

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY — Tuesday, 7 November 2017]
p5485d-5495a

Ms Mia Davies; Mr Vincent Catania; Mr David Templeman; Mr Peter Rundle; Mr Terry Redman; Mr Ian Blayney; Mr Roger Cook; Mr Donald Punch; Mr Dave Kelly; Mr Shane Love

WA COUNTRY HEALTH SERVICE — FINANCE STAFF — CENTRALISATION

Matter of Public Interest

THE SPEAKER (Mr P.B. Watson) informed the Assembly that he was in receipt within the prescribed time of a letter from the Leader of the National Party seeking to debate a matter of public interest.

[In compliance with standing orders, at least five members rose in their places.]

MS M.J. DAVIES (Central Wheatbelt — Leader of the National Party) [3.04 pm]: I move —

That this house calls on the McGowan government to reverse the decision to centralise WA Country Health Service jobs into Perth and Bunbury and rule out removing further government jobs from regional WA.

Every regional member of this house on this side and the other side, bar the member for Bunbury, should be listening very carefully to what this government has planned. There seems to be some confusion about whether the government and the Minister for Health have control over the portfolio, because there did not seem to be an awareness that the decision had been taken. During question time, the minister stood behind his department and said that it is an operational decision. I was very interested to hear the minister point to a strategic document that was commenced under the previous government. He is correct: work was absolutely done on the restructure of the finance section of the WA Country Health Service under the previous government, but it is not the model being delivered by WACHS or this minister. Today we question that it was not the model that was being worked on while we were in government. The model was that there would be a number of units across the region so that there would be a specific unit for audit for people who are employed in those regions. They would all be in the same place, so that those people employed in Northam would not be forced to shift to Bunbury or to Perth. There would be an audit team within the overarching finance team of the Department of Health's WACHS. Has this government and the minister intervened? The minister quite clearly said he had no idea what was going on in his department. It is a very interesting decision by WACHS to come up with this new model, given that, from the advice and information that we have received, it was well on track to implement a completely different model. The model that this government is now presiding over sees jobs shifting to Bunbury—conveniently—and Perth. It seems as though this minister is saying, “To hell with jobs in the Department of Health for every other region. We think that you don't deserve to have your job if you have given 20 years in the finance section of WACHS in health in Northam, Narrogin, Katanning, Moora, Geraldton, Mt Barker or Albany.” These are people who have, on some occasions, given long service and have imbedded themselves in that system. They would say that there was a requirement for some of that to be made more efficient, and those people whom we have spoken to did not deny that changes were needed to the way that the finance section of WACHS was being run. But it certainly was not their understanding that they would be given a “Don't come Monday if you're not prepared to move to Bunbury or Perth.”

Several members interjected.

Ms M.J. DAVIES: That is absolutely how they have been told. I have the media statement that the WA Country Health Service chief executive issued. I would also question some of the statements made in this and would like the minister to provide us with a response, because it states that all staff affected have been consulted by the change. Every public servant should be considerably worried if this is the type of consultation that the following 3 000 public servants who are about to be slashed from the public service are going to be afforded. My advice is that they were told by the chief finance officer of the WA Country Health Service. They were not consulted at the level that this indicates, which is that all staff affected have been consulted about the change. They were certainly not aware of a shift away from the model that was being discussed and worked on under the previous government for implementation whereby there would still be discrete units spread across the entire state. There has been some interesting decision-making, and it was interesting that the minister said he had no idea that this was to be brought about. That indicates to me that he is not across his portfolio. This is a significant matter for regional jobs. This government came to power on the promise of creating regional jobs, but it seems that unless a person lives in Bunbury, and now Perth seems to be considered a region —

Mr D.J. Kelly: Bunbury is not a region.

Ms M.J. DAVIES: But there are a significant number of other regions, member for Bassendean.

We do not know whether for some political rationale this matter has been linked to the government's withdrawn promise of the Department of Parks and Wildlife building and the promise of a significant number of jobs in relation to that. We do not know whether it is a payoff for the member for Bunbury for losing the significant project that was planned under the previous government to relocate staff to Bunbury, and so the Department of Health is the first cab off the rank in that regard.

The minister needs to answer the following questions: why was a decision made to shift away from the model that was being discussed and implemented by WACHS and centralise those positions in Bunbury and Perth; and when

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a number of golden handshakes are being handed out to senior executives and directors general across the public service to fit in with the machinery-of-government changes that this government has brought in, why is it fair that those on levels 2, 3, 4 or 5 are not being assisted to relocate to another region sometimes hundreds or thousands of kilometres away from their home, family and community? It is simply unfair. It is very distressing for the communities involved. I can tell the minister that people in the central wheatbelt will resign because they will not be moving to Bunbury or Perth. It is not a real option. It is a Clayton's offer. The minister who is presiding over this is part of a government that said that it will be creating jobs for regional Western Australia, and he has fallen short in this case.

MR V.A. CATANIA (North West Central) [3.10 pm]: We have got Roger's razor gang at it yet again, targeting regional Western Australia. The sneaky Premier, "Sneakers" McGowan, is going around ensuring —

Withdrawal of Remark

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: The member is fully aware that when you refer to a member of this place, you refer to them by their title or their seat. I ask him to withdraw.

The SPEAKER: Member, can you —

Mr V.A. CATANIA: I am talking about the razor gang of the Minister for Health and the sneaky approach —

Mr D.A. Templeman: He didn't withdraw.

The SPEAKER: Member, I ask you to withdraw that.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: I withdraw.

Debate Resumed

Mr V.A. CATANIA: As I said, the Minister for Health has a razor gang. The Premier is getting around with his sneakers—sneaking around saying one thing about jobs growth in regional Western Australia but it is suddenly starting to become clear that the Labor government set out to get rid of 3 000 public service jobs over the next 12 months. We have now worked out the plan: they are all from regional Western Australia. More importantly, those jobs are coming from the central wheatbelt, the midwest, the Pilbara, the Kimberley region and the goldfields. These jobs are going to Bunbury or Perth. It is quite clear that the Minister for Health's razor gang and the way that the Premier sneaks around regional Western Australia indicates that he intends to cut jobs and undermine the health system. This side of the house has worked so hard to rebuild hospitals right across regional Western Australia and to put doctors into towns that have never had doctors. We have been fixing the health system after years of neglect.

Mr R.H. Cook interjected.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: The minister is right; the system was rebuilt by the previous government—the Liberal-National Party—thanks to royalties for regions. During the election campaign, the Labor Party said that it was going to keep royalties for regions, and it is now cut; it is like the razor gang. The Labor Party said that it was going to create jobs in regional Western Australia but now they will be cut. We are now seeing jobs being centralised back into Perth. We are seeing it in health and we will see it in other departments, such as the Department of Agriculture and Food and the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development. Jobs in Fisheries and every other government department are being centralised in Perth.

One MP from the government side of the house said it is a kick in the guts. One Labor MP said that this is unfair for regional Western Australia because he wants to see jobs stay in his town of Albany, yet those on his own side, with the Minister for Health's razor gang and the Premier sneakily getting around regional Western Australia, are saying everything is going to be alright, but they come back to this place and we see the jobs going from regional Western Australia.

What is the commitment of this Labor government to regional Western Australia? We have now seen royalties for regions disappear. We are now seeing projects such as aged care in Carnarvon being canned so that money can be directed to projects in Perth such as the marina in Ocean Reef and car parking in Mandurah. We are now starting to see the true colours of this government—the Labor government that has no respect for regional Western Australia. It has no respect for those living in the north of the state, those living in the central part of Western Australia, including the central wheatbelt, or those living in the goldfields, the Pilbara or the Kimberley. It is disrespectful. The Labor Party went to the election with a lie of keeping jobs in regional Western Australia and keeping royalties for regions. The people of Western Australia are starting to see its true colours.

We rebuilt the health system in regional Western Australia after 40 years of neglect. We are starting to see that eight years of work being undone by the government's incompetence, the promises that it is not keeping and the disappointing way that it is treating regional Western Australian people by taking jobs away, relocating them to Perth and Bunbury and forgetting about every other town that exists outside those two areas.

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MR P.J. RUNDLE (Roe) [3.15 pm]: I rise to make a short contribution because I am very worried as the member for Roe. I would like to recount some of last week's events. I was aggrieved when I asked the Premier a question about his government forcing regionally based public servants, such as staff from the Western Australian Country Health Service, to move to either Perth or Bunbury or lose their job. The Premier replied, in part —

The government is deeply committed to providing more jobs and opportunities for Western Australians.

...

For the member for Roe to come up with something in here and make out like it is fact without any evidence whatsoever indicates to me that he needs to learn a bit before he opens his mouth in here. If the member has a particular concern that he would like to bring to my attention, he should feel free to do so. If he has a particular concern that he wants to bring to the attention of the Minister for Health, he should feel free to do that too.

As far as I am concerned, the process is called questions without notice. That is the way we do these things. It is disturbing to me that despite the Premier having 24 on staff, he was still unaware of the situation.

Mr V.A. Catania: Disrespect.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: It is disrespectful, member for North West Central.

The Premier suggests that people will happily move hundreds or thousands of kilometres. I ask the Minister for Health: should a WA Country Health Service employee with kids settled at schools and a wife or husband happily in a job be redeployed with no notice and be happy under the threat of having to either move or get sacked? That is really what it comes down to.

It also concerned me when we heard on the ABC Great Southern today that the Minister for Health said he was not consulted before the WA Country Health Service announced it was centralising, but he was sure that it would improve efficiency. When you, Mr Speaker, the member for Albany, were interviewed, you said that you were very disappointed and you would be lobbying the minister. You did not want to see people moving out of Albany to Bunbury or Perth. I fully agree with you, as a member with many towns in my electorate in the great southern. Finishing his interview, the health minister said that he admires the member for Albany for his advocacy, but he is probably not going to do anything about it as far as I can see.

In finalising my comments, I point out that we have the likes of the \$35 million hospital redevelopment in Katanning and also the one in Narrogin. These great projects came about under the previous government through the royalties for regions program. I am concerned that we may not have the staff to not only enjoy, but also use those new developments and get things going in our regional centres. In summary, we have a Premier who does not know, we have a minister who was not consulted and we have the local member for Albany who is disappointed. That is not good enough for regional WA.

MR D.T. REDMAN (Warren-Blackwood) [3.19 pm]: This government has form. So far this year there have been significant cuts to royalties for regions, which has been debated on numerous occasions in this house this year, and cuts to projects despite signed financial assistance agreements with proponents—that is, cuts to programs despite contractual agreements being in place, such as cuts to the volunteer fuel card. Last week and today we heard about the operational funding for the south west helicopter that the minister said would go before the midyear review, but of course they had a mad rush to get it through cabinet in order to announce it while cabinet was in Bunbury. Again, it is policy on the run. Of course, the big policy from the Labor Party is local jobs. Mr Speaker will know this very well because he made comments about it on the south west and great southern ABC radio program on 7 November. The transcript states —

... we went to the local election about local jobs; there will be local jobs for Bunbury and Perth, but not for Albany.

Clearly, there is a massive issue in government from the point of view of its advocacy for regional Western Australia. As has been mentioned, there is a target for a 3 000 FTE reduction in the public service. Today, the Minister for Health was asked how many people he expected would resign. He said that he expected them all to have jobs. The government is asking people to move hundreds of kilometres in many cases to hold the same job, but it is not expecting anyone to resign. To add insult to injury, they will not be offered a redundancy. That is a nice, clandestine way to save money: asking people to move 400 kilometres to hold their job. When they say no and have to resign, the government saves a whole redundancy program and can start to chalk up little targets off the target of 3 000 by early next year. That is absolutely deplorable. To me, that is an underhand strategy. What is more, people are being told to move. Beside the health staff here, who by videoconference were told by the chief finance officer of Health, "You will be moving"—that is the consultation that has occurred—other areas, such as the agricultural sector in the south west, first heard about it in a letter they got in the mail stating that they would no longer be working from the Busselton region; they have to move to Bunbury. The only winner in this house is

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the member for Bunbury! Everyone else loses, and I do not know who the hell is standing up for regional Western Australia, because it is a tight little spoiler —

Mr V.A. Catania: He is.

Mr D.T. REDMAN: The member for Bunbury is; clearly he is a winner—not a bad outcome for him.

The Department of Health’s media statement headed “Financial service consolidated with no job losses” states —

“While this change will result in some jobs moving between regions and to Perth, over the past three years WACHS jobs in regional areas have grown by more than 343.

Over the last three years, under a Liberal–National government, the level of regional WA Country Health Service jobs has grown. It seems that the argument being made is that there is a bit of a buffer there because of what the former government did. The government is going to start peeling a bit off to where it was before and make some savings on the way through. This centralisation theme is a threat to regional Western Australia and regional communities, and this government has form as far as that is concerned. This is only the thin edge of the wedge. We already have questions on notice about the Department of Agriculture and Food because of what we are hearing on the ground. We have questions on notice about the Department of Fisheries as well. The Minister for Fisheries is not exempt in this case; he is looking at consolidating his staff. Of course, we are hearing from the parks and wildlife component of the new big super agency that it is being asked to take cuts. We are yet to see that played out. This is the thin edge of the wedge of a whole regional development wipe out, and that concerns us.

It is also really concerning that under questioning the minister says he knows nothing about it. He comments in the media that he knows nothing about it. The first he heard about it was probably when he got a call from the member for Albany, which is really interesting.

The SPEAKER: Members, I am in the Speaker’s chair and cannot answer you in any way, so if you look at me and refer to me, I am the Speaker.

Mr D.T. REDMAN: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I make the point that the minister probably received calls from concerned regional members in the Labor Party, and that was probably the first he heard about the changes, but the letter sent to all the respective employees states —

... will see a substantial change to the organisational structure of WACHS Finance.

A substantial change that the minister knows nothing about, local members know nothing about and therefore they are absolutely on the back foot here and, once again, showing form in regional Western Australia; they are ready to centralise everything and take away jobs from regional Western Australia. That is an absolute disgrace.

MR I.C. BLAYNEY (Geraldton) [3.25 pm]: I will speak briefly on this matter of public interest motion. It follows a continued pattern; that is, for regional Western Australians, restructuring always means that people move out of the regions and into usually the capital city, but in this case, of course, our second city, Bunbury. When are we actually going to start addressing the population imbalance in Western Australia and start moving people the other way? It is always one-way traffic. We keep being told that technology makes it easy to centralise; surely, it makes it easy for someone in the north of the state to deal with issues in other parts of the state using the same technology.

Mr D.J. Kelly: Stop farmers buying those big new tractors that take away jobs.

Mr I.C. BLAYNEY: I would be quiet if I were the Minister for Water, because I am sure he does not know anything about it.

Mr D.J. Kelly: Go on, nail me!

The SPEAKER: I will nail you, Minister for Water. I call you to order for the first time.

Mr I.C. BLAYNEY: Thanks for that, Mr Speaker.

The other concern is that we are talking about financial issues. Will this have a flow-on effect on local purchasing decisions, which are quite critical in a lot of regional centres? There is also the issue of a flow-on modifier effect. If a new job is put into an area, it will result in more jobs. Of course, the multiplier works in reverse. In Geraldton, we have been told we will lose six jobs. At the end of the day, how many jobs will that mean? It tends to once again demonstrate that if we are serious about regionalisation and getting jobs into the regions, an issue I have spoken about a number of times that does not seem to get any traction is standardising government departments’ boundaries and regionalising more jobs, so more high-level decisions are made in the regions.

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I had a pretty good week last week with Iluka announcing 30 new jobs, with more next year. That is the news I want to have; I do not want to hear about jobs being lost. Another series of jobs we have missed out on—we hope they are still coming—were from the Barnett government’s commitment to spend \$138.5 million at Geraldton Hospital, which was the newest hospital when we came into government. We had an unusual situation whereby we could buy as many beds as we wanted from St John of God Health Care, and it also worked by contract. However, two issues needed addressing, which we addressed. Each bed in Geraldton Hospital emergency department averages 3 000 presentations versus about 2 000 at Broome and 1 800 at Albany. Our proposal would have taken emergency bed numbers from 11 to 21, added an additional operating theatre and a 43 per cent increase in beds. We would also have spent \$49 million on an integrated mental health facility. It is well known that if we treat patients locally, they have much better health outcomes. Once again, there are more jobs in that. The new government was to commit \$45 million for the hospital, focusing on the emergency in mental health. However, no funds were committed in the budget, although the government has pulled about \$80 million from the Mid West Development Commission, and \$50 million of that was actually earmarked for the new hospital. The government took from us the money we had for the hospital.

Finally, I will talk about the sobering-up shelter that opened in 2003. It was an ALP election commitment in 2001. It ran under the eight and half years of the Barnett government. It had some financial issues last Christmas that I helped to sort out. It is the thirteenth shelter built in WA since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. I am very disappointed that this service is to close and once again, regional health jobs will be lost. What will replace it?

In conclusion, people in the midwest have the right to feel disappointed and let down by this government.

MR R.H. COOK (Kwinana — Minister for Health) [3.29 pm]: I thank the member for the opportunity to debate this important issue. I think the member for Central Wheatbelt is correct; this is an operational matter that took place on my watch so, ultimately, I am the one responsible for it. I understand that and I do not resile from that issue. The fact is that, ultimately, the health system has to become more efficient and more accountable, and it has to be able to dedicate as many resources as possible within its budget to frontline services—doctors, nurses and allied health staff—those things that make a difference to the lives of the patients who use the facilities. The WA Country Health Service is a billion dollar business. For that reason it requires significant, ongoing strategic reform to make sure we are looking at modern business practices and taking opportunities to engage staff in meaningful and strategic roles that make a difference to the system so that it can continue to adapt to the changing environment in which we are trying to deliver health. This is an ongoing process. It is not something that is unique to our government. All governments confront this issue. Indeed, the previous government confronted this issue when it undertook a review of the WA Country Health Service in 2012, which was undertaken by PwC Australia at the time. In summary, in its report PwC identified seven main problems with WACHS functions, including ineffective budgeting processes with inadequate controls in place; absence of timely and accurate reporting, leading to a lack of credibility with senior management; inadequate FTE controls and management; inability to track expenditure and FTE by funding source; traditional accounting approach not well prepared for the activity-based funding model; no standard approach to business cases for new funding; and the structure and capability of the function not aligned to the business needs. It is not surprising, when confronted with those issues, that the previous government looked to modernise the accounting and financial management practices of the WA Country Health Service. I understand that that process has been ongoing and remains active today. Part of that was the striking of new strategic principles for the Department of Health under its document “Strategic Directions 2015–2018”. It states —

WACHS will rigorously review its governance, management, financial and business practices to identify opportunities for sustainable improvements.

WACHS understood the challenges it was confronting and the lessons to be learnt from the PwC review and that it needed to improve its financial management framework and practices to continue to drive efficiencies within the WA Country Health Service. Obviously, these things took place under the previous government. To some extent, that work was necessary and we see the fruits of that labour coming to bear. As I said in question time, the decision around the restructuring of the financial management arrangements for the WA Country Health Service was taken in 2016 about seizing opportunities to create a more outward looking financial management operation to make sure that we have a strong, strategic decision-making structure in the regions but devolving the big transactional and more mundane processes to a larger central unit so that the whole operation could be more efficient. No government would resile from the responsibility of taking a series of actions that would see those outcomes.

I hear from the member for Central Wheatbelt that that is not the approach the government was going to take. I wonder whether it had that level of granularity in its view of it. However, as I said in my answer to a question earlier today, WACHS was operating under what it believed was the operational framework handed to it by government—not necessarily this government, but by government generally. I noted the comments from the

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member for Albany, who, as I said in my comments in the media, stands up for local jobs and for his community. He continues to do so and I commend him for making those comments on this issue. The fact is that our health system must become more efficient because we want to continue to employ more doctors, more nurses and more allied health staff to provide stronger services at the coalface. That is what we will do. It is borne out by the fact that there will be no job losses as a result of this decision. This is not an opportunity to slash jobs. This is an opportunity to realise greater efficiencies in the system and a better financial and business management framework going forward. Throughout each region hub, we have created seven new business analyst positions so that we can continue to devolve strategic decisions into the regions while consolidating the transactional or finance number-crunching processes to these main hubs.

A number of comments have been made about the level of consultation on this decision. Obviously, with seven months in government, I do not have the full experience of what consultation took place. However, I am advised that the changes are being introduced and managed in accordance with clause 54, “Consultation/Introduction of Change”, under the WA Health–Health Services Union of Western Australia (Union of Workers)–PACTS–Industrial Agreement 2016. I understand that all staff impacted by the finance consolidation project were advised by letter that outlined key dates, the over-arching strategy, their rights, and how the project may impact their future role within WACHS. Formal communication was provided to the Health Services Union on 26 September in accordance with the industrial agreement requirements and this provided the HSU with notification that WACHS had made a decision to introduce changes in the finance area and the time frames for the changed management process. Comprehensive information forums were held with all the affected staff, and the HSU and employees were also provided with written communication that outlined the changes tailored to their specific circumstances.

We are trying to work as closely as possible with the staff in relation to this. I emphasise my earlier remarks in question time that staff will not be sacked as a result of this decision. There will be opportunities for them to work elsewhere in the system within their current areas of work. If they want to continue to pursue the jobs they are in in these finance hubs, obviously they will have the opportunity to do so, although the positions are moving to the consolidated areas of Bunbury and Perth. The member for Warren–Blackwood asked me to guarantee that no staff would resign. Obviously, I cannot give that guarantee but I can guarantee that no staff will lose their employment as a result of this decision. I can guarantee that we will continue to work closely with the staff to make sure they have every opportunity to have all their rights respected and all their employment opportunities realised. We will continue to make sure that WACHS remains one of the largest employers of people right throughout our regional community.

Ms M.J. Davies interjected.

Mr R.H. COOK: I am not sure what the member for Central Wheatbelt has against people in the south west region.

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Members! I want to hear what the minister is saying. Your speech was heard in silence as were others. I want to hear the minister’s reply.

Mr R.H. COOK: As I said, no staff will lose their job as a result of this decision. We will continue to work with all staff to make sure they continue to have careers in the WA Country Health Service, although the positions themselves will go to those finance hubs. I reject the member for Central Wheatbelt’s notion that somehow Bunbury is not in the regions and that to be in the south west is not to be in the regions. It is extraordinary that the National Party would take that attitude.

Ms M.J. Davies interjected.

The SPEAKER: Leader of the National Party!

Mr R.H. COOK: That really underpins exactly the sort of attitude —

Ms M.J. Davies interjected.

The SPEAKER: I have warned you quite a few times, Leader of the National Party. I call you to order for the first time.

Mr R.H. COOK: It really underpins National Party members’ attitudes when they try to talk up the rights of the regions, because they do not mean regions, as such—they mean their regions. They mean their little bits, which have benefited so royally from the royalties for regions program.

Ms M.J. Davies interjected.

The SPEAKER: I call you to order for the second time, Leader of the National Party.

Mr R.H. COOK: I remember —

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Ms M.J. Davies interjected.

The SPEAKER: Leader of the National Party, just listen. You might learn something.

Mr R.H. COOK: The member for Central Wheatbelt cannot have it both ways. She cannot say that I did not know what was going on and then invent some grand conspiracy that I am sending health employees to Bunbury. The member can have one or the other, but she should have a consistent narrative, at least.

Mr V.A. Catania interjected.

The SPEAKER: Members!

Mr R.H. COOK: Members of the National Party cannot have it both ways. They cannot say that I did not know what was going on, but then say it was part of a grand conspiracy to send employees to Bunbury.

Ms M.J. Davies: I think you're hiding behind the public service and you knew very well.

Mr R.H. COOK: I am not hiding behind the public service. I am defending it on the basis of the framework that members opposite put in place. The previous government demanded that WACHS create greater efficiencies in the system and improve its financial management framework to drive efficiencies and create savings. That is exactly what is going on.

Mr V.A. Catania interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for North West Central, I call you to order for the first time.

Mr R.H. COOK: Those are the facts of the case. The department operated under a framework that the opposition put in place and under a mission to find greater efficiencies created for it by the previous government. It is a bit rich for members of the National Party to come into this place and say that even though all these decisions took place under their watch, it is somehow part of a magnificent conspiracy on our behalf to send all those employees to Bunbury. Quite frankly, that is just not the way the world works.

I want to talk briefly about the member for Geraldton's comments. He had the gall to talk about the lack of progress on the redevelopment of Geraldton Hospital. I simply ask the member for Geraldton: Which was the last government that did any substantial redevelopment or upgrades to Geraldton Hospital? Which government was it? It was the previous Labor government, was it not? The member for Geraldton had eight and a half years in government —

Mr V.A. Catania interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for North West Central, not only did you misquote me before—it was the member for Geraldton's quote that you quoted me on—but also I will call you to order for the second time.

Mr R.H. COOK: I remember being shown around Geraldton Hospital very early on in my time as shadow Minister for Health. I heard that the upgrades Labor undertook were really good, but that the hospital was really under pressure for space and had important needs. Having a Liberal member of Parliament as the member for Geraldton, I would have thought that we would have seen that the next phase of the Geraldton Hospital redevelopment took place. But for eight and a half years the member for Geraldton did nothing. He cannot come into this place and criticise us for having failed in our first seven months in government to address the redevelopment needs of Geraldton Hospital, given that he did nothing in his eight and a half years in government. Let us please leave the hypocrisy out of this debate.

We want to see more resources put into the front line of our health services. We want to see more doctors, more nurses and more allied health staff delivering services that put the patient first. Unless the health system becomes more efficient and is capable of implementing modern business practice and systems to make sure that it can engage staff at the local level in strategic roles rather than transactional roles, we will not get the efficiencies that we need. The WA Country Health Service is doing its best to meet the challenges of a changing environment and the needs of WA country patients. It made these decisions under a framework that the Liberal–National government put in place. The decisions took place when the opposition was in government. These are the same decisions that would have been made if members opposite were in government today. The fact of the matter is —

Mr V.A. Catania interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for North West Central, I know you want to get thrown out, but I am not throwing you out.

Mr R.H. COOK: This decision was made under a strategic framework put in place by the previous government. It was made with the best possible intention of creating a more efficient hospital system to provide the opportunity to put more resources on the front line. Not a single member of the WA Country Health Service will lose their job as a result of this decision. We will provide new business analyst positions in each of the —

Mr V.A. Catania interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for North West Central!

Mr R.H. COOK: The member for North West Central has to be honest. No employee of the WA Country Health Service will lose their job as a result of this decision. This is a decision that has been made in the best possible interests of the WA Country Health Service. It has been made to provide more resources on the front line. The resources that will be freed up will be reinvested back into the health system to continue to drive improvements and efficiencies. This decision was made under a framework that was put in place by the previous government. It was an in-principle decision under the previous government. Members opposite would have made this decision in the same way that we have.

MR D.T. PUNCH (Bunbury) [3.47 pm]: The WA Country Health Service has to be one of the finest regional organisations in the state. It is totally committed to providing primary health services, services for people who are chronically ill, acute services and emergency management services across one of the most diverse geographic areas in Western Australia. Its primary job is to deliver health services; that is its primary role. Under the Public Sector Management Act 1994, it has an obligation to deliver those services in the most effective and efficient way it can, which means that the senior management of WACHS has to make decisions on the best way to deliver services.

The previous speaker spoke about some of the challenges of ensuring that regional agencies across the bush are supported by effective financial management systems. He highlighted some of the major problems. The problems are not new in regional WA; they are not new at all. It may surprise members to find out that over the last four years or so chief financial officer positions in regional development commissions gradually disappeared and were taken up by the Department of Regional Development. Where is that department located? It is located in Perth. It is located in Perth because there was a recognition that getting those skills into regional WA took away the focus of what the regional development commissions were about—that is, delivering regional development services, not financial services.

Back in 2008, when there was a change of government, there was not a Department of Regional Development. Regional development was delivered solely through regional-based agencies. In the 2016–17 budget, it was a central department with a full-time equivalent cap of 189. Where are those jobs? They are mostly in Perth. How many FTEs did regional development commissions get during that period?

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Members!

Mr D.T. PUNCH: They got very few. Most regional development commissions were crying out for positions to support services in the regions.

Ms M.J. Davies: You're a disgrace.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: The Leader of the National Party can hardly call me a disgrace when she looks at the history of what has happened in regional development over the past eight years. She talks in this place about taking jobs from the bush and putting them into Perth but 189 full-time equivalents —

Ms M.J. Davies: You were happy to take a pay cheque.

The SPEAKER: Look, this is ridiculous. Everyone listened to the opposition's point of view, now listen to the member for Bunbury's point of view. That is what Parliament is about..

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I did take a pay cheque for 35 years in the public sector, and I worked very hard during that period in an absolutely nonpartisan way to deliver better services for regional Western Australia. I have taken on this role because I want to represent my community. In doing so, I have been very mindful of the fact that I have worked for both sides of politics over that period, and I have tried to respect the information that I have obtained. This information is on the public record. The department has 189 full-time equivalents in Perth and hardly any in the development commissions. The Peel Development Commission at one stage had fewer staff than board members. Kalgoorlie was screaming out for service staff.

Mr D.T. Redman: The regional development agenda prior to 2008 was deplorable.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I will take that interjection. An awful lot of regional Western Australia was built before royalties for regions. Royalties for regions was a particular tool that had a time and a place and continues to have a time and a place, and will be utilised very effectively.

This proposal consolidates staff from a number of separate organisational units across regional WA, in the interests of providing a far more efficient and effective health service across the whole of regional WA, so that time is not spent having to follow up on unnecessary audit problems, and tracking down financial issues. It is consolidated in

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one place and, importantly, the staff who were spread out across regional WA, with very limited opportunity for professional development, joint training and career development will be able to do that in a like-minded unit.

Mr V.A. Catania interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for North West Central, I call you to order for the third time. I cannot understand that, when you ask a question and want an answer, you put your point of view across.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I cannot understand why on earth anyone would not want to see improved services across regional Western Australia. We should focus the energy of the agency on what it is there to deliver, and make sure that the backup services are of high quality, supported and well organised.

There has been some conjecture about where Bunbury sits in the regional scheme of things, and I accept that there is a very broad vista of regional Western Australia, and that Bunbury is a small part of that, but when I got up at five o'clock this morning to drive to this place, I drove through some forest and some rural areas, and I did not get to any suburban areas until I came to outer Rockingham. That suggests to me that there is a certain rural and regional ambience to Bunbury.

Mr D.J. Kelly interjected.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Yes, there are no central area transit buses from my office to the Parliament.

It is a major city of the south west, and it has a major WACHS component to it, so there is a certain logic behind what the agency has done. I can absolutely assure members that until today I have never spoken with anybody about this, so the conjecture that some members opposite put together earlier, that this was a deal stitched up to support Bunbury, is totally incorrect. This is an agency operational decision. I am sure that my constituents in Bunbury will be very interested to know that the party that is supposed to represent regional people is arguing against putting additional jobs in Bunbury.

Mr R.H. Cook: Isn't that extraordinary?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: It is extraordinary. Bunbury was one of the first cities to benefit from the growth plan devised by members opposite as the previous government. The Bunbury–Geographe growth plan clearly identifies opportunities for public sector growth. The “State Planning Strategy” clearly identifies Bunbury as a rural setting. There is a significant regional component to Bunbury, and the consolidation of services to a major part of WACHS, which is based in Bunbury, seems to me to make some operational sense, but the agency has made the decision—not me, not the Minister for Health, as far as I am aware, or anybody else in this chamber. This is an operational matter that has been developed under the framework of the Public Sector Management Act, which places a clear obligation on agencies to deliver efficiencies.

I conclude by once again acknowledging the fantastic work that the Western Australian Country Health Service provides. I see that time and again—I have been into the emergency management services in Bunbury—and I am sure this is replicated right across the state. People are absolutely dedicated to what they do, and the last thing they want is to be caught up in political debate and argument when they are trying to deliver effective and efficient services. If the senior managers of WACHS are saying that this is the best way forward for delivering services that benefit all constituents, we should be supporting them, not knocking them.

MR D.J. KELLY (Bassendean — Minister for Water) [3.56 pm]: I rise to respond to some of the issues raised by the Leader of the National Party in this debate. I want to point out a few things. When a party does one thing in government and then does the complete opposite in opposition, people figure it out. They realise that the party is just making a point. I was the shadow Minister for Water during the Liberal–National government, and I sat and watched the then Minister for Water cut jobs out of the Water Corporation—not just jobs in the metropolitan area, but jobs in country areas as well. I will just provide the house with some figures. The member for Central Wheatbelt became the Minister for Water on 11 December 2013.

Point of Order

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Mr Speaker, the Minister for Water is speaking about water, when this motion is about health, and how the jobs have been taken from health. Can you please bring the minister back to the motion?

The SPEAKER: The motion that the National Party put up said “rule out removing further government jobs from regional WA”, so it is not a point of order.

Debate Resumed

Mr D.J. KELLY: In June 2013, there were 819 Water Corporation jobs in regional Western Australia. Two and a half years later, in January 2016, there were 712 regional jobs in the Water Corporation. The then Minister for Water, in two and a half years, cut 107 jobs from regional Western Australia at the Water Corporation. It affected

the south west, the great southern, the goldfields and agricultural regions, the midwest and the north west. For her to come in here today and complain about job losses in regional WA—I will not say it is hypocrisy, I will just say it is very inconsistent. It is very inconsistent for the member for Central Wheatbelt to complain about the loss of jobs in regional WA when, during her time as Minister for Water, she cut, like a knife through butter, regional jobs in Western Australia.

Mr R.H. Cook: Some would say that was extraordinary.

Mr D.J. KELLY: The inconsistency is extraordinary. During that time, I did not hear the member for North West Central or the member for Geraldton complain. I certainly did not hear the member for Warren–Blackwood make any complaints about that. I suggest to members opposite that people will figure them out. When they were in government they were quite happy to cut over 100 jobs from regional Western Australia at the Water Corporation. These were not job cuts that gave people an opportunity to relocate to another location to keep their jobs. These people were given a “don’t come Monday” notice. These were compulsory retrenchments. Compulsory retrenchments were made at the Water Corporation. The previous government cut 100 jobs in regional WA, and the then Minister for Water was an expert at doing it. Sitting here today and listening to this lot complaining that we need to defend regional jobs in WA just does not cut the mustard.

Finally, it was a great pleasure to be in Bunbury the other day. I can see why the new member for Bunbury is so popular; he achieved a 23 per cent swing at the last election. What opposition members have said today just shows that, for all their talk, they simply do not like the people of Bunbury. They knew it and they elected an outstanding new member, and he will do a very good job for that region for a very long time.

MR R.S. LOVE (Moore) [4.00 pm]: I would like to finish this debate by making a couple of observations and asking a couple of questions. First of all, what is the motivation for this change? We have been told that the 41 staff —

Mr D.J. Kelly interjected.

Mr R.S. LOVE: The member had his go.

The SPEAKER: Minister for Water!

Mr R.S. LOVE: We have been told that the 41 staff who are to be asked to move on will be able to reapply for 33 positions. I assume that either some people have part-time positions or job share or people will not get another job with the WA Country Health Service. The first question is: how will 41 fit into 33? It does not make sense, unless people who are job-sharing also will be asked to relocate. It is most unlikely that someone in, say, Geraldton in the midwest with a part-time job will be able to relocate to Bunbury; it is probably 600 kilometres or more away. It is quite unlikely that they would move in those circumstances.

We have been told that no financial savings have been identified because, apparently, there will be no total job losses. What is the motivation? What is the reason for doing this? What is the efficiency that is thought to be gained from this change? We have heard some nebulous talk about innovation incentives to get people to undertake certain tasks. Basically, WACHS is a decentralised organisation in the sense that it has major facilities located right across Western Australia, from the very north to the very south, and it works very well around those diverse sites. I am sure that WACHS is quite capable of incorporating its finance function in a diverse range of locations. We are not saying today that Bunbury is not important as a regional centre. Of course Bunbury is a regional centre and of course it is important. But these jobs are being relocated not just to Bunbury; they are also being relocated to Perth. I dare say that the lion’s share of them will go to Perth, not Bunbury.

What about the families who will be asked to move hundreds of kilometres? We have been told that consultation took place but, realistically, it does not sound as though there was any consultation. What took place was a little bit of information sharing: “This is what is happening to you and if you don’t like it, you will have to get another job somewhere else, because your job will be in Bunbury or Perth.” That is not consultation; that is direction. One of the first things we learn about consultative processes is that just giving information to someone is not consultation, and that is all the government has done in this case as far as I can see.

What is the reason for the move to Bunbury and to Perth? This announcement has come to the fore at a time when the government had a community cabinet in Bunbury, so it is a bit hard for us to believe that the minister had no idea that this was happening —

Mr R.H. Cook: A conspiracy!

Mr R.S. LOVE: Absolutely. What would be the motivation for that little pearl of wisdom being dropped right at this time? Might it be to try to save the skin of the member for Bunbury, who showed himself to be completely incapable of rescuing the relocation of the former Department of Parks and Wildlife to Bunbury and lost that major change and investment that would have taken place in Bunbury? Now he has been scattered a few bits of wheat. He

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is now getting a few jobs at the expense of Geraldton, Northam, Carnarvon and a range of other regional areas. In other words, it is robbing Peter to pay Paul. That is a great way to run a regional development program. I take a bit of umbrage with the member for Bunbury. The member for Bunbury happily took part in one of the greatest episodes of regional development that has ever taken place in this state as a very senior member, so it is a disgrace for him to come into this place—it is not the first time he has done it—and try to trash the legacy of what took place under the previous government over the last eight years. I would not expect anybody with any moral background to do that.

Mr D.A. Templeman interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Moore.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am glad that I am able to make a contribution in some degree of silence. You guys complain when anybody interjects on you, but you have been speaking constantly since I stood up!

I do not believe and I do not accept that this is some sort of accident that took place, or that the minister did not know that this was happening and that he was not consulted, or that it just happened to come about when the government had a cabinet meeting in Bunbury. It is incredible that we are expected to believe that this is not a completely political decision by the government. This decision is not about efficiencies in WACHS; this decision is about shoring up the position of the member for Bunbury because he lost the relocation of the DPaW facility to his town. The Department of Agriculture and Food, the WA Country Health Service and a range of other services will be expected to lose some of the people from other regional areas to Bunbury so that the member's job can be kept safe for the next four years, when he has in fact lost one of the greatest regional development opportunities for Bunbury that has been put forward in recent years—the relocation of DPaW.

Division

Question put and a division taken with the following result —

Ayes (15)

Mr C.J. Barnett
Mr I.C. Blayney
Mr V.A. Catania
Ms M.J. Davies

Mrs L.M. Harvey
Mr Z.R.F. Kirkup
Mr S.K. L'Estrange
Mr R.S. Love

Mr W.R. Marmion
Dr M.D. Nahan
Mr D.C. Nalder
Mr K. O'Donnell

Mr D.T. Redman
Mr P.J. Rundle
Mr A. Krsticevic (*Teller*)

Noes (33)

Dr A.D. Buti
Mr J.N. Carey
Mrs R.M.J. Clarke
Mr R.H. Cook
Mr M.J. Folkard
Ms J.M. Freeman
Ms E. Hamilton
Mr T.J. Healy
Mr M. Hughes

Mr W.J. Johnston
Mr D.J. Kelly
Mr F.M. Logan
Mr M. McGowan
Ms S.F. McGurk
Mr S.A. Millman
Mr Y. Mubarakai
Mrs L.M. O'Malley
Mr P. Papalia

Mr S.J. Price
Mr D.T. Punch
Mr J.R. Quigley
Mrs M.H. Roberts
Ms C.M. Rowe
Ms R. Saffioti
Ms A. Sanderson
Ms J.J. Shaw
Mrs J.M.C. Stojkovski

Mr C.J. Tallentire
Mr D.A. Templeman
Mr R.R. Whitby
Ms S.E. Winton
Mr B.S. Wyatt
Mr D.R. Michael (*Teller*)

Pairs

Mr P. Katsambanis
Ms L. Mettam
Mr J.E. McGrath

Mr M.P. Murray
Mr P.C. Tinley
Ms M.M. Quirk

Question thus negatived.