MR C.J. BARNETT (Cottesloe) [3.01 pm] - without notice: I move -

That so much of standing orders be suspended as to allow the Minister for Resources and Assisting the Minister for State Development to answer the following question -

At any stage did Brian Burke or Julian Grill lobby him or any member of his ministerial staff regarding the Bluewaters 2 coal-fired power station project?

The reason I have moved to suspend standing orders is that today the minister was asked for a third time a straightforward and simple question: did Brian Burke or Julian Grill lobby him about the Bluewaters 2 project? I will speak for only a few minutes because I want the minister to have the opportunity to stand in this place for what will be the fourth time and answer that question. Why should he answer the question? He is a minister; he takes the pay, the perks and the prestige, and now he needs to take the responsibility. This is not about the merits or otherwise of the Bluewaters 2 project. If the minister does not understand his role and the role of Parliament, I advise him that it is about him being accountable and answering a question that is very much in the public arena.

I will make a few points about the issue. Bluewaters 1, which is under construction, and Bluewaters 2 are major projects. They do not involve small amounts of expenditure. Bluewaters 1 will cost some $400 million. More significant than that is that the environmental approval for this project is, by its nature, contentious. Coal-fired power stations produce significantly large amounts of greenhouse gas emissions. They involve environmental approval decisions that are taken most seriously by the Environmental Protection Authority and, therefore, by the Minister for the Environment. They are not run-of-the-mill project approvals. At a time of heightened international, national and state attention on greenhouse gas emissions, a decision to approve a coal-fired power station is a major environmental decision. Anyone who has been a minister, or anyone who has even a limited understanding of the Westminster system, knows that acting ministers simply look after day-to-day, routine matters; acting ministers do not make major decisions. In every sense, the approval for the construction of a $400 million coal-fired power station, a project that will produce massive amounts of greenhouse gas emissions, is a major environmental approval. Whether it is approved or rejected, it is clearly a significant issue. The decision should not have been made by an acting minister. I understand that the issue had been before the environmental agencies for some six months or so. Why was there a sudden rush in January, and why was the decision made by an acting minister? That is a matter of public accountability.

The previous Premier, Dr Gallop, had a ban on ministers dealing with Messrs Burke and Grill. All that members on this side of the house have asked on four occasions is: did Brian Burke or Julian Grill meet with or lobby the minister or his staff about the Bluewaters 2 project? It is not a hard question. It is not difficult to answer, if he is honest.

Mr J.N. HYDE: The actual motion is a move to suspend standing orders.

Ms K. Hodson-Thomas: Let him speak for three minutes!

Mr J.N. HYDE: The member for Cottesloe has not yet addressed any matter on the reason standing orders should be suspended.

The SPEAKER: The member for Perth’s strict reading of our standing orders is correct. However, my general rule is to allow a couple of minutes at the start of a debate of this nature for the lead speaker to stray outside those rules. It makes for a more even and better informed debate. The time is just about over, but I am sure the member for Cottesloe will in fact address the motion on why the house should suspend standing orders.

Debate Resumed

Mr C.J. BARNETT: Mr Speaker, it is the only way in which this Parliament and this community can find the truth about the standards of this government and this particular minister on this issue. Until the house suspends standing orders, we will not have an answer. To satisfy the member for Perth, the reasons for suspending standing orders are that this was a major project; this was a major decision in terms of investment; this was a major environmental decision by the agencies and the Minister for Resources and Assisting the Minister for State Development; this was a major issue in terms of greenhouse gas emissions for Western Australia; this was a major issue about fuel, between coal, gas and renewables; this was a major environmental issue that had been before the agency and the previous minister for some six months; and suddenly a decision is made, apparently in
haste - correct me if I am wrong - over a summer period by an acting minister. If any member of this house believes that is good government, please get up and join the debate. Does any member suggest that an acting minister should make a decision in January, at a time of a change in government with the Premier stepping down and a new one to be elected, about greenhouse gas emissions, a coal-fired power station and a $400 million project? The minister refuses to answer the simple question of whether he met with Brian Burke and Julian Grill. Why will the minister not answer that question? As I said before, if the minister has something to hide, he should confess. If he has nothing to hide, he should be a man, get up and say, “I met with them and this is what they put to me.” Let this house decide whether the right thing or the wrong thing has happened. Why will the minister not stand now and answer that question? Does he believe that he can come into this house as a minister and be unaccountable?

The SPEAKER: I ask the member for Cottesloe to take his seat. That is precisely the question the member for Cottesloe wishes to debate.

Mr C.J. Barnett: Yes.

The SPEAKER: It is not the reason the house should suspend standing orders. The member for Cottesloe has been a member of this place long enough to know how to couch an argument to support a suspension of standing orders.

Mr C.J. Barnett: Mr Speaker, there are a limited number of issues for suspending standing orders, and they are quite simple. It is a simple matter of us wanting to know how the decision affecting greenhouse gases was made. The community, which is concerned about greenhouse gas emissions, as it has been an issue for the past six months, has a right to know. We have a right to know, surely. Surely the minister’s colleagues on his side of the house are a little curious about how a coal-fired power station was approved by an acting minister during a change of Premier in January 2006. I believe that is a question of some public interest and public accountability. The only way we can get that answer is by suspending standing orders.

Mr J.N. Hyde: Why weren’t you in here yesterday?

An opposition member: You be quiet!

The SPEAKER: Order, members!

Mr C.J. Barnett: The member for Perth does not want to support the motion to suspend standing orders. He chairs the Joint Standing Committee on the Corruption and Crime Commission. He is apparently some expert on accountability, propriety and good conduct. I invite the member for Perth to join this debate and to call for some accountability from this minister. The member for Perth should get on his feet now and join this debate. What is the member for Perth’s position on greenhouse gas emissions? Does the member for Perth have a view? Does he believe that the house should suspend standing orders? I think we should.

I am not going to continue. The case is quite simple. The minister has a choice, as does the Premier. Will the Premier now finish this parliamentary session on a significant issue about ministerial responsibility, acting ministers, major projects, potential conflicts of interest, lobbying by Brian Burke and Julian Grill, and greenhouse gas emissions? Are they not important issues for this Parliament? Surely any one of those issues by itself would be a reason for suspending standing orders. I will sit down now, but all I am saying is that I hope the minister has at least some integrity and will get up and tell us whether and when Brian Burke and Julian Grill lobbied him. The people can then make a judgment about whether he behaved properly or improperly. I, for one, think he was wrong. I do not think it was improper, but it was inappropriate for him to make a decision on that project as the acting minister. A good Premier - either the previous one or this one - would not have allowed a major decision to be made by an acting minister. Good governance says that that should not be done. Acting ministers do not make major decisions. The Premier is at fault. It is now in the public interest to determine whether it was an improper decision. The only way to find that out will be for the minister - if he is honest enough - to accept the suspension of standing orders and to tell us whether he met Brian Burke and Julian Grill, when he met them - if he did - and what they lobbied him about. That is fair enough. It is a simple call. It is called accountability. It is a matter related to the history of the royal commission, the Commission on Government report and even the Commissioner for Public Sector Standards. Why not be accountable, minister? Why does he not do something for his pay packet and stand up and be honest?

MR B.J. GRYLLS (Merredin - Leader of the National Party) [3.10 pm]: The National Party will support the suspension of standing orders. The chapter in the history of the Western Australian Parliament regarding the involvement of Brian Burke and Julian Grill has been disgraceful for not just the Labor Party; all parliamentarians have had their images tainted by the events that we have seen played out in the Corruption and Crime Commission over the past few months. Today during question time the Minister for Resources and Assisting the Minister for State Development said in answer to a question that the ban on the involvement of
Brian Burke and Julian Grill was dropped by the Premier before this decision was made. That response led my National Party colleagues and me to believe that the minister had been lobbied and that he did not think there was anything wrong with that. The past few weeks have proved that the lobbying of members of the cabinet by Brian Burke and Julian Grill has had major ramifications. For the good governance of this state and for the reputation of the Minister for Resources and Assisting the Minister for State Development, the minister should take the opportunity afforded to him by the motion to suspend standing orders to clearly explain the involvement of Brian Burke and Julian Grill in the minister’s decision to approve the Bluewaters 2 power station. If he does not do that, this Parliament will close with an air of further corruption and disruption hanging over it.

DR S.C. THOMAS (Capel) [3.12 pm]: I will be very brief. Effectively, three times this week I have asked the same question of the Minister for Resources and Assisting the Minister for State Development, and three times he effectively gave no answer. Today we are debating whether to suspend standing orders. I suggest that if a similar event had happened in another Parliament or in the upper house, a parliamentary inquiry would be set up to consider whether the minister had acted appropriately and to find answers to the questions we have been asking. Unfortunately we do not have the ability to do that in this house under the current government. We must face that problem. Should we suspend standing orders? We need to do it because this is our one opportunity to find the answers to a particularly important question. The question is not whether the Bluewaters 2 power station should have been built; the question is whether due process was followed in the granting of the environmental licence for that project. This is a question that all Western Australians should be concerned about. Once corners are cut and ministers go down that slippery slope, we end up with WA Inc. The Labor Party has an opportunity to agree to this motion. If it agrees to this motion, answers might be found. If it does not agree to the motion, it is disagreeing to uphold ministerial accountability and standards.

Question put and passed with an absolute majority.

Statement by Minister for Resources and Assisting the Minister for State Development

MR C.J. BARNETT (Cottesloe) [3.13 pm]: I do not need to restate the reasons for moving this motion -

Point of Order

Mr J.C. KOBELKE: The government agreed to the suspension of standing orders, not to give anyone else the opportunity to speak, but to allow the minister to respond.

The SPEAKER: That was probably my error.

Debate Resumed

MR J.J.M. BOWLER (Murchison-Eyre - Minister for Resources and Assisting the Minister for State Development) [3.14 pm]: I thank the Speaker for this opportunity. I will answer some of the points raised by the bullet maker, the member for Cottesloe. The member for Capel even admitted to me the other day that the question he asked of me was not his question. We now know whose question it was. I do not know why the member for Cottesloe does not ask the questions himself.

I knew that Julian Grill represented Griffon Coal Mining Company Pty Ltd in 2001 during the first year of our government. He was a lobbyist and there was no ban in place at that time. The ban was put in place in 2002.


Mr J.J.M. BOWLER: In 2003. Julian Grill came to Parliament House several times during 2001 and 2002 for meetings with Labor Party officials and Liberal Party officials representing Griffin in meeting rooms and in the courtyard. I was aware of Julian Grill being a representative of Griffin at those times. More recently, in the week leading up to 31 January 2006, when the new Premier had been sworn in, I was contacted by Julian Grill. He advised me that he represented -

Mr A.J. Carpenter: What dates were they?

Mr J.J.M. BOWLER: On 31 January I made the decision and sometime in the week prior to that Julian Grill contacted me once about Bluewaters 2. I was contacted on many more occasions by the member for Collie-Wellington, who also wanted a decision made. Time was dragging on.

The former Leader of the Opposition, the member for Cottesloe, pointed out that I was the acting minister and that acting ministers do not make decisions. I had not made the decision when I was the acting minister during the initial weeks when the former Minister for the Environment had taken a week’s holiday and was then coming back. Time started to drag out, as I said in the house yesterday or the day before. The former Minister for the Environment returned from holiday and then resigned. I think she attended one cabinet meeting in mid-January and then announced her resignation the day after. Once again, I was acting minister. I was acting minister from 8 January until 3 February.

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The member for Cottesloe said on several occasions that the government does not make decisions. We do make decisions. The decision was made on Bluewaters 2, which was almost identical to the decision made on Bluewaters 1, which was made six months before. It was non-controversial and it was supported by the opposition, the coal industry and the member for Collie-Wellington. I put out a press release, which I am happy to table again for the Parliament. Once again, whoever was the Leader of the Opposition then made no comment and no criticism of my decision as acting Minister for the Environment or that I had made the decision in haste. When I made the decision, it was not seen to have been made in haste. Now, a year later, it is seen to have been made in haste. We as a government pride ourselves on getting things done.

This state is moving ahead in unprecedented economic times. We do not get those conditions with the government sitting on its hands. The former Leader of the Opposition may have sat on his hands and not made decisions when he was in government, which is why he is in opposition and contemplating retirement. We as a government pride ourselves on making decisions. We make decisions that are right and correct.

I have also released a statement showing the numbers of times in memory that I have made contact with Julian Grill and, to a far lesser degree, with Brian Burke. I have also released a list of 10 companies - based on the memory of me and my staff - that have been lobbied by Julian Grill. One of those was Griffin Coal. However, as I said to the member for Cottesloe, I was aware in 2001 that Julian Grill represented Griffin Coal. There was no secret of that. Meetings were held with the Liberal Party, Julian Grill and Griffin Coal here in Parliament House. I assumed that he continued to be a lobbyist for them from 2001 through to 2006. On 31 January I made a decision that I believe was in the best interests of Western Australians, a decision I made without fear or favour, as with any other decision I make in my portfolio.

**Mr C.J. Barnett:** What date did you meet with Julian Grill?

**Mr J.J.M. Bowler:** I do not know the exact date that Julian Grill contacted me. It was somewhere between 31 January and the week before.