our teachers out in the regions are sleeping in swags, on the floor, in badly maintained houses, caravans or even the local pub. We know that COVID has recently had a large effect on our regional schools and we have many teachers and relief teachers out of action. I do not know what will happen over the next few months. Principals are trying to keep their schools going and now a housing crisis has been added over the top of it. We cannot get people out into the regions because they have nowhere to sleep. At the moment, the Department of Education has 53 positions advertised for the goldfields-Esperance area, 67 in the south west and 37 in the wheatbelt. As I said, it is hard enough to get those people to come into the bush, but when there is no housing, it is even harder.



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I go back to the oversight of this portfolio under the management of the Department of Communities. Currently, there are 17 new Government Regional Officers' Housing properties under construction across the state and another 35 being planned. There are two in Carnarvon, two in Laverton and three in the Shire of Kent. That is a total of seven in five years. I am not sure where the others are; I am sure the minister might enlighten us at some stage. When he was questioned by the member for Moore on 15 February 2022, the Minister for Housing refused to provide the breakdown of GROH properties within 19 listed shires and towns in the electorate of Moore, and he refused to provide details of any planned new GROH properties to be constructed. It is good to know that the minister is following the track record of his government in its gold-star transparency policy, because on the same day, a question was answered in the other place on unallocated GROH properties that have been vacant for more than three months as at 21 September 2021. Across the Kimberley, Pilbara, midwest and Gascoyne and goldfields regions, we have had 43 properties vacant for three to six months, 55 properties vacant for six to 12 months and 147 properties vacant for over 12 months. That is a total of 245 GROH properties vacant across the four regions. I do not know what is going on. I do not know why —

**Mr J.N. Carey** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Minister for Housing!

**Mr J.N. Carey** interjected.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** The member for Moore asked the questions and you would not answer them!

**Mr J.N. Carey** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Minister for Housing, I am going to start calling people to order shortly. Please.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** Surely these GROH properties that no longer meet the requirements and demand of our client agencies should immediately be considered as available for clients on the public housing waiting list if not filled by allocated agencies within a predetermined time frame.

**Mr J.N. Carey** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Minister for Housing, please!

*Point of Order*

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** I am having great difficulty hearing the member for Roe give his contribution. He has the call. These people do not.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms A.E. Kent):** Thank you.

*Debate Resumed*

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** I will have another try. Thank you, Madam Acting Speaker. The question here is the capacity in this super department. It is the capacity, the ability to develop strategies and the ability to have transparency. We have a minister who does not want to answer questions.

Several members interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Ministers! You will be getting your chance shortly.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** He did not want to answer the member for Moore when he was questioned on 15 February 2022. We have a director general who is pretty well focused at the moment—let us face it—on saving the Minister for Child Protection. That is the focus at the moment. Do not worry about housing; do not worry about anything else in the super department. His work is now cut out trying to save the Minister for Child Protection from the calls not only from us, but also the media and the public of Western Australia to sack not only the minister but the director general, as well. These are the real issues that are concerning for me.

The Department of Communities is too big. It is an umbrella organisation without the capacity to truly identify critical issues and deal with them. It is a recipe for growing discontent when a group of 10 police officers is sent in the early hours of the morning to the house of someone who dared to speak up on the concerns that were raised about the culture of the department. It is actually beyond autocracy. It certainly does not meet the government's 2020–2023 integrity strategy about promoting a speak-up culture. Speak up and we will have a police raid—that is basically what the government is saying. It is actually starting to border on a police state. As far as I am concerned, the developments over the last few months and the way this government is going are disturbing. We have seen the pattern. It is not only in Communities but also in Education and Health and other portfolios: speak up and your job is at risk. That is what I wanted to say. I am disturbed about the pattern that has developed. I am disturbed about the way that the Premier, as I said, is grandstanding in isolation in his hotel room when he should be out here. He should have been looking after this state for the last seven days. I am also disturbed about the way that these super departments

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have developed. I actually feel sorry for the directors general who are trying to maintain their departments. They are trying to answer to five different ministers. It is not good enough. This government needs to start looking at its own 2020–2023 integrity strategy for the Western Australian public sector. That is what it is all about.

**MS S.F. MCGURK (Fremantle — Minister for Community Services)** [5.51 pm]: I look forward to clarifying a few points. It is true that we experience the full range of emotions when we listen to members on the other side. One is a sort of somnolent or dull repetition, very quiet, nothing much to see here. There is not a lot of action, and there is no energy or passion about what they are talking about. Then they are provoked. I cannot help but address my initial comments to the member for Cottesloe, who made the outrageous and incredibly offensive comment to the Minister for Health that she was more interested in her wardrobe than her portfolio. I guess we have to remember that this was a member of the Weld Club. This is someone whom we know feels quite comfortable in all-male environments and is the leader of a party that is really challenged to send the message to women, potential members of the party as well as elected representatives, that they are welcome, let alone understood. The Liberal Party is absolutely challenged in that regard. Although I acknowledge that the member for Cottesloe and Leader of the Liberal Party quickly realised that he had misspoken and backtracked very quickly, it was incredibly offensive. It spoke volumes to what the Liberal Party members on the opposition benches think about women in this place. The Minister for Health is sitting here in a business suit, doing her job. She gets mocked by the Leader of the Liberal Party for essentially, what? For wearing business clothes. It is just absurd. It is absurd and offensive and it speaks volumes.

Can I talk again, as I did in question time and in the MPI yesterday, and in question time today, about child protection? It has been interesting to get so many questions on child protection over the last couple of days. I say that because in 2021 and 2020, do members know how many child protection questions I got in this place? It was two questions on child protection.

Several members interjected.

**Ms S.F. MCGURK:** I am not taking interjections from the other side.

Two questions in this place were asked about child protection. That is how much members opposite care about child protection matters. All of a sudden, when there is a bit of media and a bit of interest, members opposite are very passionate and they have very strong opinions. In fact, they have shown very little interest about the details of child protection when they were in government or since they have been in opposition.

I grant that the opposition spokesperson on child protection is very interested in this issue—some might say a little obsessed. He is very interested in this issue and has a very good understanding of some of the detail. Sometimes it is a little misguided in focus but I will not take away from his knowledge of the broad area of child protection. In this house, we see very little interest over time. I will go back to what has sparked this latest interest in child protection, which was particularly the criminal investigation over the leaking of documents, or the unauthorised access to documents, from the Department of Communities. In particular, they were child protection documents as I understand it. As I have said before, after the media reporting of the leaked reports—the IPS or the Westerman report, and the subsequent PricewaterhouseCoopers report—the Department of Communities began to look into how the media had got hold of those reports because they were not publicly available at that time. The department did its due diligence and found that literally thousands of documents had been sent from the department to an employee's personal email account. They had quite possibly been forwarded from there to a third party.

That led the Department of Communities to do what it understands its obligations to be under the Public Sector Management Act guidelines for disciplinary matters. I quote —

Any information that indicates criminal conduct should be immediately referred to the WA police (in addition to notifying the CCC, as above) for advice and possible investigation.

The department was acting in accordance with the guidelines under the Public Sector Management Act. We would be disappointed, and it would be wrong, if the department did not act in accordance with those guidelines. The police were notified and then undertook their own investigations. As the Minister for Police has quite rightly asked: are members on the other side being critical of police and how they undertake their operations? Is that what they are doing? It sounds that way to me. The police were given a matter that was possibly criminal and asked whether they would like to look at it and undertake further investigation, and that is what they did.

We cannot underestimate the nature or the scale of the documents that were removed from the Department of Communities. The opposition might talk about this person as being a so-called whistleblower. This is details of children in care. The director general of the Department of Communities is legally responsible for those children. It was the detail, including the scale of the number of documents that were downloaded, that led to the report to police. I believe that is correct. I believe that is proper and correct. I am particularly concerned to see that those documents contain details of children in care and either their foster carers or the foster care organisations that work with those children in care. If the opposition is not concerned about that, it is very concerning. If opposition members

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are not worried by that, what does worry them? What do they think about someone accessing details about children in care and removing those details from the Department of Communities?

If that is not enough, if the police are given information about possible criminal behaviour, does the opposition think it should be ministers who determine how those investigations take place? Is that what the opposition thinks? That is what the shadow police minister thinks. I quoted this yesterday. The comments of Hon Peter Collier, the shadow Minister for Police, were reported in *The West Australian* as follows —

Mr Collier described the raid as “wrong on so many levels,” saying it was a waste of police resources and if the Government was going to send police to investigate every leak they would need to treble the size of the force.

Mr Collier is reported as saying —

“I have got the greatest respect for the police force, but this is a culture coming from the top down ... from a Government that is absolutely obsessed with secrecy ...

He is then reported as saying —

“Never in a million years would I as a minister have endorsed the police going around to someone’s home —

Is this Keystone Kops? It is just absurd to say this —

“Never in a million years would I as a minister have endorsed the police going around to someone’s home ... that’s a sad reflection of the Government, but at the same time that puts police in a very invidious position.”

The police are tasked with doing their job. The police are tasked with doing their investigations, as quite rightly should be the case. It is not up to the Minister for Police or me, as another minister of the Crown, or any minister, to decide how the police do their operations. As I said on the removal of details of children in care from the department, I think it is incredibly concerning for the people of Western Australia that the opposition in this state believes it is correct that ministers of the Crown should decide what potential criminal matters are investigated and how they are investigated. That is of incredible concern to all of us.

I also reiterate, as I am not sure the opposition was listening, something that was read into *Hansard* yesterday by the Minister for Police. He received a briefing note from police advising him that it had been determined that there was sufficient evidence to support a prima facie case of disclosing official secrets pursuant to section 81 of the Criminal Code; however, it was deemed not in the public interest to proceed with a prosecution at this stage. I do not know whether the opposition is paying attention, but that was the advice of the police to the police minister—that after their investigation, there was a prima facie case for a prosecution of an offence of disclosing official secrets under section 81 of the Criminal Code; however, they decided, in consultation with the Director of Public Prosecutions, that it was not in the public interest to proceed with the prosecution. I hope that the opposition listened to that and will say, “Yes, the Department of Communities acted properly and, yes, the police decided to undertake their own investigations.” However, it is not my place to question how they decide to do investigations.

I want to refer briefly to the transcript of the Commissioner of Police’s media interview on 1 March at 9.05 am. I do not have the detail here, but I believe it might have been on 6PR, but I will confirm that. Commissioner Dawson said —

Department of Communities have a legal responsibility to protect identities and details of children at risk. They’ve got over five thousand, that in the old language were called State wards. So, when the Police were referred the matter, experienced detectives made an assessment of it. They grounded a search warrant. A search warrant has to be issued by either a magistrate or a justice of the peace. That did occur. A warrant was issued. We normally have, to do it efficiently and safely, about seven officers that normally would go, that’s our normal type of number that would attend. So three initially attended, four very quickly joined them, and then when they had to download some technology, I’m advised another two technology experts arrived, and then departed again. So they weren’t all simultaneously there. A female officer was also called in there, given the nature of the family setting there. And so while they weren’t all present simultaneously, a total of ten officers attended.

Well, you know, we ... if you’ve only got two officers, it would take much, much longer and you’ve got to have the technical expertise as well, depending on the nature of what you’re doing. So, it’s ... look, we have officers attend all sorts of places and we do thousands and thousands of search warrants. It does sound a lot, but you’re dealing with, at times, a complex situation and you need to actually do it thoroughly and efficiently.

That was the police commissioner explaining the number of police who were sent to execute the warrant in that investigation. I hope the opposition was listening to that because I think it is important.

The point has also been well made about whether an employee is justified in removing state government records in the course of their work—whether they believe they are justified and therefore it is okay. That is not the case. If a public

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sector employee believes that it is in the public interest that information be disclosed, there are currently legal avenues for them to do that. I referred in Parliament in the last couple of days to the Public Interest Disclosure Act. In fact, there is a guide to public interest disclosures in WA public authorities that is easily available on a website. It states —

The Public Interest Disclosure Act 2003 ... allows people to make disclosures about wrongdoing in public authorities, which includes the State public sector, local governments, government trading enterprises, public universities and some government boards and committees ... and protects them when they do. Read below to learn about the PID Act and what your role in the process might be.

It is not just for public sector workers; it is also for the public. There are very user-friendly opportunities for people to understand how they can make public information that they believe is in the public interest to disclose. It is not for a public sector worker, whether or not they are well meaning, to take it upon themselves to remove public sector information, particularly sensitive information that is protected by law, and that includes details of children in care. A number of acts are very clear about that. Not only did the Department of Communities suspect that this might be of a scale and nature that is criminal, but also clearly the police thought there might have been possible criminal activity, because they undertook their investigation and then advised that in fact there was a *prima facie* case for charges under the Criminal Code but decided not to proceed with charges.

I want to address a couple of things that the department, which I have had the great pleasure and privilege to work with over the last five years, has done to ensure that it has improved outcomes for not only Aboriginal people within its workforce, but also Aboriginal clients. A number of those things are referred to in the Indigenous Psychological Services report, or the Westerman report. That report is now publicly available. It was not hidden. It was not gathering dust. It was being acted upon within the Department of Communities. Generally, the intent of a number of those recommendations to improve the outcomes for Aboriginal people within and external to the department are being acted upon.

A number of those outcomes, for instance, are reflected in the structure of the department. I talked about this today in Parliament. We have an Aboriginal outcomes division. About 30 per cent of that division within the Department of Communities comprises Aboriginal staff, which is a fantastic outcome. It is led by an assistant director general, an Aboriginal woman, who is tasked with leading that division and then informing the work across the department to improve Aboriginal outcomes. In fact, overall, the department is doing well with its employment of Aboriginal people. The rate is currently 6.4 per cent across the whole department. The industry target within the public sector is 3.7 per cent, so it obviously well exceeds that. Commentary has been made that before the machinery-of-government changes to the departments for child protection, housing and disability services, the rate was higher in the child protection department. That is true, but when a department that had about 2 500 employees joins with a department with 6 000 employees, there is likely to be some dilution of the rate. The rate of 6.4 per cent could be better. I do not think that the solution is just to have more Aboriginal people working in the department, although that would be good. I think it is also about how we work with Aboriginal people and how we work particularly with Aboriginal-controlled organisations, and I will talk more about that.

Our procurement is very good. Again, it could be better. It is a key issue in how we improve our outcomes for and engagement with Aboriginal families. It is no surprise that child protection, like other authorities, whether it is police or others, has a lot of historical baggage because of past policies. I can understand the reluctance of some families, whether or not they are Aboriginal, to engage with departmental officials. Part of our approach needs to be having community sector organisations, particularly those that are Aboriginal controlled, doing some of that work.

The overall government target for 2020–21 is for three per cent of total contracts to be with Aboriginal-controlled organisations. The Department of Communities has reached 19.05 per cent. Just over 19 per cent of its contracts are with Aboriginal organisations. I give credit not only within my areas of ministerial responsibility; the Minister for Housing is also working very hard to make sure that maintenance and construction contracts are given to Aboriginal organisations.

I was very pleased to receive a letter from Wungening Aboriginal Corporation, which is one of the Aboriginal-controlled organisations that we have contact with. It reminded me of a letter I received late last year. Many people here have engagement with Wungening. It was previously the Aboriginal Drug and Alcohol Office and now does a very important range of social work, whether it is in the areas of drugs and alcohol, homelessness or early intervention in child protection. It was awarded one of the big new contracts in a consortium of Aboriginal-controlled organisations after we came to office; I think it was in 2018. It has been doing some really good work with early intervention and I think it can take some of the credit for reducing the number of Aboriginal children in care.

I was pleased to receive a letter from the CEO, Daniel Morrison, in which he said that he wanted to provide an update on some of the work happening in Wungening Aboriginal Corporation. He said —

... Today, Wungening is undertaking a series of interviews with Reconciliation Australia as we have recently been announced as one of nine finalists in the Indigenous Governance Awards.

These national awards recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led organisations excelling in culturally-informed ways of working, that result in positive and long-lasting change for their community.

In preparation of the interviews being conducted today, we have been reflecting upon the last three years at Wungening, and the amazing achievements we have produced for our community, which would not have been possible without the support of Government.

The exponential growth we have experienced over the last five years has been unprecedented in our 34 year history as an organisation. In part, this has been because of the strong leadership and intent shown by the State Government to work with Aboriginal led organisations, programs and services in partnership in social service areas.

For example, one of the services we have highlighted across our interviews this week, is our child protection Wungening Moort program, which is funded under the Early Intervention and Family Support Services by the Department of Communities.

In the financial year of 2020/21, we provided over 20,000 occasions of service, to 349 highly vulnerable families across the Perth Metropolitan area that we worked with. This included 606 adults and 941 children that were supported through a case management approach, which involves walking hand in hand with our mob to address their needs.

We are really proud, that because of this work, 96% of the children we worked with remained safe in their homes, despite being at risk of entering the out of home care system when we started working with them.

The point we continue to make—that Aboriginal led services and programs are best delivered by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations—is proven through examples like this program.

Given the reflection we have had to do for these awards, I thought it timely to write to you and provide you with this update. I also wanted to take this opportunity to thank you for the unwavering support that you and the Department of Communities have provided us.

...

I wanted to take this opportunity to also acknowledge the unprecedented efforts that the Department and you as Minister have put in to lifting the voice of Aboriginal People in important areas like Child Protection, the Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence, and homelessness.

I wonder whether the opposition will talk about those sorts of achievements instead of talking down the work of the Department of Communities and child protection workers in our state? What about some of the achievements? I do not resil from the fact that there is difficult work and difficult cases. This is the nature of child protection. That is why they are before us, but there is also some very, very good work.

Just briefly, the Noongar Family Safety and Wellbeing Council, which is a peak body in the south and south west that does child protection advocacy, sent me a letter on 15 November. Barbara Henry the executive director of that council wrote to me —

Dear Minister McGurk

...

On behalf of the Noongar Family Safety and Wellbeing Council, I would like to thank you for your commitment to Closing the Gap and to supporting the self determination of Aboriginal people through the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy, whole of government Commissioning Strategy, —

That is the strategy of the department —

and recent tender award for the Aboriginal Family Led Decision Making pilot services.

She says later —

It is encouraging that the significance of Yorganop's knowledge, —

Yorganop is one of the Aboriginal-controlled organisations —

experience, roots within community, and leadership in Aboriginal child safety and wellbeing is now being recognized by the Department of Communities under Mike Rowe's leadership.

She says more, and I thank her for that acknowledgement.

The investment has been significant. New money has been put into child protection. Additional money has been put in under this government. In 2021–22, the state government put a massive \$198 million into initiatives that keep communities safe, strong and fair. This included \$93 million in increased funding for child protection services,

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including the \$37.2 million to permanently establish the Home Stretch program, which I think will have significant improvements for young people leaving care.

I have spoken about some of the outcomes from early intervention. We have had the first reduction in the growth of the number of not only children in care, but also Aboriginal children in care since 1996. Significantly, in every region in Western Australia there has been a reduction in the number of Aboriginal children in care and an investment in Aboriginal-controlled organisations.

I spoke about the work that Wungening is doing and I just want to reiterate that figure. In 2020, through the Aboriginal in-home support service—that is some of the work Wungening does in Perth and Peel—98 per cent of children were kept safe at home 12 months later after engaging with that project. These are significant figures. These are children who would otherwise be in the child protection system. That is not only us doing that. That is Aboriginal people doing the work on the ground and supporting those organisations. Communities and Wungening Aboriginal Corporation are working to extend this program to Peel, as I said before, and this Peel program will support an extra 18 families.

I spoke about Best Beginnings Plus today in a brief ministerial statement. It is a fantastic program that looks at infants who are less than a year old and unborn babies. I want to reiterate those outcomes. There was a 50 per cent reduction in drug use, a 45 per cent reduction in alcohol use, and a 40 per cent reduction in family and domestic violence. They are significant outcomes. Some fantastic work on pre-birth planning has been done by the Department of Health through King Edward Memorial Hospital for Women and also Fiona Stanley Hospital. There are some fantastic improvements there. There was a 52 per cent decrease in the number of newborn infants entering care from King Edward's and a 54 per cent decrease in the number of Aboriginal newborn infants entering care from King Eddy's. They are fantastic outcomes because of the cooperation across government agencies and working in a person-centred way. There is still work to do, but I am very proud of that.

For the record, I want to reiterate that although I am pleased with the reduction in the number of children in care under our government, there has been a decline in the growth. From 2017, the number of Aboriginal children in care went from five per cent annually to six per cent to 6.7 per cent, but then in 2020 it went to 4.8 per cent and in 2021 it went to minus 0.8 per cent. We have seen a reduction in the level of growth, plateauing out and then a reduction in total numbers.

Let us look at the figures under the previous Liberal–National government. The growth in the number of Aboriginal children in care went from 7.1 per cent in 2011 to 10.5 per cent the year after. In 2013, there was another growth of 10.5 per cent. When it left government, the growth was 6.1 per cent. In 2012 and 2013, the growth was 10.5 per cent in each of those years. There was an increase in the number of children in care by a massive amount and no attention was paid to the sort of work and reform that needed to be done to work in partnership with Aboriginal people to best manage our gross over-representation of children in care. Compared with other states, particularly Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales, Western Australia was behind in this area. State government authorities acknowledged that we needed to work differently with Aboriginal people and that connection to culture, extended family and country is an important protective factor and we needed to improve those outcomes. That drove the legislative change that we put through Parliament last year. That has driven the Aboriginal family-led decision-making pilot, which is entirely Aboriginal led. An entirely independent group of 10 senior Aboriginal people decided how they wanted the pilot to be designed and run, and now it has been rolled out in Geraldton, the midwest and Mirrabooka. There has been the big investment in early intervention and for some of the feeder issues, such as homelessness and family and domestic violence.

During question time, I spoke about the increase in the number of child protection workers. Since we came to government in 2017, there has been a 28.6 per cent increase, which is a total of 201.8 case-carrying FTEs. That is distinct from the numbers under the previous Liberal–National government. Between 2012 and 2016, there was an increase of 2.1 per cent or 13 FTEs—pathetic! If members of the opposition are listening, do not lecture us about increased numbers of child protection workers. Of course they are not listening. Of course they have left the chamber. It was incredible to me that we got the message that they would be struggling to fill one and three-quarter hours on this debate.

Several members interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** There is a point of order, minister.

**Ms S.E. Winton** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Member for Wanneroo, I will call you to order. In fact, I will just start booting people from the chamber at this late stage. I saw the performance earlier and I was not impressed. I tell you, Deputy Leader of the Opposition, that you do not start when you are not in your seat, but I will hear your point of order.

*Point of Order*

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**Mr R.S. LOVE:** The point of order is that the minister has reflected on the absence of a member or group of members from the chamber, and that is not considered to be parliamentary behaviour, as I understand it.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr D.A.E. Scaife):** There is no point of order.

*Debate Resumed*

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I understand the sensitivity of members on the other side of the house. It is just not cricket, is it, to talk about their actual performance, but it has been woeful in this area. In two years, 2020 and 2021, I was asked two child protection questions in this chamber, and now when there is a bit of interest out there, all of sudden they are really concerned: “It’s in crisis” and “This is woeful”. I understand that there are challenges—I do not deny that—but that is the nature of child protection work. It is like going to a children’s hospital and saying, “These children are sick. What’s going on?” It is the nature of child protection that children and their families are vulnerable. It is difficult work.

Foster carers do incredible work in difficult circumstances. Ideally, the department works to reunify children with their birth parents if it is safe to do so and that can be incredibly difficult for foster carers. Sometimes the department does not get it right. Sometimes we do not get it right, but to denigrate the department and say that it has a toxic culture, it is in crisis, it is under-resourced and everything it does is bad is not helpful at all. I acknowledge that there are vacancies, but that is because we have been in a worldwide pandemic and we have had border settings that have meant that the usual flow of workforce into the child protection specialist callings has been turned off, and that has been challenging. Having said that, it is always a challenge to attract and retain staff. It is challenging and often traumatic work. I want to make it clear that I support the workforce and thank those people for their work. I know they sometimes do not feel that they are heard or supported. I have made the effort as the minister to try to make myself available to understand their concerns. I think the director general, Mike Rowe, is doing a fantastic job and I want him and all the staff to feel that we are moving forward to deliver a secure workforce and good outcomes for families.

I am proud of some of the outcomes. I do not say that there is not room for improvement and that we do not have work to do to make sure that the department is more culturally aware and able to meet Aboriginal people where they are. I think we as a country are on that journey. But I believe that some of the elements that we have put in place and some of the partnerships we have with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations means that we are well placed to do so.

Finally, I want to refer to the Target 120 program, which, again, is another important program that the Department of Communities has overseen and a policy of this government. It is about early intervention for youth justice and it has been implemented across 11 sites in the state. As of December 2021, 48 per cent of participants have not had further police contact since participating in the program. These young people were prolific offenders and some of them would have been on their way to Banksia Hill Detention Centre if not for the program. I thank the department staff who are doing that work. I also met Lawford Benning and his staff from MG Corporation, which is the Aboriginal community-controlled organisation doing that work in Kununurra. I met him recently in Perth and he was very excited about the achievements that it has been able to make in the four or five months it has been doing that work. It bodes well for the future that we can give more contracts to ACCOs and get them to do the wraparound work that is needed for vulnerable people and their families.

**MS A. SANDERSON (Morley — Minister for Health) [6.26 pm]:** I rise to speak against the motion moved by the opposition. This afternoon, we have seen the opposition in all its glory with some of its anachronistic views, frankly. I note that the Leader of the Liberal Party is not here; he will keep for another day, given some of the comments he made in the chamber this afternoon. I will address some of the incredibly patronising comments made by opposition members during this debate, particularly those about child protection workers and Aboriginal communities. It was the Liberal–National coalition that tried to shut down remote Aboriginal communities. There is feigned outrage, even though there was a clear and articulated plan —

**Mr R.S. Love** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Member for Moore!

**Ms A. SANDERSON:** There was a clear and articulated plan to shut down remote Aboriginal communities and it was not until there was broader community outrage that it backed away from that. That is the kind of acknowledgement and respect that it has —

**Mr R.S. Love** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Deputy Leader of the Opposition, I made myself pretty clear before. The Minister for Health has the call and I want to hear her in silence.

**Ms A. SANDERSON:** Thank you, Acting Speaker.

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That is the kind of philosophical place the opposition comes from when it comes to Aboriginal communities, so I do not buy its feigned outrage—it is flimsy—because it already has a record. The opposition's gripe or grievance is with the conduct of the police—it is clearly with the conduct of the police. It outlined clearly the litany of issues that it has with the executing of a warrant and the decision or otherwise to prosecute, which are all independent matters for the police. The opposition has been consistently calling for ministers of the Crown to intervene in a police matter. That is what it was calling for. The opposition has been calling for a minister of the Crown to intervene in a police matter. There is a word for that. That is not how this government and cabinet ministers in this government conduct themselves. That might be the standard to which members opposite hold themselves, but interfering in a police matter by a minister of the Crown is their gripe.

**Mr R.S. Love** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Deputy Leader of the Opposition, I am not interested.

**Ms A. SANDERSON:** There was a fundamental data breach in the department, which included the details of children in care. They are our most vulnerable citizens. They do not have that many people looking out for them. They do not have parents looking out for them at this point. They have the department. It is the department's duty of care to ensure that everything that it holds about them is kept securely. That is absolutely the department's responsibility. The director general was required, under law, to refer that to the police, the Public Sector Commission and the Corruption and Crime Commission. He carried out his obligations under the act, as was completely appropriate. I have worked with the director general of the Department of Communities; he is an individual who has integrity and empathy. He is a hardworking, dedicated public servant. He did exactly what he was required to do under the act. That is what we ask of our public sector.

All the opposition has done has been to criticise, harp on and seek some kind of political interference in that process. That is what it has asked for. We will not interfere in a criminal process. We will not interfere with the police, who should carry out their duty without fear or favour. That is what they are supposed to do and that is what they should be supported to do by all sectors of the community. This confected outrage that somehow the minister should have had line of sight of what was occurring at an operational level in a potentially criminal matter is ridiculous and outrageous. It gives us a real flavour of the kind of government the opposition would run—without question.

The idea that the Minister for Child Protection; Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence; Women's Interests is somehow sheltering racists in the Department of Communities is offensive to the minister and that department. I have known this minister and worked side by side with her for nearly 17 years.

**Mr R.S. Love** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Deputy Leader of the Opposition!

**Ms S. Winton** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER:** Member for Wanneroo, I do not need assistance. Deputy Leader of the Opposition, I do not mind the occasional short interjection, but it is not an opportunity for you to give your speech on this matter. The Minister for Health has the call, and I will hear from the Minister for Health.

**Ms A. SANDERSON:** I have worked beside this minister for 17 years. I have known the Minister for Child Protection, who is also the first Minister for Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence and Minister for Women's Interests, and worked side by side with her for 17 years. There are not many people who I could say have championed the rights of vulnerable people and fought tooth and nail against discrimination as hard as this minister has done for her entire working career. She has led from the front. She has tackled some of the most pernicious discrimination across industries that she has worked in, whether she was outside or inside Parliament. She has taken that approach into her role as Minister for Child Protection. She acts with absolute integrity and empathy. I have never seen her act in a way that is anything other than thoughtful, deliberate, consultative and empathetic. That is the approach that she has taken to this portfolio. It is not a portfolio that wins you great accolades. It is not a portfolio that wins you great headlines. No-one pats you on the back when fewer children are in care. That is not the stuff that makes the headlines; that is the hard graft behind the scenes. That is what this minister has done. She has taken on this portfolio. She put her shoulder to the wheel. She identified the rising number of Aboriginal kids in care under your watch. She has worked with Aboriginal-led organisations. She works with Aboriginal families. She is doing everything she can to bring them into the decision-making process to reduce the number of kids who are separated from their families. That is what she has done. I know that she is 10 times the calibre of any cabinet minister you had in your government—of any of them put together—because she works with integrity and is willing to do the hard work in government. There are not many harder jobs than being the Minister for Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence or Minister for Child Protection. It does not get much harder. We are seeing real results from the work that she is doing. I congratulate her for the work that she and her office are doing and for her commitment to this portfolio and to working with the issues that she has to work with—the depravity, tragedy and terrible



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circumstances—every single day in this portfolio. She is committed to making a difference in the lives of those children and families, and she has never wavered from that commitment. I reject any assertion from anyone inside or outside this Parliament that somehow she is harbouring racists in the Department of Communities—an organisation with very dedicated people who do some of the hardest work in this state.

I do not buy your confected outrage. That is because you have a record in government of how you treated Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal kids in care. You had no plan to fix it. You were just happy to go along with the paternal approach—take them away, put them in care, do not help the families, do not reunite families and do not work with them, but sideline them, make the decisions from a corporate office and then throw them out into the communities for them to live with. That is not the approach that we take. That is not the approach this minister has taken. I am proud to work side by side with this minister. She is a strong voice in cabinet, in government and in the community for those vulnerable people. She has done more than any of your lot ever did in your time in government. I absolutely reject this motion. I reject your confected outrage. I reject your attempts to somehow paint this government, this department and this minister as harbouring racists in that department. That is what you are doing. You also suggested that we should somehow interfere with the police investigation. That is wrong. If we were to interfere in a police investigation, there would be calls for a royal commission. There would be a CCC investigation if a minister were to interfere by saying, “I don’t want really want you to execute that search warrant. That makes me a bit uncomfortable. That might be politically difficult for me. Can you not?” How did it work under your government? Did you give them a nudge or a bit of wink? Is that how it worked?

Several members interjected.

**Ms A. SANDERSON:** It does not work. It would not work with this police commissioner and it does not work in this government. The performance by the opposition this afternoon has been embarrassing—absolutely embarrassing. I reject your confected outrage, I reject your assertion and I reject your motion. I will allow other members to speak. The Minister for Police or Minister for Mines and Petroleum might want to say a few words and give you a lesson on your record in government.

**MR W.J. JOHNSTON (Cannington — Minister for Mines and Petroleum)** [6.38 pm]: I rise to reject the motion moved by the opposition. I just want to start by making a point and sharing the Minister for Health’s endorsement of the hard work and effort put in by the member for Fremantle in her role as a minister. I am not aware of any minister in this difficult portfolio who has made a greater effort to make a difference for the children for whom she has become responsible. It was cheap and ridiculous criticism from the opposition, especially when we remember what the opposition did in government. For some reason, the member for Moore was offended when the Minister for Health pointed out that the Barnett Liberal government wanted to shut 118 remote Aboriginal communities and defunded them. Let us remember why the government said it wanted to do that. Without any evidence and without any opportunity for the residents in those communities to explain anything, the then Premier came into this chamber and said that those communities were full of paedophiles. That is what happened. The member for Moore was in this chamber at the time. Why was he not outraged by that outrageous slur on Aboriginal people in this state? Where was the member for Moore in defending Aboriginal people at that time? We do not have to go back to the black hand ads of the 1980s in which the Liberal Party and its friends opposed land rights here in Western Australia, which held back Aboriginal advancement for 20 years until the Mabo case allowed Aboriginal people to claim their ancestral lands and to be recognised as the First Australians. Who can forget the criticism that was levelled by the Liberal and National Parties that somehow Aboriginal people were being treated specially through the process of native title? Indeed, the Liberal and National Parties brought a bill to this chamber that said that they would cancel native title in Western Australia. That legislation was knocked off 7–nil by the High Court. Six of the seven judges made one set of reasons and the other judge agreed with the majority but made their own reasons—7–nil. The Liberal and National Parties did that. Indeed, Hon Colin Barnett was the Leader of the House at the time and managed the bill through the chamber on behalf of then Premier Richard Court. That is what the Liberal Party did, and now its members come in here and pretend that they are interested in Aboriginal people.

Do not believe the confected tears of the Liberal and National Parties on behalf of homeless people. During their time in government, the owners of one building in King Street put the water sprays on so that homeless people could not sleep in the laneway behind the building. Liza Harvey, who was the relevant minister at the time, came into the chamber and criticised the non-government organisations that supported homeless people. She talked about how much money the NGOs had been given and asked them what was wrong because there were homeless people in the city. That is the approach that those parties take to these issues. When they are given authority in this state, we know what they do. They came in here today and yesterday—two days in a row—and effectively put the same motion, pretending that somehow they are interested in these issues. As the minister pointed out—two questions.

The former special shadow minister for homelessness spent two years talking about homelessness. When I went through all his speeches over the eight years that he was in government, I found that he had made five mentions of homelessness and nothing about homeless people. We know these people have form. I make it clear.

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I have been criticised by my shadow for not politically interfering in a contractual arrangement between Synergy and the potential purchaser of the South Fremantle power station. Yesterday and today, opposition members—all of them—came in and complained because neither the Minister for Police nor the Minister for Community Services would intervene in a police investigation. I was criticised when I was formerly the Minister for Industrial Relations because I would not intervene in a health and safety investigation. What sort of crowd are these people that they think that ministers should be making these decisions? They are decisions, under legislation passed by this Parliament, that are for others to make.

The idea that the Minister for Community Services would have directed police officers to raid a house is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard. Nobody with common sense would ever make that allegation. It is bizarre. Think about it. To execute a warrant, the police have to get a warrant. They have to go to a magistrate and ask permission to execute that warrant, and they have to show why—they have to show that they have a reasonable suspicion that a raid is appropriate. We have already heard the minister talk about the Commissioner of Police and explain why the number of staff was allocated to the task that the police commissioner was responsible for. But, no, none of those things interests the opposition. Exactly what is it that they want to do?

I understand from the information that has been publicly available that the director general of the department became aware of the downloading of thousands and thousands of documents—5 484 emails, containing 2 646 documents, 151 presentations and 332 spreadsheets. Those documents included highly confidential personal individual information about hundreds of children in care. What does the Liberal Party and National Party say should happen? The director general exercised his responsibilities at law. The director general spoke to the Public Sector Commissioner. The Public Sector Commissioner pointed out that he was obliged to make referrals and he did so. He referred it to the Corruption and Crime Commission and to the police. The director general did not ask the police to take any particular action. He simply referred the facts to the police for the police to investigate. His involvement in the investigation ceased at the point at which he provided that information to the police. Perhaps the police had additional contact with the department about the details of the matter, but the director general had no role in operational issues with respect to the way the police did the investigation. Indeed, police officers are sworn as direct servants of the Crown and they cannot be directed in the operation of their responsibilities at law, so each individual police officer has a right to make a decision about how they conduct an investigation. Therefore, it would not have been legally possible for the director general to intervene, but he did not even try to—or the minister, indeed. In fact, a minister cannot give a direction. I cannot do that in health and safety about how an investigation is to proceed or whether charges are to be laid. That is entirely a matter of discretion for the relevant officer, not for a minister. We do not have a role in deciding who gets charged.

The fact that the police, having executed the search warrant, made a public interest decision not to further prosecute is a demonstration of the fact that they were doing it on their own cognisance and under their own decision-making process. There has been absolutely no evidence at all of any ministerial involvement in any of these decisions. But that does not matter because, unlike a good opposition, these members of the opposition do not believe that they have to do any work. They just think that they can read the newspaper and come in here and make unsubstantiated allegations. Members of the opposition should be careful because they could end up in front of the Procedure and Privileges Committee. Allegations cannot be made in here without the capacity to substantiate the allegation. Having been referred to the privileges committee when I was in opposition back in 2009, I know that members have to be able to substantiate an allegation.

Let me make clear why I was investigated by the Procedure and Privileges Committee. I pointed out that a Liberal member of Parliament had had their name expunged from the record of the Corruption and Crime Commission. That allegation was referred to the Procedure and Privileges Committee, and it was shown that what I had said was true. In fact, I had a copy of the un-expunged transcript of the CCC and the expunged transcript in which Tony Krsticevic's name had been removed.

The other allegation that I was referred to the committee for was about the former member for Wanneroo Paul Miles forgetting to declare a \$20 000 donation to his local government campaign. He must have forgotten because he was never held to account by the relevant authorities for having done so. But it was clearly a surprise to most of us, because if most of us received a \$20 000 donation when running for local government, we would probably have remembered it. But he had forgotten.

They are the two things that I was investigated for. I had to go to the committee and prove that I had a reasonable basis for saying everything that I had said in the chamber. The reasonable basis for the Paul Miles issue was a news report in one of the northern suburbs newspapers, and the issue regarding Tony Krsticevic was that I had a copy of the two sets of transcripts from the Corruption and Crime Commission—the one before and the one after the removal of his name. Interestingly, in the Tony Krsticevic matter there was never an order by the commission to remove his name from the transcript. That came out in the budget estimates.

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A government member interjected.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Indeed, he loved social housing because he lobbied to get social housing removed from his electorate and then he offered to buy it! Anyway, that is another story.

A government member interjected.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** That is okay.

This was a significant breach of private information data within the department. My understanding of what the opposition is saying is that on discovery of this potential illegal conduct, the opposition's position is that there should not have been a referral to anybody. The opposition keeps using the word "leaked", as opposed to saying that the documents had been sent to a private email address because they had been leaked. Who were they leaked to? From what I have read in *The West Australian*, I am not clear whether it has identified who passed information to it. I do not understand where this idea that the documents were leaked came from, because that suggests that it was sent to the media. I am not aware of how *The West Australian* came into possession of anything it is in possession of and I make no allegation about who might have passed anything to it. The point is that what was referred for investigation by the director general was the sending of those emails, which contained thousands of documents, from the government server to a private email address.

The opposition is saying that there should not be any consequences for illegal conduct by a public servant. Let us make it clear that this was not a whistleblowing action. In 2002, I think it was, the Geoff Gallop Labor government introduced whistleblower protections in Western Australia. As the Minister for Community Services said, there is a methodology if someone believes that something that is not right is going on in an agency. That set of procedures is covered by this Parliament and was brought in by the Labor Party. Let us not forget who introduced the Public Sector Management Act that created the obligation for the director general to refer matters. That legislation is from 1994 and was introduced by the Liberal Party. As every minister knows, one of the difficulties in the legislation is that ministers have a communications agreement and must comply with a set of very narrow parameters about our relationships with departments. We can communicate directly only with the director general, or with another official when the director general agrees that that can occur. We do not have any right to ring a departmental official in the agency doing the work and get advice. We have to go through the director general. That is in our communications agreement. The reason that we have a communications agreement is that it is specified in the Public Sector Management Act. The idea that somehow we are trolling around inside the bureaucracy telling people what to do is stupid. This simply reflects on the former ministers in the opposition. What the heck were they doing? They are criticising us for not trolling around inside the agencies and making people do what we want them to do. What were they doing? Were they trolling around inside the bureaucracy telling junior and mid-level public servants what to do?

The member for Moore goes on about corruption. Let me tell him about corruption. What is the name of the apartment block in Karratha? Pelago. Talk about corruption! Let me make it clear what happened there. The former government granted a site in the town to a donor to the National Party and then the donor bought the apartments in the building. A second building was built but the donor could not sell the second lot of apartments, so the government rented the apartments in the second building and left the government-owned apartments in the first building empty. The government rented the empty apartments in the second building while the government-owned apartments in the first building had no-one in them. A donor to the National Party was involved in that. I went to Karratha during the election campaign and said on radio that I felt that was a whiff of corruption. The journalist was shocked and tried to get me to follow up. I went through the details. The journalist said, "Oh my God, you're making these allegations on the radio." Of course I was, because it was outrageous what the former government did, and that is not the only one.

We have to remember the Langoulant report that outlined that there was a shadow budget process in the Barnett government, just as there had been in the previous Liberal government. Ministers would bring forward matters—as famously outlined in the Langoulant letter when he specifically called out Hon Colin Barnett, the then Minister for Education; Energy as the chief offender—and put stuff up to the Economic and Expenditure Reform Committee, which would get knocked off, and then they would see the Premier separately and would have it put back in the budget. It is no wonder that the Liberal and National Parties are so hopeless at running the finances of the state.

[Member's time extended.]

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** I will take it to 7.00 pm. I know members are looking forward to that.

**Mr R.S. Love:** I am looking forward to the end.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** The member could not have been looking forward to the end because he spoke.

Between 1993 and 2001, the former government ran five deficits in eight years; it damaged the finances of the state and ran the economy down. When it was re-elected, it had learnt nothing and had forgotten everything, and

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it ruined the budget again. Now members opposite have come in here and still they have learnt nothing and forgotten everything. They are attacking us and they have attacked the staff of the Department of Communities for being racist. They want to wrap themselves in the flag of the Community and Public Sector Union–Civil Service Association of WA, yet they accuse the members of the union of being racist. That is what they are doing. They come in and say that the staff of the department are racist, but then say they have sympathy for the same people. Crocodile tears. We remember.

Being the Minister for Child Protection is a difficult job. I remember when Hon Sheila McHale had the same job. I used to talk to her about the challenges that she faced in the role. I also used to talk to Hon Eric Ripper, who held the position under the Lawrence government. He told me how tough it was for him. I sat next to the Minister for Child Protection in the last Parliament. She would occasionally share some of the challenges that she was facing in her portfolio. We now work together because, as Minister for Corrective Services, I am responsible for so many young people at Banksia Hill Detention Centre. That is another area in which we have to work together. It is a tough portfolio, but I can tell members that one of the best achievements in this portfolio in a long time is Target 120, a policy that was invented and championed by the minister when she was in opposition and implemented and achieved—a great achievement—in government. The wraparound services reflected in Target 120 are very good. It is based on research. It is based on looking around the world and seeing what works. Instead of members just flapping their gums and carrying on, it is actually about achievement. It is about doing the hard work. I can tell members from being responsible for the kids at Banksia Hill that some of these kids have had a terrible life. The Minister for Child Protection has been living that terrible life for five years. It is her compassion that has enabled her to do such a great job. I am proud to stand up for the minister, who does a great job. Not a great job in trying circumstances—a great job. Target 120 is an incredible success. We are going to see what else we can do with that approach.

We are reducing the number of Aboriginal children in care for the first time.

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.

*House adjourned at 7.00 pm*

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