

**POLICE — FIREARMS LICENSING AND REGISTRY INFORMATION SYSTEM**

*Motion*

**HON RICK MAZZA (Agricultural)** [10.17 am] — without notice: I move —

That this house recognises the importance of value for money in the delivery of government services; and acknowledges that the firearm licensing and registry (L&R) information system fails to meet an acceptable level of service for application fees charged and the system's failings as outlined in the May 2019 Auditor General report 18.

I am sure that all members would agree that there is an expectation of value for money in the delivery of government services. Whether it is train tickets, car registration or fishing licences, there is an expectation that there is a degree of efficiency and that charges will be kept to a minimum in delivering those government services. Whether or not members agree with private firearm ownership, the real issue is that firearm licence holders are legitimate licence holders and they deserve and should expect a cost-effective and efficient licensing service. To give the house some background, in the last Parliament, regulations were tabled in 2013 that included very significant increases in firearm application fees. I moved a disallowance motion in relation to those regulations. It was one of the only times that two of the then government members crossed the floor to support a disallowance motion, along with the then opposition, which is now the government. Unfortunately, that disallowance motion was defeated. However, the Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation conducted an inquiry into the regulations and held public hearings and produced a report, which was its sixty-eighth report. In October 2013, former member of Parliament Mr Peter Abetz tabled the report entitled "Explanatory Report in Relation to the Firearms Amendment Regulations 2013". In doing so, he said —

I will take the opportunity to make a few personal comments regarding the Firearms Amendment Regulations 2013 that were gazetted on 28 June 2013. Because they resulted in a massive increase in fees, they certainly generated an awful lot of public debate and discussion. Some fees were increased by 400 per cent.

I recall that there was a significant amount of media interest around this issue at the time. I attended some of those hearings. Some of the findings that the Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation made in its sixty-eighth report and some of the information surrounding the hearings were quite interesting. Paragraph 4 of the executive summary to the report states —

The Committee resolved to advise the House of four controversial matters arising from the hearing and those submissions. The matters are: (1) the processing of applications for firearms licences, (2) the opportunity for error in such processing, (3) the Noting fee for additional firearms on certain existing licences; and (4) the costs of licences in other jurisdictions.

In some evidence given by Western Australian police, the officer in charge stated how the processing of original class A low-powered firearm licences for recreational hunting and shooting progressed. The report noted that process in dot point form —

- A person goes to a dealer, obtains a dealer's certificate and details of the firearm, applies online through the website, fills it out, prints it out and takes it to Australia Post, pays the fee and submits the appropriate forms.
- 48 hours later if it comes through electronically, it arrives at the firearms licensing services probity area, not the firearms branch;
- The probity area's unsworn officers (overseen by sworn officers), look at the application details and the antecedents of the applicant including CrimTrac checks to ascertain suitability under the Act. This takes approximately five days.
- The application is then handed to an unsworn, firearm licensing services assessor "*who would then look at the application in terms of actually licensing the firearm*". This person compares the calibre; the shooting location and considers sections 11A and 11B of the Act. Other activity includes contacting a property owner to ensure that he has had the authority to shoot on it. It is at this stage, a changeover occurs from a civilian assessor to the supervisor who is normally a police sergeant.
- Assuming the application is satisfactory, the assessor makes a recommendation. A sergeant makes his or her own assessment of it.
- If pre-approved, the application is returned to the assessor for a Form 22 assessment. This concerns the storage security system for the firearm.

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- The assessor fills out forms and sends a statutory declaration form to the applicant for photographs and details as to how the firearm will be stored. The declaration is returned within 28 days and then sent to the approver (again) for final approval if everything is correct.
- The approver sends the forms to a 'loading' clerk. At this stage, the application has been in the 'firearm portal' whereas the actual licence is issued in the firearm registry system. However, there is no automatic link between these two systems, so *"we have to manually take it out of one system and manually load it into the actual firearm registry system. Once loaded in the system, and it is a civilian who does the actual loading, the details are then sent to Post Connect,... and the licence is forwarded out"*.

The process to assess a firearms application in Western Australia is very convoluted and clunky compared with that in other states.

As far as I am aware, we are the only state in Australia that uses Australia Post as the first point of call to receive applications. Australia Post charges a fee for that service, which I will get into a little bit later, then the application is forwarded to police licensing. That puts a pretty significant cost on the first step of the application. I am at a loss as to why we do not have a direct portal in this day and age straight into the police licensing system that improves the probity and integrity of the system. Recommendation 1 of the sixty-eighth report of the Joint Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation is —

**The Committee recommends that the Minister initiate a review of the *Firearms Act 1973* and advise the Legislative Council and the Legislative Assembly of the timeframe for the review.**

That resulted in the Law Reform Commission conducting an inquiry into the Firearms Act, resulting in the 105<sup>th</sup> report, which was conducted over a two-year period. It was a very thorough inquiry and investigation. It was tabled on the last sitting day of the last term of government in October 2016. This report has 143 recommendations in it about a review of how the firearms processing system operates. Recommendation 26 states —

- 26.1 All components of the Licensing and Registry system should be made fully operational as soon as is practicable but nevertheless within six months of the tabling of this Report.
- 26.2 WA Police should conduct a review of the Licensing and Registry system after its first full year of operation to verify that it is functioning as intended.
- 26.3 The review of the Licensing and Registry system should be made publicly available.
- 26.4 Any deficiencies in the Licensing and Registry system revealed by the review should be addressed as a matter of priority.

Recommendation 27 states —

- 27.1 The Department of Transport and Western Australia Police should collaborate to implement a system for the receipt of firearms applications, conducting the 100-point check and taking photographs at Department of Transport Driver and Vehicle Services.
- 27.2 A firearms applicant who has a driver's licence should be able to apply at Department of Transport Driver and Vehicle Services for a firearms licence without having to go through the 100-point check and photographing.

Recommendation 32 states —

- 32.1 The current paper licence and extract of licence should be replaced with a single plastic authorisation card to be issued to holders of firearms licences ...

For the benefit of members who do not hold a firearms licence, currently there is an identity card and a paper licence, both of which the licence holder must carry on their person at any time they have a firearms licence. The identity card does nothing but identify the person; it does not do anything else. The number on it is the same as their drivers' licence number. The person then has to carry a paper licence with the details of the firearms on it. I get a lot of complaints that the piece of paper gets lost. Usually people are out in the bush or on the farm and they cannot always access the piece of paper. The little identity card has to be upgraded with a new photograph every five years at a cost of around \$20. It is a very clunky way of dealing with the process of the firearms system. One of the recommendation that I will make note of is that Airsoft should be permitted under firearms legislation, subject to appropriate regulation, which will please Hon Aaron Stonehouse.

This is not a criticism of the officers or staff of the licensing and registry system. They are dealing with what they have got and they have to use a system that is ineffective. It was quite interesting to note a couple of things in the very recent Auditor General's report, "Firearm Controls", tabled in May this year. The first was that there are 85 100 licence holders, so it is not small number of people. A lot of people are affected by an inefficient system. On page 16 of the report, the Auditor General also noted —

The L&R system has a number of control and functionality weaknesses around data input, logging and monitoring of data access, authorisation for approving licences, system access and reporting. These create a risk to the integrity, reliability and completeness of information in the system, and limit Police's ability to measure, report and evaluate its regulatory performance.

As a result of these weaknesses, staff told us that they lack confidence in the L&R system and prefer to use their own spreadsheets to manage work such as licence applications, deceased estate firearms, and inspections. Manual workarounds increase the risk of errors.

The police are still carrying out manual workarounds, as indicated by the sixty-eighth report in 2013 and the Auditor General's 2019 report. It continues —

We did a desktop review of the project management to establish the L&R system. We found the way the system was developed and implemented has likely contributed to existing deficiencies. The project started in 2014, has cost almost \$9 million, and functionality concerns raised by staff during development still remain. The L&R system does not currently provide the functionality required to help Police effectively regulate firearms.

The fact is that there was an upgrade from 2014 to 2015. I think the exact figure was around \$8.7 million. The end users of that system have not found any benefit at all. We still have a very clunky system. There are still delays and wait times for applicants to have their applications processed. There are still manual workarounds in the system, which is a concern for the probity and integrity of the system. One of the issues with the system is public safety. The integrity of the system ensures that it is a very secure system. Certain things are still required. For instance, when someone buys ammunition from a dealer, they are required to identify themselves by writing their name, address and licence number in a book that sits on the counter. We have not got away from that yet.

During 2018, I was part of a working group that included a number of stakeholders, such as the Sporting Shooters Association of Western Australia, the Western Australian Firearm Traders Association and the WA Police Force, and we worked through the Law Reform Commission recommendations. Over that year, we broke it into three tranches. We agreed on tranche 1, after debating the more practical recommendations. We deferred tranches 2 and 3 until a later date. We provided that report to the minister towards the end of 2018. As yet, we have received no indication about whether those agreed representations in that first tranche would be implemented any time soon. I have asked a couple of questions in Parliament about how that was progressing, and I have not received much in the way of answers. It is of great concern that we have not made any progress, despite the \$8.7 million that has been spent on that system.

Unfortunately, we need more investment in the IT system for the licensing and registration of firearms in Western Australia to provide a more modern, secure and efficient system so that firearm owners and the community can be assured that we have a modern system and things like a direct portal into the police licensing system for applications or the use of the Department of Transport and its vehicle and licensing sections to assist it with that. We also need a single smart card that does not provide the address of the licence holder but can be scanned by police to find out what is going on. That can be connected with a person's driver's licence. For example, one of the practical recommendations we agreed on related to safe storage. If a firearm owner was visiting another firearm owner, whether for a competition shoot such as clay target shooting, where people travel great distances, or a pest control program, they would be able to store their firearm in the host's firearm cabinet while visiting, which is the safest place for it to be. Currently, that would be an offence. People cannot do that. In fact, all people can do is lock the firearm in the boot of their car. I do not think that is a practical way of safely storing a firearm. The firearms community does not want an issue with firearms. It is very mindful of ensuring that only licensing firearms owners have access to those firearms and that we have a system that regulates it correctly. I will give members a bit of an idea of some of the fees and charges and how out of step we are with other jurisdictions. I asked a couple of questions yesterday and on Tuesday about firearm charges. The question I asked yesterday was what is the fee for an original licence application, and the Western Australia Police Force said that it is \$268. The cost of an annual renewal is \$56 and the cost of an application for an additional firearm is \$188. I have had some complaints about that because sometimes the cost of the application exceeds the value of the firearm. I also asked a question on Tuesday about what Australia Post charges WAPOL for processing applications. WAPOL said that it charges \$44.62 for a new application—that has come down a bit from a few years ago—and \$33.42 for an additional licence. I also asked whether that full cost was passed on to the applicant and WAPOL said that, yes, the full cost of firearm licence applications is subsidised by government. Even with these high charges, there is still government subsidy for the system. My understanding is that the licensing registration department receives a bit over \$7 million a year in application fees, so it receives a fairly significant amount of money each year, but it still requires the government to subsidise it.

In Queensland, the cost of a new licence application is \$107.15, which is considerably less than the cost in WA; it is less than half. A permit to acquire, which is the same as our additional licence, costs \$40.50. In New South Wales, the cost of an application for a category A, B, C, D or H licence holder for two years is \$100, or \$50 a year, and an additional licence costs \$40. In Tasmania, the cost is \$145.80 for five years, but for a concession holder, it

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is \$116.64. That is another thing with the Western Australian system—there is no pensioner discount on this particular service. Just about every other government service has a concession for pensioners, and a lot of older Western Australians undertake shooting as a pastime, so I often get complaints about that. In Victoria, a five-year category B licence costs \$280.60 and an additional licence costs \$9.20, compared with \$188 in WA. There are some quite significant cost differences between WA and other jurisdictions.

I have a short time left. It is not just firearm and licence holders who are impacted by this. A lot of small businesses throughout regional Western Australia, in particular, and in metropolitan Perth are firearms dealers and they, like every other business, rely on cash flow. We have a very slow and clunky firearms processing system. If they have to bring a firearm into stock, it could be weeks, if not months, before they can sell that firearm. Some of those dealers have said to me that accessories that are purchased at the time of picking up the firearm usually exceed the value of the firearm, so while the firearm is sitting there, their cash flow is in limbo. Not many businesses can withstand not having that cash flow on a regular basis.

There have also been many issues with the transportation of firearms. Australia Post used to undertake a lot of that. Some years ago, there was a reinterpretation of what an approved carrier is under the Firearms Act. Australia Post basically stopped transporting firearms, which caused enormous problems for regional Western Australians in getting stock. Some of that has been alleviated through negotiations between stakeholders. Australia Post is doing some click and collect-type services, but they are still very limited. The costs of commercial carriers are huge. I think it is about time we upgraded the system.

**HON TJORN SIBMA (North Metropolitan)** [10.38 am]: I might commence my contribution to this debate by invoking the great spirit of the Minister for Regional Development and her astute apprentice Hon Darren West and say that I have great news as well, and that great news is that I support the motion that is currently being contemplated by this house. On behalf of the Parliamentary Liberal Party, I am driven to reveal our support even if for only one reason, and that is the first part of the motion, which states —

That this house recognises the importance of value for money in the delivery of government services ...

I think that is an astute observation of a prevailing need. It is a matter that has not been expressed as clearly and as eloquently as it should have been in this house. I have some serious concerns about the government's commitment to delivering value-for-money services across the wide domain of all its service offerings. The government should be held to account for that at the macro level, as well as at the level of the interaction of a civilian, a member of the Western Australian community, with any government agency. That ethic needs to be driven structurally and as a process within the public service. Individual public servants, particularly those at the senior executive level, need to be continually held to account and be able to prove that the services that they provide with taxpayers' money for the benefit of the community are being delivered with that ethic in mind. It needs to be demonstrable and measurable. Ultimate responsibility lies with the executive of government.

This government may not have invoked that wording, but very early in its term it certainly invoked that ethos through a range of matters—in particular, the machinery-of-government changes, which came into effect very early on in the first term, in July 2017; and the voluntary targeted separation scheme. I want to address those two issues first because they are integral to the purpose of this motion. I remind members of the commitment given by the government. The voluntary targeted separation scheme was part of its first budget, and an update was provided by the Treasurer on 10 May 2018 in a media statement called "Progress continues with the Voluntary Targeted Separation Scheme". I will quote from that document to remind members of its purpose —

Separation costs under the VTSS are estimated to total \$300 million.

That is because the government was paying people out. It continues —

Gross savings under the scheme are estimated to total \$1.1 billion over the forward estimates period, with \$189 million of this to be retained by participating agencies for reinvestment in workforce renewal.

The government reached its target of over 3 000 separations, but forgot to mention that it added them all back and more by hiring 3 700 additional full-time equivalents across the public service. Let us follow the maths. More than \$300 million was spent to pay people out. They have all been hired back, but we are expected to believe that the government still has a commitment to value for money for ethical and efficient service delivery and we will still obtain a \$1.1 billion saving across the forward estimates. I am sorry, but that is impossible to deliver now. Furthermore, agencies were provided with 20 per cent of the savings. That was offered up as some sort of incentive payment for reinvestment. Those agencies diligently delivered on a government policy agenda and, presumably, were gifted that 20 per cent. Now that the government has decided to hire everyone back and more, I wonder whether the agencies have to hand that money back. All we see here is financial churn. There is no efficiency here. This is illogical and insensible. Frankly, it is stupidity. It is a marker of this government's management of the public sector.

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The other issue is the machinery-of-government changes. The machinery-of-government changes have done nothing but cause dysfunction and chaos across the public sector. They have been inefficient. They could have been successful had they been structured and delivered in an intelligible way, but they were not. They were rushed. Between March and July 2017 there was a great churn that gave the government the opportunity to engage in what I continue to call a political purge of the senior public service of people who it thought were far too close to the previous government or were unlikely to kowtow to the dictates of some obstreperous cabinet ministers. That is unfortunate, because I have respect for the public service; I think it can sometimes save governments from themselves. But this government chose to jettison the cream of the crop and make decisions to, frankly, put people in positions for which they were probably unqualified. I speak very clearly here of the head of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, who has shown nothing but misjudgement, missteps, arrogance and poor decision-making for the entirety of his management of that department. I will elaborate further on that on another occasion.

Machinery-of-government changes continue to cost the public sector. If they cost one department in particular, it is the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, which, two and a half years on from those changes, is still running different financial and payroll systems and will struggle to implement a one-size-fits-all or a single departmental IT system that is integrated across all the domains until beyond next year. That, frankly, was just hopeless. It was hopeless because it was rushed and poorly designed, and it was delivered purely to give the Premier a nice sugar hit of a media statement to say, “I’ve banged all these departments together and I’ve cut them by 40 per cent. Look at me!” Frankly, it is idiotic. Neither a business nor any sensible, sustainable human endeavour can be run that way if that is the way decisions are rushed.

I want to reflect also on why this government cannot deliver value-for-money services. The reason is that it refuses to hold its senior executive service cadre to account for their performance. The Premier went to the election with a glorious 20–20–20 vision for the public sector: he was going to cut 20 per cent of fat cats, do something with another 20 per cent, and tie 20 per cent of the salaries of his directors general and CEOs to the achievement of certain performance targets. We are still waiting to understand what those performance targets are. I asked the Premier a question about three weeks ago about how he is going and how it is progressing, because I am keenly interested in what he is doing. In answer to my question without notice 1316 on 31 October this year, I was referred to the 12 key targets detailed as part of the Our Priorities vision, which was released earlier this year. The Leader of the House representing the Premier said —

It is anticipated that a model will be ready to be rolled out after the expiry of the four-year pay freeze for senior public servants ...

The Premier went to the last election saying that he was going to crack down on fat cats and hold everybody accountable. He cannot even work out what those DGs are supposed to do and will not get around to it until after 2021—that is hopeless. That is why there is continued inefficiency in the domain of firearms licensing and a range of inefficiencies in vehicle licensing, sitting for driver’s tests and the like—because nobody seems to be held accountable for anything at all. A government cannot be run this way. This problem exists through the whole of the public sector, and it is owned by the Premier, because he is the Minister for Public Sector Management.

In the brief time available to me, I do not have the opportunity to reflect on the job description form that was tabled as part of an answer to a question I asked about the gentleman who has been in the press who was the assistant director general, corporate operations, at the Department of Communities. That tabled job description form demands reading from all interested members in this place, because what I have here is three pages of platitudinous guff but not a single hard target and absolutely no reference to value-for-money service delivery. We spend up to \$200 000 on non-jobs like this. This is part of the problem. I commend this motion to the house and we should all support it.

**HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Leader of the House)** [10.48 am]: I appreciate the opportunity to provide a response on behalf of the government and I thank the member for bringing the motion to the house. Unlike the previous member, I am going to talk about the substance of the motion, which is the regulation of firearms in Western Australia.

I begin by thanking Hon Rick Mazza for his participation in and contribution to the working group that was established by the minister. Probably the only thing I will have in common with the contribution by Hon Tjorn Sibma is to say that I, too, have good news. I advise the member that the government is working on a bill to be ready in 2020 on the first tranche of the work done by the working group, and members of the working group will be consulted on the draft of that bill.

I will give some background comments and then update the honourable member and the house on where we are in responding to the issues raised in the reports that the honourable member referred to in his contribution. By way of some background information, firearm fees and charges in Australian jurisdictions are not directly comparable for a couple of reasons. The cost of firearm licence fees in WA is based on cost recovery; it is not subsidised by the government as it is in some other Australian jurisdictions. Fees are different between the states and territories. In Australia, no two licensing systems are the same. For example, Tasmania charges a fee to licence the person,

then an additional fee to add a firearm to that licence. Additional costs, however, include about \$160 to TAFE for a firearm awareness certificate and \$20 for a permit to acquire. Tasmania also charges a fee of over \$9 to every dealer for each firearm they sell, which may be passed on to the applicant by the dealer in the sale price. In WA, we do not have TAFE fees for firearm awareness certificates, permits to acquire or a dealer fee for every firearm sold. Yearly licence renewals also vary greatly between jurisdictions from around \$21 in the Northern Territory, to \$94 in South Australia and \$56 in Western Australia.

The WA Police Force licensing and registry—L&R—information system is undergoing an enhancement project to improve its functionality. The L&R stage 4 enhancement project commenced in July 2018 and was completed in August 2019. I will talk about what that has delivered in a moment. The L&R stage 5 enhancement project commenced in August this year and is scheduled to be completed in March 2020. Issues with the L&R system were identified since its deployment and were further highlighted during the Auditor General's audit of the system and licensing services business processes in 2018. As a result of the stage 4 enhancement project, which finished just a few months ago, it has already delivered significant improvements to the system through the following: individual task management, which allows officers to deal with allocated tasks more efficiently; task management, allowing for the allocation, oversight and reporting on tasks within the system; searches, allowing for new search parameters and enhanced search capability through additional filters and fields; automated running sheet entries, clarifying parameters with the running sheet and streamlining display; reports, providing additional reporting functionality to existing reports and creating new reports; receipts and payment, automating fund processes, resolving payment process issues and providing more efficient reconciliation activity; and there are others, including automation of the dealer section activities and multiple smaller system fixes.

Stage 5 of the enhancement project, which is ongoing, continues that work, creating new role responsibilities to address the licence approvals process issues raised by the Auditor General, new conditions built within the system to streamline this area of licence process and new recent activity reports to resolve the manual process of checks for criminal activity against licence holders. To date, the two projects have delivered over 130 enhancements to the system, and they are working on a further 40 enhancements that will provide more efficiencies from the system in the management of all licensing activities. As I indicated, in tranche 1 we are preparing a bill, and members of the working party will be consulted on that. The area of temporary storage permits for licence holders will also be enhanced and streamlined within the system as part of that tranche 1 work, which will be reflected in a bill that members of the working party will be consulted on.

Tranche 2 will see significant work undertaken to create an online licensing system, available to end users 24/7, 365 days a year, I am advised, with the potential for mobile apps to further enhance licence holder experiences. During September this year, firearms licensing had 1390 original and additional applications on hand, which was above the preferred routine operating number of 800 or less. This occurred not because of failings of the licensing and registry system, but because of other duties taking staff away from processing, such as audits, including recent offences committed at Barry and Son Firearms and Military Collectibles, of which the honourable member will be aware, and other operational requirements.

This is a work in progress. I appreciate the contribution of the honourable member to ensure that we get this right. The WA Police Force has acknowledged that there are some inadequacies in the system, and has been working, as I said, on the licensing and registry enhancement project to address those issues, including data integrity, systems reliability and business reporting. The police have implemented recommendation 4 of the Auditor General's report, and the remaining recommendations are continuing to be progressed and should be implemented by the end of this year or early 2020. I know that other members want to speak. Again, I commend the member for his contribution to ensuring we continue to improve the system in place, and continue to provide better service.

**HON COLIN TINCKNELL (South West)** [10.57 am]: I would like to start by thanking Hon Rick Mazza for this non-government business motion. It is a very worthwhile discussion. I can see already that maybe the member got a couple of Christmas presents from the minister just then—a bit of information that put a smile on his face. I want to go back to some of the discussion that the honourable member spoke about. I would love to see Australia have a uniform system. We have heard that all the states are different. That will cost us money and reduce efficiency. If we had a more uniform system, it would also be a lot safer for the public, in general terms. Recreation is important in WA, and hunting is a part of that. We are talking about licensed firearm owners here. The honourable member also mentioned the great work being done in getting rid of pests and feral animals, and how important that has been. The economic and health benefits of being one of the 85 000 Western Australian licensed firearm owners cannot be disputed. They are a very important part of our community. The honourable member also mentioned that our state is the only one that uses Australia Post. We need to be able to improve that system for delivery. There have been many inquiries, and we heard about some of the 143 recommendations discussed previously. Collaboration is the main thing here. We see that the police agree with all of the five recommendations from the Auditor General, and it is good to hear the minister say that one of them has been implemented at this

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stage, and the other four will hopefully be implemented by the end of this year, as that was the time frame. That would be really good because that is what it is all about here. We are talking about working together to make firearm licensing safer and better, more cost efficient and easier to administer. It is an issue given the time it takes for police to recover firearms from deceased estates and to follow-up on expired licences. That needs to be improved and streamlined, and it is what the recommendations refer to.

The honourable member also suggested some good ideas about a single smart card and safer storage. Application fees in this state are very, very high and need to come down. These are practical, commonsense measures and I commend the member for bringing this non-government business to the house. Since I entered this place, he has been very consistent in seeking to make firearms in general safer right across WA and to ensure our system of transporting firearms between gun shops, owners, other gun shops and distributors is efficient. These inquiries and recommendations from the Office of the Auditor General will make the firearms licensing system in WA safer and more efficient, but there is a long way to go.

When I started my conversation, I indicated that I would like to see a uniform system across Western Australia. That is very important, but it is something for another day. I commend the member for bringing this non-government business to the house.

**HON AARON STONEHOUSE (South Metropolitan)** [11.03 am]: Members will forgive me; I have not had a chance to prepare some comments for this debate because I have been preoccupied with the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Hon Rick Mazza for bringing on this motion. He is a fantastic advocate for firearm owners across the state and has done a fantastic job with this motion in particular. I would like to echo the comments he made at the outset of his remarks that this is not a question about how individual members feel about firearm ownership. It is really not about that. It is, essentially, about the efficiency and cost effectiveness of licensing systems. We would demand a high level of service and cost effectiveness for licensing in any other area, be it vehicle or security licences, and the same should apply to firearms.

Without getting too populist about it, I feel there is, unfortunately, a perception that firearm owners are second-rate citizens, treated so by the media and government at times. Whether we think that is true, it is certainly a perception and an attitude out there. It is very sad that a group of law-abiding people have to go through quite a rigorous process to obtain firearms in the first place for legitimate reasons. They are fit and proper people but are delivered a sub-par system—an inadequate level of service—by government and that is really unfortunate. Why that is, is hard to pin down. Could it be attitudes towards firearms? Perhaps. I think it has something to do with a lack of transparency more than anything around the system administered by the WA Police Force and around the process, in fact. I am almost inundated with correspondence from constituents with complaints about firearm licensing. It is very, very hard to know how to help those constituents and where to steer them. More than two years in, I still do not fully understand how the system works—who is accountable for it, what the proper chain of command is and where complaints should be directed. It is a very, very difficult system to navigate and how this stuff actually works is behind a bureaucratic veil, I suppose. As I mentioned, there is also a lack of accountability, not just in individual decisions made by bureaucrats within licensing, but around the way information technology projects are rolled out and the way capital is spent on IT projects. As we heard from Hon Rick Mazza, something like \$8 million was spent to upgrade an IT system, but we still have not seen a dividend from that. There has been no increase in efficiency, at least not from what has been reported to me by constituents. Fees have not decreased. In fact, it has been quite the opposite. An incredible amount of taxpayers' money has been spent and the main customer for that service has not seen any improvement to the service they receive from the state as a result. Unfortunately, I suspect that within some agencies there is a negative attitude towards these kinds of things. The attitude is not so much to provide a customer service to licence applicants, but more to stand in the way. I sometimes see a very sort of stand-off attitude. I am often sent letters and email correspondence between my constituents and officers within Police Licensing Services, and there is not an attitude of someone who is trying to help an applicant navigate this complicated process, but rather someone who is acting as a gatekeeper and stopping them and looking to put up roadblocks for them. It is very disappointing.

I have seen a similar thing in the Department of Transport when dealing with modified vehicles. My Select Committee on Personal Choice and Community Safety has looked into the topic. There seems to be a massive lack of accountability in the Department of Transport when licensing modified vehicles. Licences are knocked back for arbitrary reasons; discretion is exercised, but there is no right of appeal; and complaints can be made to lower level officers that are not escalated up the chain. When we ask the director general of Transport about what happens with these complaints, he says that he does not get any. I am not surprised. There is no clear escalation of complaints. The same thing is happening within firearms licensing. At least, that is my suspicion. I would like to confirm that suspicion, but it is hidden behind this bureaucratic veil. It is very hard to understand what happens there.

Ultimately, I think that firearm owners are very frustrated with the system. They are paying more than their counterparts in other jurisdictions. There is a massive lack of accountability of how funds are spent to upgrade

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IT systems in this state. Something really needs to be done about it. It is comforting to hear the Leader of the House say that the government is working on this but I remain sceptical because that is what we hear year after year. We will get it sorted. I am sure that the very same thing was told to Hon Rick Mazza when the government rolled out its \$8 million IT capital investment.

**Hon RICK MAZZA:** It was \$8.7 million.

**Hon AARON STONEHOUSE:** It was \$8.7 million. We were told that it would finally fix firearm licensing in WA. It has not delivered—not yet. I will not hold my breath. I remain very sceptical. We need to remain vigilant not only from the perspective of advocating for firearm owners to get a fair go, but also because as parliamentarians we are the stewards of public funds. It is not good practice and it is not judicious to throw money at IT systems and not have a return to the taxpayer and the applicants who use that system. I fully support this motion. I am glad to see that there is a somewhat positive attitude towards it across the chamber, and I commend it.

**HON TIM CLIFFORD (East Metropolitan)** [11.07 am]: I rise to speak briefly on the motion. I welcome the motion as it opens up a broader discussion on weaknesses in the system. I strongly agree that inadequate regulation of firearm licensing, including weaknesses in licensing and registry systems, is a very serious issue and needs a lot more work. It has been going for quite some time now, over a few years. The solution is better regulation, not reduced application fees. The Greens would never agree to “weak firearms regulation is okay provided it is cheap”, but we do welcome that the government has said that it will probably introduce a bill next year, and I am interested to see what comes of that. I am sure that Hon Rick Mazza will have lots to say about it when that eventually comes through.

As said previously, the Greens support firearms application fees being within legislative power and based on cost recovery and CPI increases. We discussed that just over a year and a half ago, when the previous motion on this topic was moved. However, we do not support calculating the fee based on the quality of the regulation. Therefore, the Greens will not be supporting the motion as it is worded.

**HON MARTIN ALDRIDGE (Agricultural)** [11.09 am]: Madam President, I seek some advice on how much time the debate has left.

**The PRESIDENT:** I think we have 15 minutes and 24 seconds.

**Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE:** Thank you. I would like to thank Hon Rick Mazza for bringing this motion to the house today. I think it is one that could be easily supported. I am surprised that the Greens just announced they do not support a motion framed in these terms, because I cannot see anything in the motion that would go to lessening, weakening or watering down firearms regulations in Western Australia. In fact, the motion talks about value for money in the delivery of government services and reflects on the WA Auditor General’s views on how well the Western Australia Police Force is administering that system. It is rather peculiar that the WA Greens are not supporting a motion framed in those terms.

As Hon Aaron Stonehouse has said, there have been several debates on firearms regulations over the last couple of years and even over the last six years that I have been in this place. It was interesting to hear the discussion today around the subsidisation of firearms fees. If I heard the Leader of the House correctly in her response on behalf the government to this motion, she said that in Western Australia we run a full cost recovery system and the state does not subsidise those fees and that therefore it is unfair to draw comparisons with other jurisdictions. I must admit that that has been my understanding of the firearms system in Western Australia. However, I will reflect on Hon Rick Mazza’s question without notice 1326 of Tuesday, 19 November 2019, which asked —

- (3) Is the full processing charge by Australia Post to the WA police firearms branch for applications passed on to the applicant in fees charged by WA police?

The answer received on Wednesday, 20 November was —

- (3) Yes. The full cost of firearms licence application fees are subsidised by Government.

That does not make much sense to me. Obviously, Minister Dawson representing the Minister for Police responded to this question. I think he said two things in his answer. He agreed with Hon Rick Mazza, saying, yes, the full cost is charged to the applicant, but then he went on to say that the application fees are subsidised by government. That is a little confusing and perhaps that is something that Hon Rick Mazza may pursue at a later stage to get some clarity on the issue. I understand his difficulty because day after day in this house I ask the police minister questions about WA police and road safety and rarely do I get a straight answer. Generally, we get straight answers, or at least part of a straight answer, after our fifth or sixth attempt at asking the simplest question known to mankind.

The issue of subsidisation is interesting and I think requires closer examination on another day. I have accepted the advice I have received over time that other jurisdictions do offer a level of taxpayer subsidisation to run their



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regulatory systems and we do not, and that that is one reason the fees charged to firearms owners are different in other jurisdictions. Obviously, that may perhaps need to be tested a bit further based on the advice of the Minister for Environment in this place yesterday. Notwithstanding that, if it were to bear true, it would be difficult to argue to Western Australian taxpayers that we ought to commence subsidising a regulatory system for firearms owners in Western Australia. My concern about regulation fees, which this motion before us goes to, really applies across government. When we have a regulatory system based on cost recovery for the users, who is the champion of change within government, within the relevant department, to try to develop a system and charge a fee that is the most efficient and safest pathway at least cost for users? Obviously, we are talking about firearms users today but we could be having this debate on a whole range of other types of cost recovery fees. If the Western Australia Police Force still used typewriters and carrier pigeons, that could well be the appropriate system, but I doubt it is. The users, under a full cost recovery —

**Hon Darren West** interjected.

**Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE:** Hon Darren West can get up in a moment.

Under a full cost recovery model, what incentive is there on the agency and on the government to actually do something differently—to actually better themselves, with the end —

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan:** Because we like to do good.

**Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE:** The minister has decided to grace us with her attendance in the chamber, and now wants to start interjecting as we get to the last 10 minutes of debate. Welcome, minister. You can have your chance in four minutes!

Several members interjected.

**The PRESIDENT:** Order! We might just settle everyone down until everyone is quiet. There is no need to yell across the chamber. The member might want to focus on the motion in front of him.

**Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE:** Thank you, Madam President. That is what I was trying to do, but there are obviously some other members in the chamber who have some interest but have not stood yet.

**The PRESIDENT:** Member, I do not know if that warrants comment. As you know, it is up to every individual member to choose whether they want to do that or not, and you should not be trying to entice them to do so. You might want to focus on the motion in front of you, please.

**Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE:** Thank you, Madam President. I thought I was until I received interjections.

The issue we have with this type of regulatory system and cost recovery to the users who use it is: what incentive is there? When these agencies turn up to the Expenditure Review Committee, as sure as day follows night the government will say to them, “We want you to do more with less, we want you to do more with less.” Who will be the champion of change in these regulated systems to say, “We want you to do more with less so that users of that system can pay less”? I think that is the problem here, with firearms licensing. Another thing I have heard over my time here is that one of the big challenges for WA police is the legislative framework they have to comply with. The minister in her reply talked considerably about the new legislative reform that is coming in 2020. I thought the minister had previously made a commitment that it would be here in 2019, but now we are talking about 2020. I am sure the next excuse will be, “Oh, we’re a bit too close to the election and the government’s got other priorities. This will be a commitment we’ll make in our next term of government.” I suspect that is probably where we will end up.

On the government’s own advice to this chamber, one question that we must give regard to when that legislative reform hits this place is: to what extent will that legislative reform create a more efficient and cost-effective regulatory system in Western Australia? By how much will the fees that Hon Rick Mazza quoted earlier decrease or increase? I have been told for a number of years by departmental advisers and governments of different persuasions that there are legislative and regulatory barriers to WA police doing a better job in this regard. When the government finally brings that reform to this place, post the Law Reform Commission of WA’s report, I would like some commitment from the government on the extent to which the system will actually be better. Some \$9 million of taxpayers’ money has been invested in a new licensing system that was meant to achieve some of these things, but as far as I can tell, as a licensed firearm owner, the only real difference is that I can now pay my licence renewal online and finally dispense with my chequebook, after all these years. The final cheque I signed was to WA police, to renew my firearms licence. It is probably only two or three years since we had to do that. The options were to go to the post office or to pay by cheque, and like the plague, I think banks and post offices should be avoided at every opportunity.

I think this is a good motion, and I thank Hon Rick Mazza for continuing to pursue these issues. My party supported the disallowance motion by Hon Aaron Stonehouse—I think it was last year—with regard to further increases in

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licensing fees, and I hope that somewhere, somehow, there will be a champion of change within government to make sure that there is a better outcome.

**HON RICK MAZZA (Agricultural)** [11.19 am] — in reply: I would like to thank all members for their contribution today. There has been general support for the motion. The Greens were the only ones who opposed the motion, which is quite predictable—the Greens are usually off target with these sorts of things. I would also like to thank the Leader of the House for her contribution today. I know that Hon Aaron Stonehouse is a bit cynical about whether we will have some improvements in time to come, but I am always a bottle-half-full type of guy, so I am very hopeful that we will see some improvement early next year and that the recommendations made in the Law Reform Commission report, which we have all agreed upon, will be implemented. I am also hopeful that we will see the implementation of an effective IT system. The minister talked about direct portal access apps, and also a smart card, which I think would be most welcomed by the firearms' community. I often get complaints from constituents that they are paying a gold-standard fee for a substandard service. I am hopeful that in the next 12 months these reforms will be put in place and that the emails I will get from people will be that they are paying a fair price for a gold-standard service.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.