

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY

Amendment to Motion

Resumed from 14 November after the following amendment had been moved by Hon Bruce Donaldson -

That the following words be added to the end of the motion -

but regrets to inform Your Excellency that the Government is failing in its administration of the State of Western Australia.

HON BARRY HOUSE (South West) [4.46 pm]: I am pleased to support the amendment moved by Hon Bruce Donaldson. I could refer to numerous examples to highlight the amendment. As an overall theme for the comments I will make today, I could follow on from the comments of the Leader of the Opposition about Dr Gallop being Dr Dolittle. They were very pertinent comments indeed. I rather like the phrase I heard the other day that this is a Government that started with a gallop but has slowed to a walk, or I could refer to a Government that promised to gallop but has barely managed a walk. I will highlight a few examples to illustrate that.

The first issue I will address relates to land conservation officers in Western Australia. The Labor Party was elected to government on a platform of caring for the environment. It certainly gained political advantages from that rhetoric by collecting many green preferences, which returned it enough members to form government comfortably. Now it certainly owes government to the support it garners from the five members of the Greens (WA).

Hon Nick Griffiths: I think the Government is formed in the Legislative Assembly.

Hon BARRY HOUSE: Yes, but the minister knows that the Government cannot pass any legislation without a majority in this place, even though it tries to crib the rules occasionally on some issues.

Hon Nick Griffiths: The Liberal Party is infamous for its constant breaches of convention, and you have been party to that many times.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon BARRY HOUSE: I am saying that to pass a range of contentious, divisive issues that the Government has brought before the Parliament, it must have the support of the five Greens. Surely that is not startling, even to the minister.

Hon Nick Griffiths interjected.

Hon BARRY HOUSE: I agree with that. The bottom line is that the Government needs a majority, and it does not have it on its own in this place.

I want to check the reality of one issue; that is, land conservation officers. On 20 August this year, Hon Murray Criddle asked a question of the Minister for Agriculture about the abolition of land care officers. This was in connection with Natural Heritage Trust funding. Soon afterwards, I asked the following question on land conservation officers -

- (1) Why have the positions of 15 land conservation officers who worked from Department of Agriculture offices on the Swan coastal plain been abolished?
- (2) Why were these people prevented from applying for the recent redundancy packages, when it would have been known that their positions were about to be scrapped?
- (3) How do these changes reflect the Labor Government's much-stated commitment to the environment and sustainable agriculture?

The Minister for Agriculture thought I had asked a question on the same issue raised by Hon Murray Criddle on the previous sitting day. During the minister's answer, I asked by way of interjection whether we were referring to the same people. On the following day, the minister provided further information on this question. He partly acknowledged that we had been talking about different people and different programs in the Department of Agriculture. However, he still did not seem to fully understand to whom I had referred in my question.

I will explain that matter in full. All land conservation officers are or were permanent public servants; they were not contract employees. Of those employed on the Swan coastal plain, the Bunbury officer, who also covered the Manjimup district, retired in September this year after his job was effectively abolished and he was to be transferred to another job in Kununurra. He was forced into a position of accepting retirement out of frustration and despair with his only option. I will say more about that a bit later. I understand that the Merredin officer has been moved to a junior position in the Agriculture Protection Board, as the land conservation position was

abolished from that office. No permanent person has held the position of land conservation officer in either Busselton or Harvey-Waroona for a few years. The Busselton office will be moved to the Vasse Research Station by the end of 2002-03. I am told that the Midland office is closing, with its staff to go to Forrestfield or South Perth. I am also told that the land conservation officer in Midland was leant on to retire.

I request the minister to take note and investigate some of these matters - what has happened and how it was done, which was rather unsavoury. For instance, the land conservation officer in Bunbury was informed of the situation via a very impersonal note dated 14 August 2002, which states -

Following our discussions with -

His supervisor -

... regarding the possibility of you transferring to a Technical Officer position in Kununurra due to the diminished amount of work the Department is undertaking in the area of Land Conservation at Bunbury.

I have reviewed vacant positions in the organisation that match your skills. This has identified suitable work-related vacancies as a Technical Officer at Kununurra, Wongan Hills and Carnarvon.

Having given consideration to the available information I intend to transfer you into the vacant position in Kununurra.

That letter was signed C.W. Thorn, Executive Director, Program Services. That very impersonal note was received by an officer who had been in the service of that department for many years. Unfortunately, it seems to fit the pattern for employees in this category. The aim seems to be to target long-term employees who are aged over 55, many of whom have 40 years or more experience. That is an appalling way to treat loyal, long-serving public servants.

The other issue is that they were not given the chance to apply for redundancies offered earlier in the year, at a time when the department would clearly have known what was coming. The decision must have been made within the department. The minister must surely have been aware of it; if he was not, he should have been. The decision to abolish the land conservation officer positions on the Swan coastal plain must have been made much earlier than that. The officer in Bunbury who received this note actually asked at least twice about the possibility of redundancy. He was told not to apply, as his application would be rejected. He knows that some land conservation officers around the State did in fact apply for redundancy, but were knocked back. I am aware that many of these people and others in the department are bitter about their treatment. They consider that the Government was not up-front and in fact was very sneaky in the implementation of this policy. This has become a major contributor to low morale in and distrust among Department of Agriculture officers, who have seen what happened to their colleagues.

Is this part of a bigger agenda? I have been told that the plans for a new office in South Perth include only 500 office spaces, and current numbers are up around 800. The indication is that the Department of Agriculture budget will in fact go into deficit by the end of the year on current staff levels, because wages and operating costs are too high compared with the department's budget allocation. Therefore, a need will arise to lower numbers at double the rate of natural attrition. No contract positions are being renewed. The department is actively targeting people aged over 55 and promoting the view that they should move on. The long-term effect will be the further decline in the knowledge and intellectual property contained within the Department of Agriculture.

The abolition of land conservation officer positions on the Swan coastal plain means that there are now no dedicated personnel to carry out regulatory work; for instance, with land clearing assessments. The department does not have officers with the experience to respond to landowners on land degradation issues. No response will now be made to the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure or local shires on any land use issues. That means that agriculture, as an industry, will have no voice in the process. This, of course, leaves the field wide open for advice to be received only from environmental agencies and self-interest community groups. How does this sit with the Government's so-called commitment to the environment and sustainability? It clearly has not given land conservation any priority and has chopped sustainable agricultural resources through the abolition of land conservation officer positions. The other disturbing aspect is that all these people are or were domiciled and worked in country regions of Western Australia. Many of them were in the south west.

The words of the amendment are a shining example of the Government's failure on planning in its administration of the State of Western Australia. Comments have been heard in this Chamber from time to time that the administration of the planning portfolio is in absolute chaos. Minister Alannah MacTiernan has not done her job since taking office, and against many better judgments, the ministerial appeals system was abolished and legislation passed through this place to establish the Town Planning Appeals Tribunal. The parliamentary timetable for that measure was as follows: it was introduced into the Legislative Assembly on 28 June of last

year. We know that it came to this House and was dealt with by the committee I chair - namely, the Standing Committee on Public Administration and Finance. We duly reported back, and the Bill languished on the Notice Paper for some time before it was amended and returned to the Legislative Assembly. The third reading was in August, and the measure was assented to on 24 September 2002. Its progress took some time, although time was utilised positively and constructively by our committee as many aspects of the Bill were poorly drafted and needed work.

Debate interrupted, pursuant to standing orders.

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