

**SELECT COMMITTEE INTO THE
GOVERNMENT'S LOCAL PROJECTS, LOCAL JOBS PROGRAM**

Establishment — Motion

HON TJORN SIBMA (North Metropolitan) [2.53 pm]: I move —

- (1) A select committee into the government's Local Projects, Local Jobs program is established.
- (2) The select committee is to inquire into the Local Projects, Local Jobs program, "the program", with particular reference to —
 - (a) how each project was developed, evaluated and selected for funding;
 - (b) how payments were made and acquitted under each project to ensure financial probity and accountability;
 - (c) how actual or perceived conflicts of interest were declared and managed under each project;
 - (d) the number of projects funded and, for each project, the amount of funding provided and number of jobs created;
 - (e) whether community, education, arts and sporting groups within the state were afforded an equal opportunity to access the program;
 - (f) whether funding to the program affected the quantum of funds available for grants or other funding sources for community, education, arts and sporting groups within the state; and, if so, in what way; and
 - (g) any other related matter.
- (3) The select committee shall consist of five members.
- (4) The select committee is to report no later than 12 months after the committee has been established.

The motivation behind this motion is a very simple one—it is to follow the money. For the better part of the past 12 months, I and other members of this chamber have sought specific details concerning the Local Projects, Local Jobs program. In my estimation, and the estimation of others, all avenues of inquiry into a specific constrained program have been thwarted, evaded, dismissed or derided, whether that be through the budget estimates process, questions without notice or on notice, or in the course of other debate. Largely, the government has demonstrated a dispiriting abundance of hubris about this program and has not satisfied or deemed it worthy of its time to deal with these questions honestly. That is not to say that answers have not been provided, but they have been largely deficient. My motivation in putting this motion in the terms that it is put is that if we continue to rely on this process, we are more than likely to be treated with the same form of contempt. We will not get to the bottom of this program if we continue at the pace at which we have been going and we will be none the wiser about how a program that ostensibly started at a quantum of around \$22 million suddenly ballooned to nearly \$40 million. That expansion occurred at a time of so-called budget repair. That has been one of the prevailing mantras of this government—budget repair, budget repair, budget repair. My proposition is that these two things do not necessarily hang well together. Although we can get somewhat used to large round numbers in this chamber, \$40 million is not an insignificant amount of money. From my calculation, it is probably equivalent to the savings or the cuts to the education portfolio. If members of this chamber have justifiably railed against those cuts at that kind of quantum, it is in their interest to investigate how that \$40 million was spent by this government in other areas.

The whole motion, as I have said, is to follow the money, but we have to do it in a way that is focused and circumscribed because if we continue at this rate, we will be none the clearer about precisely when the government's commitments were made, how those commitments were made, by whom they were made, to whom they were given and for whose benefit those commitments were entered into. What has struck me more than anything is that there is little in the way of written evidence of many of these commitments being made.

In the course of questions and discussions, I and a number of other members have sought business plans. If there has been one avenue of inquiry that has been derided more than any other, it has been the request for a business plan. We have not yet received even the sketch of a business plan—not the slimmest outline. We have not seen a single business plan. But my working assumption is that there are indeed discoverable business plans of some kind. I quote here from an authority no less than the Premier of this state, who in a PerthNow article published on 4 February this year made the following claim —

"Every single one of our election commitments went through a rigorous evaluation process."

Furthermore, the Premier said, and I quote —

“As with all of our commitments, our candidates were required to put forward strong arguments for projects in their community and make the case for why they should be funded,” ...

My proposition is that there are discoverable business plans of some kind out there. They have not been presented to this chamber, despite its endeavours.

Another concern I and others have is about the general oversight of this program. It is all very well for election commitments to be made and then later discharged by the government, but that needs to be done in an appropriate way. From recollection, when the first questions were asked about Local Projects, Local Jobs during the budget estimates process last year it was unclear which agency or minister had overall oversight or management authority for this program. Because it was unclear, I put a question to the Leader of the House on 28 November last year. The answer provided was —

The Premier appointed Mr John Carey MLA, Parliamentary Secretary to the Premier to oversee the Local Projects, Local Jobs program. Mr Carey has liaised closely with all relevant local members to clarify the detail of each commitment.

Some assessment was made of commitments entered into and commitments to be discharged. I find it interesting that that task was allocated to a parliamentary secretary rather than a minister, but that was obviously the determination made by the Premier. But I have some questions regarding that. It is unclear to me how that parliamentary secretary was actually empowered to discharge that responsibility, how it was discharged, and how Mr Carey may or may not have influenced how, when and where government funds flowed to particular commitments. We do not know the details of that, and I put it very simply to members that this chamber should know.

The chamber should also know precisely how and who from each department was instructed to take carriage of the delivery of these commitments through their portfolios, how those payments were made and how that expenditure has today been acquitted. I am not seeking gold-standard accountability; rather, I am seeking just the basics. These questions are foundational to gold-standard accountability, but they are the foundation of a culture of public accountability that in the main does not seem to be satisfied.

Likewise—I will say a bit more about this later—it is very clear that a program like this lends itself to either the actuality or the perception of conflicts of interest. How were those conflicts of interest managed? We still do not know. The management of conflicts of interest or the perceptions of conflicts of interest are indeed foundational disciplines of public accountability and probity. We are not seeking to reach for the marble here or rolled-gold accountability; we have been chasing basic accountability and have so far been dissatisfied.

Another justification for this program is embedded in its very name but this chamber is still none the wiser about whether any jobs were created in this community as a consequence of the Local Projects, Local Jobs program. Which jobs are we talking about? Whose jobs are we talking about? I do not mean to be overly cynical, but I think this is geared towards the employment of a particular class of people, not an everyday person.

To date, two further issues that merit consideration have not yet been adequately answered. They relate to the equity of the program and the effect that syphoning up to \$40 million from the budget has had on other groups in the community who legitimately seek financial support. This question merits examination. One of the terms of reference is whether this was an open, transparent and competitive process that was available to all. It appears not. The need for this motion could have been avoided if the government had answered questions honestly and openly. It has had a number of opportunities to do that. Without reflecting unnecessarily in any pejorative way on a motion recently put by Hon Darren West regarding this program, I observe that government members had the opportunity to answer some of these questions around probity and accountability, but did not take that opportunity. Had they done so, I would not have been motivated to put this motion on the notice paper.

Additionally, I know at least in my case, I have sought recourse through the now increasingly storied freedom of information process. I will reflect on a particular example that has affected me. In April I submitted a freedom of information request to the Premier’s office. I will specify its terms and work through the process. I originally sought—this is in quotes—

“all communication (briefing notes, letters, emails, texts, diary appointments, notes and note book entries between the Office of the Premier and The Department of the Premier and Cabinet, the Treasurer’s office, the Department of Treasury, and Mr John Carey, the Member for Perth regarding the Local Projects Local Jobs program between 17 March 2017 and 17 April 2018.”

That is a broad-ranging request, but people familiar with putting in freedom of information inquiries know it is better to go broad early rather than too narrow because documents relevant to the inquiry would otherwise be missed. Nevertheless, a desktop assessment within the Department of the Premier and Cabinet was undertaken on the basis of that request, which revealed that 1 024 documents fell within the scope of those search terms over 12 months. Understanding the practicalities of someone in a department putting all this information together,

I worked with the Department of the Premier and Cabinet's freedom of information unit to reduce the scope of the inquiry on two occasions. I was trying to be helpful. The time line ran as follows. On 17 April, I submitted my original request. On 24 April, I agreed to reduce the scope of that request. On 4 May, I agreed to a further narrowing of the scope of that request. On 7 May, I agreed to a minor clarification of the reduced scope. From 1 June, the Department of the Premier and Cabinet requested an extension.

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.