

SHIRE OF EXMOUTH — COUNCILLORS

154. Mr V.A. CATANIA to the Minister for Local Government:

I refer to the minister's meeting with councillors from the Shire of Exmouth earlier this month, which resulted in the resignation of five shire councillors. Which councillors did the minister meet with and did he discuss a Department of Local Government and Communities investigation into the Shire of Exmouth?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN replied:

I thank the member for North West Central for his question.

The member is aware that I went to the Shire of Exmouth in late May after a very damning Corruption and Crime Commission report had been released by the Corruption and Crime Commissioner, which unfortunately included some serious findings against some salaried officers at that council at Exmouth. To quote the commissioner, he also found "stunning indifference"—they are his words—with regard to the council's oversight of operations in Exmouth. They were serious allegations—not "allegations", serious findings by the commissioner. The member would be aware also that the council had up until this time been suspended—an action taken by the previous Minister for Local Government, Paul Miles. The member would also be aware that there was a resignation earlier this year by one of the six councillors. My meeting in late May was with the then five remaining suspended councillors with the Shire of Exmouth. The meeting was very robust. In fact, the first comment given to me by at least two of the councillors I met with was, "Thank you for coming. You're the first one to come up and actually talk to us about the situation." I can even say that one of those was Councillor Hood. I said to them, "Look, I am not sugar-coating this issue at all. This is a serious matter that has been found with regard to the CCC outcome." It was my view that I could not ignore the comments in the report by the CCC commissioner with regard to the oversight by the elected members themselves. I could not ignore that. I explained to them very clearly that one of the options I was pursuing was an inquiry panel, which of course would look at the operations of elected members themselves. I also said to them it was important that they consider that for the benefit of their community. Exmouth has been through a lot. These matters are very difficult for local communities. Their local council is under investigation—in this case suspended—and this is very difficult. The last thing a community needs is adverse media about its town. That is something I found when I talked to a number of people during my visit to Exmouth. I said to the councillors, "You might like to consider your position and maybe it's an opportune time to ensure that the people of Exmouth have a fresh-slate opportunity to determine whom they would like to represent them in October." That is what I put to them and, to their credit, as I highlighted in my ministerial statement this morning, they have put the interests of their community first. I applaud them for that. That means that in October this year, all six seats will be vacated and will be able to be contested by whoever puts themselves forward. I admire that action. I urge the people of Exmouth to take an active interest in their local government.