

CLIMATE CHANGE IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Motion

HON LOUISE PRATT (East Metropolitan) [3.54 pm]: I move -

That this house calls on the federal government to provide the communities of Western Australia with the appropriate resources to deal with the likelihood of real and significant climate change, including -

- (a) the allocation of increased levels of research funding to address likely changes to Western Australia's climatic systems;
- (b) ratification of the Kyoto Protocol by the commonwealth that considers and addresses Western Australia's position as a resource-driven economy; and
- (c) programs of public education which address the likely need for future public adaptation and responses to climate change.

The motion raises an issue of significant concern to the entire Western Australian community, including the state government and, I hope, this chamber. Both state and federal governments are heavily involved in greenhouse and climate change issues; however, the federal government has shown a significant failure of leadership in a number of areas relating to climate change and greenhouse gas emissions. We know that national and state consultation on greenhouse issues has not been working very well at all. The commonwealth has continued to reject the Kyoto Protocol. Senator Campbell, the commonwealth Minister for the Environment and Heritage, has stated that Australia is prepared to engage in other agreements as long as they are comprehensive and include the United States and the developed world. Action is being taken by the federal government to look at a framework beyond Kyoto. The federal government has been quite active internationally in that regard, although it should be more active. It has chosen certain parts of the international community to work with in reaching international agreements, but, interestingly, it is not involved with any of the states. Therefore, the federal government is ignoring Kyoto and is attempting to make other agreements, and has excluded state government involvement in putting agreements together. The issue of greenhouse emissions is firmly on the agenda of the Council of Australian Governments because Australian states firmly recognise the need to address climate change. The Western Australian government has firmly supported that stance. However, it is quite clear that the commonwealth government is not interested in working with the states on this issue.

I find it interesting that there has been a lack of federal leadership on this issue, yet the federal government is quite game and keen to intervene in other areas beyond its jurisdiction, such as industrial relations, the environmental arena and taxation. I refer to a whole raft of different areas in which the federal government is overstepping its mandate. However, the federal government is significantly underplaying its leadership role on climate change and greenhouse issues.

The Western Australian government has launched its greenhouse strategy, which comprehensively considers all the areas this state needs to address, including examining carbon sequestration resulting from plantation establishments, revegetation and the replanting of areas of Western Australia to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The government is comprehensively looking at new opportunities for Western Australian businesses and residents, including, as I mentioned, revegetation. Other initiatives will become more evident as climatic conditions evolve. I will touch a little more on these opportunities a little later.

The Western Australian government is looking very closely at the need to adapt to our new and changing climatic circumstances - it is not only about reducing emissions. The government is working closely with local government and communities, because everyone has a significant role to play in addressing the greenhouse effect. Importantly, the government is looking at research, because our actions into the future on climate change need to be well supported by research. Importantly, we are seeking national and international representation, and that is an area in which we are being sorely let down. Interestingly, according to a recent poll by the Lowry Institute for International Policy, 71 per cent of Australians are concerned about climate change. Ninety-four per cent of Australians believe that improving the global environment should be a key goal of Australian foreign policy. Sadly, we are being let down in that regard. It is significant that this same survey showed that Australians believe that climate change is an even greater threat to Australia than terrorism. I am certain there is evidence to support that claim.

I have some research from the Australian Climate Group, which was sponsored by the Insurance Australia Group and the World Wildlife Fund. We can see why the insurance industry has a significant interest in this issue. With climate change comes potential increases in natural disasters and a range of other weather-related threats. We have already seen a small increase in average temperatures in Western Australia over a very short period. Only about five degrees in temperature is the difference between a stable climate and an ice age. Therefore, an

average variation in the world's temperature of about five degrees would bring the state into an ice age or have an equal effect in the other direction. In the past 50 years, the temperature has already changed by about half a degree. That is 20 per cent of that change. With a one or two per cent increase in the average global temperature, Australia needs to deal with shifting rainfall patterns that reduce run-off to rivers and the recharge of water supplies. We have already seen evidence of that in Western Australia. Rainfall graphs kept since the mid-1970s show that the rainfall has almost halved. That means a much lesser amount of run-off can be collected in dams. The effects of a small decrease in rain are exacerbated by far less run-off, and the aquifers and the like take much longer to be replenished. In fact, the balance of nature is upset. A small increase in temperature will see, for example, up to - I do not have the statistic in front of me - a 12 to 18 per cent increase in the risk of bushfire, an increase in other agricultural and natural disasters and agricultural and economic losses from natural disasters. More damage to homes, businesses and infrastructure is caused by extreme weather.

Insurance industry research indicates that a small increase in wind speed increases exponentially the amount of damage that is caused by such wind. A small increase in wind speed does not necessarily mean a small increase in damage; it can mean an escalating increase in damage. Climate change will also result in increased and new threats to the health of Australians, and irreversible damage to our ecosystem.

Anthony Albanese, the federal shadow minister for environmental issues, examined some of the statements made by the federal Minister for Tourism, Industry and Resources, Ian Macfarlane. It is interesting that the federal government has made some quite contradictory statements about climate change. The minister said -

Whether or not those [carbon dioxide] emissions were causing climate change, I don't know. If you go back across history, millions of years, carbon dioxide levels go up and down, and global warming comes and goes. I mean, the Earth is a lot warmer than it was when the glaciers formed.

The industry minister said that in February this year. On the other hand, the federal Minister for the Environment and Heritage at least appears to understand the problem. He said -

I think we need to engage the climate sceptics, those who are pulling the doona over their heads, and get past the debate over whether or not climate change is real. There is a dominance of science which does say that the massive increase in greenhouse gas emissions has contributed to human-induced climate change.

During the past couple of days I have been attending the Indian Ocean Climate Initiative Conference. There is irrefutable and compelling evidence that climate change is real. It is with us in Western Australia and its impacts are being felt first here in our state. That has been indicated by our changing rainfall. Western Australia, and south west Western Australia in particular, is one of the areas already most affected by climate change, and it is beginning to affect our whole community. Our region is at the front line of adaptation. We need to change and adapt our practice to a less certain climate. Together with other parts of Australia, we are experiencing worldwide trends of warming and rises in sea levels.

The sudden decrease in our winter rains began in the 1970s and already has had major impacts. That is evidenced by our current water planning and the significant adjustments in community attitudes to the way we use water. We have also had to make significant adjustments to the way we invest in future water resources. Governments and the community have already shown a significant change of thinking. This is one very significant area of our lives in which we have had to adjust to climate change. However, this is something we must tackle on a great many fronts in Western Australia, such as our economy, our lifestyle and our community practices.

Some of the key findings that IOCI has come across show large-scale changes in atmospheric circulation, which has resulted in local implications. The evidence shows rainfall decline over south west WA that is associated with large-scale changes, and those changes, at least partly - particularly the enhanced greenhouse effect - are driven by human activities on a global scale. Scientists are grappling with the relationship between putting together the natural variation in our climate and the science of how that is being enhanced and exacerbated by human activities that have increased levels of CO₂ in our atmosphere. The Western Australian Indian Ocean Climate Initiative has made the assertion that it is most likely that both natural variability and the enhanced greenhouse effect have contributed to Western Australia's decrease in rainfall. In light of the huge scale of these changes, the IOCI has firmed in its view that other local anthropogenic factors, such as land use change, are unlikely to be the primary cause of such changes.

The latest suite of climate change simulations shows that, even with the lowest greenhouse gas emission scenarios, south west WA is projected to be drier and warmer in this century, with an increasing probability of dry winter weather patterns prevailing and a decreasing probability of wet west and central weather patterns. They are extremely alarming findings.

Hon Bruce Donaldson: This has not all been caused by Western Australia.

Hon LOUISE PRATT: No, of course it has not. I am outlining the impact of global greenhouse emissions.

Hon Bruce Donaldson: Should we have more nuclear power stations?

Hon LOUISE PRATT: Most certainly not, honourable member. I will get to that later. I am outlining the significance of climate-change modelling. We have a lot to learn from scientists. They have outlined a range of changes to our climate system and a range of scenarios for the future. We have a lot to benefit from this research, but it will require further investment from the state government, industry and the federal government. The Indian Ocean Climate Initiative has been supported by the state government, but we are also looking to the federal government for support. This initiative works around a range of different sectors. It is modelling weather and a range of different scenarios, and it has models to examine our climate patterns in the near and distant future, and it is doing that with increasing reliability. The significance of that is that we will then be able to examine the current practices in our community, whether they relate to insurance, agriculture, water, mining or the built environment and the way we construct our buildings to certain weather standards so that roofs are not blown off in extreme weather events. We have a lot to learn by investing in this science, and then informing and transforming both government and community responses to climate change so that we can adapt and change our behaviour.

The climate has changed, the temperature has changed, the sea temperature is changing, the winter atmospheric circulation has changed, south west rainfall has changed, extreme south west rainfalls have changed, the river flows have changed, the ground water is changing and the regional sea levels have changed. Salinity is also impacted on by climate change -

Hon Bruce Donaldson interjected.

Hon LOUISE PRATT: Interestingly, I also notice that with the greenhouse effect the majority of carbon dioxide that is emitted into the atmosphere is absorbed by the ocean. The ocean is the world's greatest sink for carbon dioxide, which has meant an increase of half a pH level in the ocean. Because of the greenhouse effect, the ocean is becoming more acidic. We are yet to understand what the impacts of that will be, but it is likely to have a significant impact on coral reefs around the globe and also our own Ningaloo Reef. We are already finding that it is impacting on some micro-organisms in the ocean. That needs to be closely monitored.

To pick up a point made by Hon Bruce Donaldson, it is true that these impacts are not created by Western Australia. They began many hundreds of years ago with perhaps the industrial revolution and the advent of electricity.

Hon Simon O'Brien: Which industrial revolution?

Hon LOUISE PRATT: The industrial revolution continues in China today, as we all know.

Hon Simon O'Brien: What do we do? Do we close down China and India?

Hon LOUISE PRATT: No, but we have to make real and significant cuts to our greenhouse gas emissions. That is something that the state government acknowledges.

Hon Simon O'Brien: Whose greenhouse emissions? Western Australia's?

Hon LOUISE PRATT: The globe needs to cut its greenhouse gas emissions, and that includes Western Australia. Of course there are complexities about how we count carbon emissions.

Hon Simon O'Brien: When you get the chance, would you comment on the fact that Western Australia is a net energy exporter? I think we are probably unique in the western world in that capacity. Why is it always our blinking fault that there is global warming?

Hon LOUISE PRATT: It is partly our fault that there is global warming. We have a moral imperative to cut our own emissions. Western Australia is perhaps the world's highest per capita emitter of greenhouse gases, so we have a moral obligation to examine our own activities and reduce emissions. What that can also mean is that we have an economic and financial obligation to reduce our emissions, because the rest of the world is beginning to understand this and it is looking at carbon trading, carbon accounting and carbon taxation. Countries are locking those things into their economies. They are developing carbon-based economies, and that is something we will be locked out of because we do not sign up to things like the Kyoto Protocol. We will lose economic opportunities as we lose markets, because the rest of the world gets this problem and the federal government does not.

Debate interrupted, pursuant to sessional orders.

Sitting suspended from 4.15 to 4.30 pm