

WATER CORPORATION — NON-PAYMENT

306. Ms S.E. WINTON to the Minister for Water:

I refer to the McGowan Labor government's commitment to supporting those in our community who may be struggling or facing hardship, particularly throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

- (1) Can the minister outline to the house how the government is supporting Western Australian households and families in paying their water bills?
- (2) Can the minister advise the house whether he is aware of anyone who is opposed to this government taking a compassionate approach and who thinks the government should be tougher on Western Australia families?

Mr D.J. KELLY replied:

- (1)–(2) I thank the member for Wanneroo for that very good question. I am very pleased to answer it. I have spoken before in the house about this government's new approach to assisting Western Australian families to pay their water bills. I have previously given figures such as the fact that under the previous government, 2 500 families a year were having their water cut off for non-payment issues. We have reduced that by almost 70 per cent because we have been much more proactive in the way we have dealt with these issues. I can also advise that in its last year, the previous government instituted 748 claims in the Magistrates Court against Water Corporation customers who were not able to pay their bills. That is when the current Leader of the Opposition was the Minister for Water. In the four years prior to the hitting of the pandemic, we had reduced that number to 19, so there was a very significant reduction in the use of court action against Western Australian families who were struggling to pay their bills. On this side of the house, we are very proud of that response. Members may well be aware that during the COVID-19 pandemic, we have stopped cutting off people's water for non-payment altogether. We have ceased taking court action—full stop—during the pandemic. We are proud of that response.

I was surprised that the shadow Minister for Water, Hon Dr Steve Thomas, in the other place has twice this month been on the radio criticising our approach to these issues.

Point of Order

Dr D.J. HONEY: Hon Dr Steve Thomas is not the shadow Minister for Water.

The SPEAKER: That is not a point of order. I ask the minister to continue.

Dr D.J. HONEY: He is verballing him.

The SPEAKER: You clearly disagree with him.

Questions without Notice Resumed

Mr D.J. KELLY: Hon Dr Steve Thomas spoke on water matters twice on radio in the last month, criticising our approach to managing families who are struggling to pay their bills. In effect, he was arguing that we should be tougher on those families. With respect to not taking action against Western Australian families, he said that it is "lazy politics", it sets "a terrible precedent" and "it's absolutely astounding". He also said —

... you know in my view ... trying to carry favour and buy support and not take any of the hard and tough decisions.

...

... not good financial management.

He went on to say that it was "absolutely outrageous" and that it "sets a terrible precedent". He then said —

I think that's a terrible way to manage any business.

He went further. With respect to our decision not to take any recovery action at all during COVID, he said —

... there's no way in the world that every ... defaulting payer is a family suffering in economic hardship that's just nonsense in my view.

...

... to simply have this blanket approach ... it's not just poor business management, it's not just poor economic management, it is an insult to those people who pay their bills ... It is a terrible outcome ...

We on this side of the house have worked really hard to assist those families who might be struggling to pay their water bills, particularly during the COVID pandemic. We are proud of that. One of the members opposite attacked us on radio, not once but twice, saying we should be tougher on those families and we should be cutting off more families and taking more families to court. I ask the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Liberal Party:

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Ms Sabine Winton; Mr Dave Kelly; Dr David Honey; Speaker

do they support a more compassionate response or is it their policy that when Western Australian families get into difficulties, we should be taking them to court?

The only bit of evidence Hon Dr Steve Thomas provided to support his claim was that at the beginning of each month, about \$60 million of outstanding debt is on the books. He did not say—he should have known this—that that includes every family that is one day overdue. If he had done his research, he should have known that in 90 days, about 89 per cent of that debt is paid and the rest of it is followed up. There is absolutely no justification for the comments he made. The question for the members in the corner is: do they support this government's more compassionate approach or do they think we should be tougher on struggling Western Australian families?