

ELECTRICAL APPRENTICES — TRAINING INFRASTRUCTURE

Grievance

MR A.P. O’GORMAN (Joondalup) [9.14 am]: My grievance this morning is to the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Training and Workforce Development, and it is about the provision of places for electrical apprentices. The National Electrical and Communications Association of Western Australia trains apprentices here in Western Australia through its College of Electrical Training. NECA has two campuses, one in Balcatta and the other in Jandakot. CET currently has about 1 600 apprentices, and Electrical Group Training employs about 770 apprentices. In total across WA, there are about 4 000 electrical apprentices.

NECA would like to have taken on at least an extra 300 apprentices in 2011, and then an extra 200 in 2012. Currently, NECA has 977 student apprentices at its Balcatta facility, and 700 at its Jandakot facility. However, it would have had approximately 300 first-year apprentices at Joondalup initially, eventually rising to over 650 over three years. The Joondalup college should have been completed and operational at the beginning of the 2012 school year. NECA now hopes to have it complete and ready for the 2013 school year. The college will be smaller due to funding difficulties. At least 300 apprentices would have been recruited in 2011 to commence training at the college in early 2012.

I raise this grievance this morning because this government goes on and on about how committed it is to training. We see an organisation with a proven track record that wants to take on more apprentices, and it is very upset that the government is not supporting it. Our Minister for Training and Workforce Development is heading to the United Kingdom in July to recruit skilled workers. That points to what is happening here: we are not training our people in Western Australia. It also points to what is happening with the Make It Here campaign and the fact that a number of our fabrication workshops are empty. CET and NECA have to date, despite their efforts, not been able to produce enough electrical workers to meet the needs of industry. In 2008, NECA tried to establish the Joondalup campus, but has been frustrated by the state government. NECA approached the government to see whether it would donate a piece of land at Joondalup to build the college there; the land is owned by the government through LandCorp. NECA had over \$2 million of funding from the federal government, so there was a commitment by the federal government to fund training in Australia, but particularly in this state, and it was hoped that the state government would come to the party also. The cost of the land in Joondalup is about \$1.2 million to \$1.3 million, and ministers were approached about a year ago to donate that piece of land. It took 12 months for the government to get back to NECA. State cabinet met on 21 February, and at that cabinet meeting it was decided not to allocate that piece of land to NECA.

As I am sure every member in this place would agree, apprentices are the lifeblood of our industries. Electrical apprentices do not fit into just one industry sector; they work across all industries, such as building and construction, mining and manufacturing—the whole gamut of our economy. It is really important that we support electrical apprentices and organisations like NECA to build colleges and train our apprentices. Electrical apprentices and electricians are engaged in a very dangerous trade, and it requires the absolute highest standard of training. We cannot neglect this important training and bring in people from overseas to fill the gaps in our workforce. We have people in Western Australia who are unemployed. Our young men and women are unemployed, and all of them could be apprentices. This Western Australian organisation is missing out on training 300 apprentices in 2011–12 and up to 650 apprentices over the next three years. It needs to get on and build this facility, and it would be great if the government got behind the rhetoric it is putting out about training and put some money behind training. It is simply not good enough to purchase training places and for the government to say that it has the training needs of our state at heart. It has not!

It is about time we stopped hearing the rhetoric. I have been present and heard many speeches, and I have seen Minister Collier walk out, pat himself on the back and say what a great job this government is doing. We are down 3 000 apprentices across this state. That is from the Department of Training and Workforce Development’s own website. We are sending work offshore. We are sending the minister offshore to find more tradespeople. Surely in a state as rich as ours, we should be able to train our own apprentices. We should be able to provide work for our own young people. That is not just in the area of Joondalup, because if this college were built in Joondalup, NECA’s Jandakot facility would be able to take on more apprentices as there would be a greater spread—obviously, those from the north would go to the college in Joondalup. We could also help apprentices and young people from the southern areas and from the central district as the Balcatta facility would also be able to take some more apprentices.

We are pushing all the time for people to go back into the trades. We need more tradespeople in the mining, building and construction, manufacturing and food industries. We need electricians who can ensure that the equipment that people work with is not only safe and up to a certain standard, but also maintained and operational every day so that production is not lost. It is an issue today and it needs to be addressed today.

MR M.J. COWPER (Murray–Wellington — Parliamentary Secretary) [9.18 am]: I thank the member for Joondalup for bringing on this grievance. Electrical apprenticeship training is a very important issue. I can assure members that this government is committed to ensuring that we have considerable input into providing electrical trades in Western Australia. Basically, the Department of Training and Workforce Development funded the National Electrical and Communications Association of Western Australia, which is the industry peak body, through the College of Electrical Training, to the tune of \$4.92 million for training delivery. I understand that this whole issue revolves around the land being allocated for free to NECA.

The case put forward by NECA identifies Joondalup as a place of need. Immediately next door to NECA is the Motor Industry Training Association of Western Australia facility, which opened only in the last few days. The Minister for Training and Workforce Development cut the ribbon and it was a very important hallmark for the motor industry trades. The electrical peak body wants to establish a training facility for electricians right next door, which is fantastic. However, NECA is asking for that land to be given to it for free, whereas the Motor Industry Training Association next door had to pay market rate. Is the member advocating that the government gives free land to anybody and everybody who wishes to set up a training facility? From the government's perspective, it is a problem if every training provider in Western Australia that wishes to set up a training facility expects the land to be given to them for free.

It is recognised that NECA is a peak body. As the member pointed out, NECA has a good track record and great facilities at Jandakot and Balcatta; there is no question about that. We certainly want to find ways to build on the great successes of those facilities, and Joondalup is the obvious way to go. The problem is that the government has been dipping into its pocket to fund NECA and to provide opportunities for it to expand and, unfortunately, NECA has decided to take a new approach and say that it wants the land for nothing. That throws up a whole lot of other issues about land and property values. Recently, the Pinjarra training facility opened with great fanfare down in my neck of the woods; I know the Minister for Lands and the Premier were there. That apprenticeship centre provides another great opportunity for private enterprise and service providers to provide apprenticeship training here in Western Australia.

I hope that there will be a resolution to this issue, and I offer an opportunity for the office of the Minister for Training and Workforce Development to talk with NECA and see whether we can resolve this issue. As the member pointed out, this issue has been going on since 2008, which is far too long. We need additional electrical trades in Western Australia; it is very important to the people of Western Australia and this government. As the member rightly points out, it is particularly important to the people who live not only in the north, but also in the south.

The government is committed to introducing a number of initiatives to encourage apprenticeships. The government has introduced a rebate on workers' compensation premiums for employers; promoted apprenticeship training through marketing and awareness campaigns; helped employers retain apprentices and trainees during the economic downturn through the securing out-of-trade apprentices initiative; and provided investment of an additional \$50 million to support an estimated 17 000 additional training places to develop Western Australian workshops for the future.

I will make some general comments on apprenticeship training in this state. Western Australia will face a period of sustained growth, and to maximise the opportunities from growth, we have a range of strategies in place to ensure that the state has sufficient skills and labour to meet the requirements of our industries. The state government has established a comprehensive and integrated framework headed by the recently released "Skilling WA — A workforce development plan for Western Australia". We have a plan and the idea of just giving away land is not a policy of this government. We like to offer discounts, and a discount of 10 per cent has been offered to NECA, which I do not believe was offered to the Motor Industry Training Association. It is not as though NECA has not been given some due consideration. As I said, I give the commitment from the minister's office to sit and negotiate with NECA to come up with a resolution to this impasse that seems to have occurred, because we need those training programs.

The 2010–11 budget funds 7 600 new training places. The state government considers traditional apprenticeships a critical priority, and guarantees funding for training of all traditional apprenticeships, which includes electrical apprenticeships. From June 2009 to the present, 20 new apprenticeship qualifications have been established through the State Training Board, and the government has introduced a range of initiatives to help employees retain apprentices and trainees during the economic downturn. The government is committed to apprenticeship training. This is not a simple case of the government being approached by various peak bodies for land and giving up land without consideration of a number of issues, some of which I have just detailed.

I say to the member for Joondalup that the genuine part of this grievance is the government's commitment to negotiate with NECA, the industry peak body, to see whether we can resolve this situation. I hope that the member for Joondalup and I can negotiate and facilitate a resolution.