

Minister for Environment — Response to Question without Notice — Adjournment Debate

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [10.15 pm]: It is clear that many of the members on the front bench opposite have not used their winter break wisely. I and many of my colleagues on this side of the house were hoping that they would use the winter break to have a long, close look at their budget and work out how they would plug some of those big black holes that we spent several weeks before the winter break exposing. Unfortunately, they do not seem to have done that. Government members on the front bench have come back even more bad tempered and sulky than they were before they went on their winter break.

Hon Norman Moore: What are you talking about?

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I will try to explain so that Hon Norman Moore gets the point.

Hon Norman Moore: You are so extraordinarily rude.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: I realise that I might be being a bit obtuse for him, particularly at this time of night. When working our way through the Local Government Amendment (Elections) Bill tonight we heard some very well-informed and well-thought-through contributions from this side of the house.

Hon Norman Moore: The last speech was the worst I have heard in this place. It was a terrible performance; just filling in time.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Hon Norman Moore is clearly having difficulty containing himself. I am happy to wait until he calms down a bit.

Hon Norman Moore: I am perfectly calm; I can assure you of that.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Hon Norman Moore does not look terribly calm.

THE DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Hon Matt Benson-Lidholm): Order! It is getting rather late in the night. I want to get out of this place as well. If we could focus on the task at hand?

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Thank you, Mr Deputy President. I was just making the point that tonight we have been working our way through the Local Government Amendment (Elections) Bill with some very well-informed and well-thought-through comments from this side of the house. All of a sudden Hon Peter Collier went into some minor paroxysm of anxiety and launched a most extraordinary personal attack on my colleague Hon Ljiljana Ravlich.

Hon Kate Doust: Again.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: As Hon Kate Doust says, again. He seems to be unable to resist an opportunity to take every swipe he can. Indeed, I can remember one occasion before the recess when he started interjecting on Hon Ljiljana Ravlich before she even got to her feet. He needs to take a lesson in a bit of self-control.

However, the point I wanted to come to is the extraordinary ill-tempered response I got from Hon Donna Faragher when I asked her, as Minister for Environment, what I thought was a reasonable question. I checked to see whether I phrased it in such a way that perhaps pushed some buttons, but nobody seems to think so. I asked her a perfectly straightforward question about some disciplinary action that we understand has been taken against some of the staff of her Department of Environment and Conservation in connection with Straits Resources' proposal to start a salt mining project near Exmouth. I got an extraordinary response saying that the department has a director general who deals with all staffing matters. I have looked at the response quite carefully. I cannot see any reason for her to be quite as upset as she was at my asking the question. However, I want to tell her that I will continue to ask these questions until we get some decent answers. This is only one of many dozens of questions that need to be answered by the minister. Before I go on with that, let me explain why I asked the question. It is not clear to anybody to whom I have spoken that the Department of Environment and Conservation staff in Exmouth were acting in any way in an official capacity when they involved themselves, as they have every right to do, in adding their names to some points of view outside their working hours. However, that is not the case with this government, whose record now is severely tarnished with this kind of interference with what public servants in this state do. If the minister had any idea about what was going on in the way that this government's actions are being perceived by the public, she should have looked for a briefing note, which was presumably in her papers, and found a more adequate way to respond to my question today. I have one helpful, creative suggestion, which is offered in good spirit. Hon Donna Faragher would have noticed at the beginning of the winter break that the head of one of her authorities, Mr Barry Carbon, referred to her, although actually not by name. Honourable members will agree that I am right to draw the conclusion that he was referring to the minister. Mr Barry Carbon responded to a question I asked during a public hearing of the Estimates and Financial Operations Committee about the projected income from the increase in the landfill levy. My notes indicate that Mr Barry Carbon said —

One would have to be a wild optimist to think the levy would deliver 4 times what it previously did.

I do not think that the levy will deliver that. Presumably he was not talking about me. I have not spoken to anybody on this side of the house who thinks that the government is even remotely on track with this extraordinary 300 per cent increase in the levy and the removal of the levy from the Waste Authority of Western Australia. Nobody on this side of the house thinks that the increase in the levy will deliver what the budget papers tell us it will deliver. However, I think that the minister does make this assumption. Therefore, she is one of the wild optimists Mr Carbon was referring to. I think she would count herself on that list, but I cannot be sure. This hearing took place on 29 June and there was extensive media coverage that night and the following day. I put out a media statement that was taken up by several media outlets. What did we hear from the minister over the ensuing six weeks? We heard a deafening silence. I concede that it was not a deafening silence from the minister. This minister is obviously going for a record in the number of press releases she puts out. Sometimes I sit there looking at my inbox and up they pop, one after the other. I am very glad that the minister is in the house tonight. It is very good to see her here during the adjournment debate. It is something of a novelty. I can only think that perhaps there is a little bit of anxiety going on here.

While I started my adjournment debate tonight by talking about the fact that some ministers have not used their winter break wisely, I do not think the same could be said of the government backbench. That backbench looks positively perky. Have members noticed that? The government backbench is up there raring to go. We have heard some terrific contributions today. I noticed Hon Michael Mischin is already trying to take over from the Minister for Transport. I do not think it will be too long before that happens. I noticed other members jumping to their feet to speak on an urgency motion. It is the first time we have seen that. It is great to see all that energy and enthusiasm, even though I have serious doubts about the calibre and quality of their contributions to this place. It is early days and we will see what happens.

I have mentioned Mr Carbon's comment that one would have to be a wild optimist to think that this money would be raised by the levy. This government has created with the landfill levy a state of wild confusion. I hope the minister will go home, take a Bex and have a good lie down and think about how she might respond in a more level, even way to some of the questions I plan to bowl up to her over the next couple of weeks in an attempt to cut through some of the wild confusion she has created.

I have been told today that a substantial number of councils—I believe it might even be the majority of councils—are already charging the 300 per cent increase in the landfill levy. That is despite the fact that towards the end of the last session the minister announced in this place that she had deferred the whole thing. I have commented at length on that subject in this place and outlined how confusing that is. I understand that most councils are already charging this increased rate. Where is that money going? Nobody knows. I hope that the minister will eventually give us some answers.