

Mr Shane Love; Dr David Honey; Ms Libby Mettam; Ms Mia Davies; Mr P.J. Rundle (roe — Deputy Leader Of The Opposition) [5.40 Pm]; Acting Speaker; Mr Peter Rundle; Mr Reece Whitby; Mr Donald Punch

COOK GOVERNMENT — TRANSPARENCY

Motion

MR R.S. LOVE (Moore — Leader of the Opposition) [4.00 pm]: I will move the motion standing in my name on the notice paper, but I will read it out because it is a lovely motion. I move —

That this house calls upon the Cook Labor government to review its processes of delivering a rolled-gold standard of transparency, as promised to Western Australians, and notes its abject failure to deliver anything close to that.

In 2018, former Premier Mark McGowan promised Western Australians a Labor government that would deliver a rolled-gold standard of transparency. That promise is as empty as the Labor back bench during this discussion and, I have to say, through most of the week. It is interesting that a number of parliamentarians are present in the building, yet consistently over the last two days there has been an absence of Labor government members in this house. I understand we are to move on to residential tenancies after private members' business. It would be sad if we called a quorum and nobody came in, and we had to shut down the house. Perhaps the Whip could rally the troops and get some in, so we will not have to go through that process. As I said, we have a very empty Labor back bench at the moment. A few members are leaving; they will be out the door. I think it is up to 10 now who are leaving and will not be back in the next session of Parliament. We will see how many of the remaining Labor MPs come back.

The government has often dodged transparency measures. We have seen that time and again in this place. Government members have addressed that matter by denial, or by belligerence when they are talking about members of the opposition, and sometimes they are talking about parliamentary officers and the like. They seem to hold a rather contemptuous view of anybody who seeks to criticise them or the way they go about their issues. In Parliament, one of the key transparency measures that exists is the Office of the Auditor General. Time and again, there have been plenty of alarming headlines around the reports that the Auditor General has brought down. I will read some: "Auditor-General Caroline Spencer calls for 'improved transparency' on major WA projects like Metronet", "McGowan Government slammed in Auditor General report over \$600m in project cost blowouts" and "'Very unusual' Auditor General says that access to Griffin Coal insolvency legal costs withheld by Government". Again today, the member for Cottesloe asked questions about \$220 million of taxpayers' funding and we were told it is commercial-in-confidence. Is it commercial-in-confidence for a business that is broke—in receivership? Its existence is only being propped up by that \$220 million. It would be good to know what we are getting for it. Moving on, there is also: "WA Auditor General sports spending inquiry raises pork barrelling questions" and "Premier Roger Cook doubles down in defence against Auditor General's report on COVID advertising campaigns". I have that report here and I will read some extracts from it. Finally, "Auditor-general warns WA government over risk of money laundering and terrorism financing."

Part of this government's attempts to downplay the seriousness of some of its failings over those anti-money laundering and counterterrorism financing requirements, as highlighted by the discussions around the Perth Mint and its dismissal of serious failings as a certain type of "storm in a teacup" is the type of rolled-gold transparency we are not getting. It is not rolled gold transparency, but some other sort of substance transparency we are getting from this government. That is reflected in the remarkable situation in which we spent half a billion dollars buying rapid antigen tests, which I think have mainly ended up in the rubbish tip. Some of them were stored until only quite recently, but it was still costing us money to store them. They must all be expired now. I am sure many MPs had them in their offices. Now, if you squeeze the little tube, there is nothing in it anymore. It has disappeared, just like that half a billion dollars. The testing substance has also disappeared somewhere. It has floated off into the atmosphere like that half a billion dollars—just gone.

In opposition, we frequently put in freedom of information requests. Many of them are outstanding, have been refused or returned in much longer than the prescribed period. The Information Commissioner Bill is going through the upper house at the moment. We have not heard any real assurances that any extra resources will be given to the soon-to-be Deputy Information Commissioner in the pursuit of those freedom of information inquiries. We are acutely aware that that office is seriously under-resourced, as evidenced by the time it takes to handle any requests for review and the fact that so many reviews are sitting there unattended. There is no shame in that on the Information Commissioner. It is all down to the lack of resources that this government is applying to that very important office, which is crucial to ensuring government transparency.

Even in this place, bills are rushed through. The opposition is given very little time to consider them. We are often not given briefings until the last minute before a bill is debated. Going back to the mother of all these situations, we can look at the Aboriginal cultural heritage legislation. It was a massive bill, which we were given access to about 24 hours—no, not even that—before it was rammed through this house. People were trying to get their heads around the new system, which nobody in the community could understand even years later. However, members

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of the opposition were supposed to somehow intelligently debate a massive piece of legislation with a completely new system on a very important matter with no regard for the processes of Parliament. There was no real reason for that to have been the case. It would not have mattered if it was another week, fortnight or month. There are reasons that legislation sits in this house for three weeks or so; it is so opposition members can understand it and consult with key interest groups about it. When those matters start to be pushed along in the way this government has done, transparency and good governance fall away.

I spoke before about a press report titled, “Premier Roger Cook doubles down in defence against Auditor General’s report on COVID advertising campaigns”. Some of the highlights were that —

Premier Roger Cook has dismissed criticism from the State’s Auditor General following a report into a number of taxpayer-funded advertising campaigns which ran throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, including one which polled voters on their political views.

Caroline Spencer’s report was tabled in Parliament earlier this week and made five recommendations to improve governance with the State’s advertising, to ensure campaigns remained apolitical and represented value for taxpayers.

The reports said that, while the State had largely followed the rules, there were examples of non-compliance demonstrating how advertising crossed the line from “appropriately focusing on public information”, to being “politically advantageous” to the government of the day.

He claimed some of the Auditor General’s findings were “inaccurate”. “I respectfully disagree with the findings,” Mr Cook said on Friday ... While Mr Cook defended the decision to use taxpayer funds for the polling, which included questions about whether AFL teams should be allowed through the State’s hard border, Ms Spencer’s report wrote poor procurement practices had also occurred.

She said, in one COVID-19 ad campaign, costs increased by 600 per cent from what was quoted, adding the advertising agency was awarded the work without competition.

Labor while in opposition criticised government spending on advertising. We remember that. I remember it complaining about the Bigger Picture program and other things that occurred. It has certainly come back with a vengeance and spent money with gay abandon to support itself in its pursuit of re-election. Back in 2018, Minister Sue Ellery claimed the \$25 million that was spent in 2016–17 had fallen just over \$16 million in the first 11 months of 2017–18. Annual reports show the advertising spend by the Premier’s own department soared in the lead up to COVID, increased even more through COVID and decreased only slightly after the state moved on from border restrictions and mandatory vaccination. Labor’s circular to cut spending put out to the community and to its departments was removed from the government’s website in November 2021: “No need to worry about it; just keep going.” Department of the Premier and Cabinet figures also showed advertising spending from the office of the Premier also shot up in those years.

It is staggering to think what the government might be looking to spend in the next period because, as we know, we are coming up to an election. If one looks at government advertising at the moment for things like the Metronet program, also known as the “Metrodebt” program, the electricity credits and zoo tickets et cetera, it can be seen to go on and on. We will see that rolling further and further out in the future as we come towards the election as the government tries to promote itself to ensure, using its departments, that it get its message out there in the community. I do not think there is any doubt that the Labor government, in using Metronet, is basically using what was a political slogan for it in elections past. In effect, it is advertising the Labor Party. There will yet again be a Metronet train at the Perth Royal Show from which people will pick up all the little free giveaways and all the rest —

Mr P.J. Rundle: Using taxpayers’ money.

Mr R.S. LOVE: It is using taxpayers’ money to basically promote the Labor government. The Auditor General looked at this when she did that —

Several members interjected.

Mr R.S. LOVE: You will have your chance!

Several members interjected.

Point of Order

Mr R.S. LOVE: Can I call a point of order while I am standing on my feet or do I have to sit down to do it?

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr P. Lilburne): Member, please continue putting your discussion points through me. It is not very serious: there was a bit of to-and-fro, and it was good-humoured. If the member would like to have no interjections, please let me know. The member certainly invited it himself. If the member would like that

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arrangement, I can arrange that for the member. I just ask all members to await their turn. Please continue, Leader of the Opposition.

Debate Resumed

Mr R.S. LOVE: There are four other Labor members here, so I think they would rather hear me talk than hear the minister shouting from over there. I would rather they be a little quieter while I continue my contribution.

The Auditor General's report overview states, as I said, some of her concerns about the way the government spent money during the COVID period. That was during the period leading up to elections as well. I read directly from the report —

There were, however, examples of non-compliance that demonstrate how campaign advertising can cross the line from appropriately focusing on public information into areas that are politically advantageous to the government of the day. Two notable instances included the use of sentiment polling in COVID-19 campaigns and a separate campaign targeting the Australian Government's decisions on submarine full cycle docking.

Despite my Office finding 10 years ago that the total cost of government campaign advertising is not known, there has been no improvement in this area. This limits transparency and makes it harder for Parliament and the public to judge whether advertising campaigns represent value for money.

I note that the Department of the Premier and Cabinet (DPC) disagrees with some of the findings in this report, mainly in relation to the extent of the exemption to normal processes provided during the state of emergency to help DPC deliver campaigns in a timely way. In my view, the exemption applied only to the processes that affected the speed of campaigns, rather than the pandemic being an excuse to suspend all the principles, even those such as being apolitical which do not affect timeliness. This kind of disagreement is unusual and unfortunate, and I note that DPC in their formal response stated that despite the exemption they sought to adhere to the guidelines.

Some very serious concerns were laid out by the Auditor General about the COVID period. As I said, the result from the Premier was to come out and basically deny that there was any issue. In some way, I think he tried to downplay the Office of the Auditor General. We have seen that with other government ministers. When the Inspector of Custodial Services criticises the Minister for Corrective Services or the administration of the department for which he is responsible, we then hear, "Oh, well. I don't listen to what he says. He's a nice fellow, but he doesn't know everything." The minister downplays what he hears from the person involved. This is very worrying. If we hear from offices of the Parliament, the Inspector of Custodial Services et cetera, they should be listened to, not ignored, downplayed and spoken about patronisingly. We have a very fine Auditor General. We should listen to what those reports tell us about transparency.

Time and again, we know that we are not getting that transparency. It is becoming increasingly difficult for the Auditor General to get access to information to properly judge whether decisions have been made in an appropriate way. There seems to be a view of not trusting that agency and its confidentiality. Ironically, the Privacy and Responsible Information Sharing Bill that is going through the upper house at the moment contains provisions that I think are of great concern to the Auditor General in that they restrict what that office can report on. She made that quite clear, yet we see that she is not being listened to. When the information bill came in, we accepted on face value that there seemed to be good improvement in some ways in ensuring greater access to information. The sting in the tail was that after that bill passes, many situations I am talking about at the moment relating to access to information would be affected. The bill will restrict what the Auditor General can report on. Far from being a measure of greater transparency, the legislation has within it some very worrying aspects that have been well highlighted by the Auditor General. Nobody from the government is willing to accept that there is any validity to what the Auditor General has said, and, in doing so, the government dismisses those concerns. I do not understand what the government thinks it is trying to achieve by doing that. It is setting up a system that will also apply when it is not in government. The system is there for everybody—for all time going forward until another act of Parliament is passed and the system is changed again. We want to make sure that it is right so that those on the government side can be confident that when this side is in government—that will happen—decisions are properly examined and not shrouded in secrecy, which is occurring within government at the moment.

We know that the government made a promise in 2018 that it would provide gold-standard transparency, but time and again, this government has failed to provide anything like that. Another example of that lack of transparency was seen quite recently in a quite impassioned situation involving the member for Kalamunda, who heads the Joint Standing Committee on the Corruption and Crime Commission. A report of that committee was tabled in Parliament not that long ago. Again, the Premier refused to accept that there was any reason for concern. We have seen successive reports from the Auditor General. We also have the report of the parliamentary committee headed by a Labor MP.

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There are two Labor MPs on that committee. Presumably, everybody on that committee was behind that report. No dissenting report was tabled. We assume that all four members—members from the Labor Party, the Liberal Party and the Nationals WA—concurred with that report. That report is titled *A lower standard*, which is not great for a government that claims to have a rolled-gold standard of transparency. The report was harshly critical of what the committee thought was vital information on the appointment process of the CCC. As we know from the report, there had been no change in the way information should be provided to the committee relating to the appointment of an important officer to the Crime and Corruption Commission. That information related to the new deputy's position, but the positions of commissioner, deputy commissioner and parliamentary inspector are filled the same way, although I could be wrong about that. There should certainly be no change to the way information is provided to members of that committee.

Again, one has to wonder why there was a concern. The committee has strong processes in place to ensure that information is held confidentially. Many things come across the committee's desk that are very sensitive and not leaked and put out to the public. I believe it is inappropriate to claim that there should be no trust in the processes of the committee. That was part of the reason given by the Premier when denying that information to the committee. We discussed that in Parliament and the government refused to accept that it had trampled on the committee process in a way that was unnecessary. It spoke of a government that has become used to not displaying true transparency. It does not like to have anyone else in on its decision-making.

I turn to another Auditor General's report—*Opinions on ministerial notifications*, which revealed that the Attorney General refused to provide key information for the Auditor General to make a necessary decision on whether the decision of the Attorney General not to provide information in answer to questions asked in Parliament was appropriate. The Attorney General had no ability to make that decision because he refused to provide the information requested by the Auditor General, which was backed up in this place by the Attorney General and the Premier. It is not as though they are minor players in the government. I am talking about the government's chief law officer and the chief minister, if you like, of the government, who backed up decisions to withhold information from the Auditor General that the Auditor General deemed critical in order to form an opinion on an important matter. That is a very worrying situation and just goes to show that whether it is the former Premier or the current Premier, transparency is not front of mind of the Labor government in Western Australia. The Western Australian people deserve better than that; they deserve a government that respects parliamentary processes and that wants to ensure it is doing all it can to be accountable and assure people that it has nothing to hide. It is fair enough for the government to keep some matters away from the public. We do not doubt that. The idea that pretty well everything the government does should somehow be protected from exposure has more to do with political expediency or perhaps not wanting to be held to account for the reasons behind decisions rather than any damage that release of the information may cause.

This issue also speaks to the enormous amount of money the government devotes to event promotion. I have nothing against people trying to enliven the social scene in Western Australia but there has to be a limit to how much money a government can spend without accounting for the value of that spend, even if it de-identified it, to give us some understanding of what is going on. We do not know how much it costs to hold some of these events in Western Australia and there is just no reason for that to occur.

I spoke earlier about freedom of information. The government is not putting in the necessary resources for FOI requests. I recently requested tracking, and learned that 28 requests were submitted back to my office late, with an average delay of over 78 days. That hinders the ability of the opposition to receive information. We are often told that there is limited scope. Is it limited because the information cannot be found or because it is so narrow and unless we have a certain date or subject, it cannot be found? Some departments know every trick in the book. In my view, they deliberately set out to frustrate and ensure that accountability does not happen.

We have even seen a lack of transparency in what the government does when it is out campaigning. Members may remember the lead-up to the 2021 election when the then Premier was repeatedly asked whether his government would embark on any changes to the electoral situation. We were told time and again that it was not on its agenda. Within weeks, a so-called ministerial expert panel was charged with coming up with some models, all of which suited the stated policy of the Labor Party, which the Premier refused to enunciate before the election, even though he had every opportunity to do so.

Dr D.J. Honey: How many times was it?

Mr R.S. LOVE: Goodness; I do not know. Was it three times before the cock crowed? No. It was many more times than that.

We know that is a hallmark of this government. Another way we are seeing a lack of openness, honesty and transparency is the way the government has consulted on some key policies. I remember when the then Minister for Environment conducted some sort of internet poll on forestry. She did not say that the government was doing

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a push poll to all the conservation groups to ensure it got back the answers it wanted so that it could justify shutting down an industry, which had not been told it was going to be shut down. The government already knew it was going to do that because it had been doing the backend work to justify a decision that it had already decided to make.

Dr D.J. Honey: Didn't they take international submissions. The majority of the submissions were actually from outside the state of Western Australia, as I recall.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I think the government did that for the south coast one. I am not so sure about the forestry one. Certainly, that is the allegation. That is the understanding on the south coast, which is an issue I am about to get to.

The poll showed that there was already a process in place. In my view, the government had decided it was going to end the timber industry, and it set about building the case to do so using a faux consultation process. Anyone who knows anything about polling and surveys knows that that if you ask people the right question, you know what the answer will be on the vast majority of the responses you get. The government uses sham consultation processes. It is happening right now for the south coast marine park. As the member for Cottesloe said, there has been influence from the Pew Charitable Trusts, which is a US-based organisation. It seeks to impose environmental conditions in countries other than the United States, which do not exist in the United States by the way. As far as I am aware, it is not actively campaigning for those measures in the United States but it is doing it in some of the far-flung colonies. It used its influence on this government. We know that people involved in the south coast marine park process have been listening to the voices of people from everywhere but not the voices of people from Esperance, Bremer Bay and other communities on the south coast and goldfields who are very closely linked to the Esperance marine situation because it is their coastline as well. I talk to people throughout the Esperance–goldfields area, and they are ropeable with what has been going on. They have been ignored while everyone else, of course, is being listened to.

Western Australia's lawful firearms owners were asked to be involved in a consultation process with the Western Australia Police Force about an extremely complex matter on which there was many pages of information, but they only knew about the consultation weeks beforehand. We were heading up to Christmas, which is always a very busy period. Despite thousands of signatures on petitions calling for the consultation process to remain open to allow people more time to undertake the consultation, the call was unheeded and the consultation was period shut. We as lawful firearm owners were in some cases denied the ability to make our points known. I know that thousands of the submissions, emails and communications went unheeded and unopened and were not listened to. Why should the government listen to voices it does not want to hear? This has been set into government agencies' mode of thinking and they are starting to operate that way, and it is extremely worrying. In a democracy, government relies upon confidence in the community that its decisions are, as far as possible, open and there is transparency and an ability to check the information behind decisions and some of the processes by which decisions are made.

I note other members are going to speak on this motion, so I will end my contribution at this point and allow them to speak.

DR D.J. HONEY (Cottesloe) [4.35 pm]: I join in support of this excellent motion moved by the Leader of the Opposition, the member for Moore. There is a problem in this Parliament. I have had a significant number of Labor Party members talk to me privately about a problem in this Parliament. It is that the Labor Party has absolute ascendant control of both houses of the Parliament. Why is that a problem? I might say this was early on in the term, but members on the other side came to me and talked to me about this matter. The problem is that we have a government that thinks it is utterly unaccountable and can do what it likes. It thinks its moral position is so superior that it is beyond reproach and any decision that it makes is clearly the right decision. The government does not feel it has to be accountable at all. Of course, when the government came in, it employed, I think, 110 journalists—goodness knows how many more have been employed since—so it has a great relationship with the major media outlets. They will get government stories out whenever it likes, so why does it need to be accountable? Of course, there is the old saying about power: power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. It is not intentional, but we can see it in the arrogant demeanour of ministers in this government and in this government. It is the contemptuous way government members treat any inquiries from members on this side. As I said, that is because the government thinks it so superior morally and beyond reproach. The fact that anyone would dare question the government is itself a heinous crime. It is like the government has the infallibility of the Pope in everything that it does, and if anyone questions that, they are a heretic who deserves to be stoned to death.

There is an inherent risk in that, members. We have seen that risk in the past and I will go through that. The government treats the idea of transparency with disdain. The Leader of the Opposition mentioned the disgraceful way we are treated when we ask reasonable questions of the other side. I put in a freedom of information request recently. I was asking for reasonable information that was pertinent to current issues. I got the reply, "Go and look at my press releases." That is really disgraceful, tawdry and dismissive behaviour by a senior minister in the government, but it is common. If members do get a freedom of information request back, in many cases, it depends on the minister. I find some ministers are fine with answering questions because they are comfortable and confident

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in what they are doing, but a good number of requests—I would say the majority—are returned with nearly everything or every significant detail on the page crossed out. It is “an”, “this”, “but”, “what” and so on. It is just joining words and no information.

There is an important reason we have transparency. Of any party in this place, the Labor Party should be the one that is most attendant to the idea of transparency. The repeated refusal to release documents means we cannot have transparency. The government cannot be accountable if it simply refuses to share information with the opposition. I know members on the other side would like to forget the WA Inc history, but, as I said, of any party in this place, the Labor Party should be the keenest on transparency. It behoves some of the younger members on the other side to look at the royal commission report into those activities. I say that not to shame them because of something that was done in the past—this idea of original sin is something that I have always struggled with—but to learn the lessons of the past.

I was much younger than I am now and was freshly involved in the Liberal Party, but I was around at that time. The Premier of the day, Hon Brian Burke, was a highly regarded figure in the community. I remember when my side of politics was digging into this, including Bill Hassell and others. They were ridiculed by the local business community: “How dare you impugn the reputation of the Premier. He’s such a fine fellow.” The circumstance was similar. The Premier had a very strong relationship with the media and good support in the Parliament and he felt that he could do what he liked. I do not think he was a bad person intrinsically. He definitely got in with a bad crowd and ended up making some very bad decisions that affected the whole state and, ultimately, his reputation. That is the risk that government members should be attending to.

I go back to the *Report of the royal commission into commercial activities of government and other matters*. Paragraph 27.2 titled “General Evaluation” states —

27.2.1 The governmental system of this State exists to serve the interests of the people of Western Australia. Our findings and observations provide compelling evidence that this fundamental purpose has not always been uppermost in the minds of our elected and appointed public officials, in some instances far from it.

27.2.2 At the very least, it must be said that the Parliament, the public’s representative forum, has failed to provide an effective check on the executive arm of government. The Parliament, no less than the public, was kept ignorant of many of the matters which led to the establishment of this Commission and which have had such adverse consequences for every person in the State.

Members opposite should listen to those words. That is the problem we get when government members are not transparent. It is not that they are denying the opposition of information, but that they feel they can do whatever they like without scrutiny, and that means there is a high risk of them ending up doing the wrong thing. They do not set out to do that because they do not feel that they are accountable. The report continues —

27.2.3 Ministers have elevated personal or party advantage over their constitutional obligation to act in the community’s interests. Public funds have been manipulated to partial ends. Personal associations and the manner in which electoral contributions were obtained could only create the public impression that favour could be bought, that favour would be done.

That is extremely relevant in the current circumstance. The report later states —

27.2.6 The processes of decision making, but more importantly the very reasons for decision in many of the matters inquired into, were often shrouded in mystery. If a basic principle of good administration is that governmental decisions should be taken by officials who are known to be responsible for, and accountable for, those decisions and who can provide considered, documented reasons for those decisions, then that principle has been disregarded systematically at the highest and most important levels of government.

How pertinent that comment is to this debate because we are not receiving the information around decisions that government members make. It continues —

27.2.7 The absence of effective public record keeping has dogged this Commission in its inquiries. Records provide the indispensable chronicle of a government’s stewardship. They are the first defence against concealment and deception.

Further on, the report states —

27.2.9 The Government was entitled to pursue new goals. What it was not entitled to do was to risk the public resources of the State without its actions being subjected to critical scrutiny and review.

As I said, the government’s actions are creating exactly that circumstance. In the great majority of cases, in the serious matters that we want to consider on this side, government members simply refuse to provide that information. I could go on with those quotes, but members opposite should read that report. It is a highly relevant report in relation

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to why we are raising this matter. This is not some idle opportunity to raise a gripe against the government because we do not believe we get adequate information. This government's failure to provide adequate information to the opposition is putting it at risk of doing the wrong thing. I do not think any member opposite would deliberately set out to try to do the wrong thing any more than former Premier Hon Brian Burke set out to do what he did. I have met the former Premier on several occasions and, as I say, I am convinced he did not set out to do those things at the start, but because he was not transparent, he got himself into a circumstance in which he did the wrong thing. It is critical for the operation of our state that government members are absolutely transparent. If they forget the lessons of WA Inc, unfortunately they will risk repeating those actions that brought the Labor Party into such disrepute at that time.

For my final word on this, the last part of paragraph 27.2.11 in the report states —

But when government seeks to “live by concealment”, to adapt a phrase used in evidence by Mr David Parker, it can be anticipated that instances will occur where official power and position are both misused and abused.

That is why members opposite need to be transparent. What happened in the cases that were mentioned by the Leader of the Opposition—an experience I have had—is that it is questionable in some circumstances that certain government decisions served the public interest rather than vested interests. Our system of government is brittle. Despite all our rules and practices, the integrity of government relies on honesty and openness to the people and the opposition in government. The government's reluctance to adhere to its gold standard of transparency that the former Premier announced is a major risk for that side and a threat to our democracy. I do not think it is too extreme to say that because that is exactly what we saw in the WA Inc period.

I want to cover a few key areas on which our side has tried to get transparency from the government and the government has simply refused. We will go through the Metronet program. It is a massive capital program. Tonight, quite literally, families will be sleeping in cars because they have nowhere else go. There is no adequate housing and no affordable rental accommodation. When they cannot stay with relatives, families will be sleeping in cars or multiple families will be squeezed into a house because they have nowhere to live. On this side, we have been very concerned about the Metronet program for a couple of reasons. The first is the massive cost blowout. We are not talking about idle things. I have heard various discussions including from the Minister for Transport who comes into this place and says, “You guys can't add up or do this or that.” The truth is that the Labor Party said that it was a fully costed program that would cost \$3 billion. Labor had to know at the time that that was not true, but that is what it said. We are then told that some scope has been added to the program, but the program is now heading towards a cost of \$13 billion, which is \$10 billion more. Imagine what that money could have done to solve the housing crisis.

The program has not only cost a vast sum of money but also sucked a large part of the labour workforce out of the housing industry. I know this because I was approached by numerous builders about it. When I came into my role, they told me, “You've got to do something about the state government and the Metronet program. They are taking away all our workers.” In large part, many of trades that build houses are the exact trades that build the rail stations and the lines and so on. The housing sector and the Metronet project use an enormous amount of “unskilled labour”. It might be skilled, but it is unqualified labour, if you like. The Metronet project sucked that out of the building industry. I was told at the time, and I repeated it when I first came into this place, that doing that would cause a housing shortage. Guess what? It did. That is why we ask questions about the Metronet program. What happens when we ask those questions? The Minister for Transport refuses to provide any detail. It is just so frustrating to have to go through it. I have submitted some detailed FOIs and questions on notice about this matter and we get these smart responses: “Go and look at the budget”. What a farce! Looking at the budget provides people with nothing but umbrella numbers and knowledge of how much they increase. It provides no detailed explanation of where the money has gone or what effort the minister has made to try to gain additional efficiency for the use of that money—none whatsoever. As I said, one program is more responsible for the lack of housing in the state than any other single issue and it is certainly more responsible than anything else for the lack of money for other critical government programs, such as social housing. That is the reply we get. When I requested information from the Minister for Transport, the response I received was —

Project timeframes, budgets and milestones are, and continue to be, detailed in numerous publicly available Ministerial Media Statements and the State Budget Papers. Updates will continue to be provided as projects progress.

What a load of rubbish! I defy any member opposite to look at the minister's press releases or the budget and say that they provide the level of detail we need for transparency.

I do not know a finer public servant than the Auditor General. She is an extraordinarily professional woman who does her job fiercely without fear or favour. The Auditor General made a number of comments in the 2020 *Transparency report: Major projects* —

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... Parliament and the public cannot easily access detailed or consolidated information on the cost and time performance of these projects.

...

It is my view that Government should provide regular public reporting on the status of major projects to Parliament and the public.

...

It is my intention to continue to periodically report and track a selection of major projects until Government fills the gap.

Two years later in 2022, the Auditor General reported again —

... Parliament and the public cannot easily access detailed or consolidated information on the cost and time performance of these projects.

The Auditor General highlighted those risks and the lack of transparency and further, in 2022, she stated that it was her intention to periodically report on and track a selection of major projects until the government filled the gap. As I said, the Auditor General, who is a superb public servant and an extremely decent and reasonable person, believes that this government is not being transparent and called for those reports. What was the response of the Minister for Transport? She said that she would not waste her department's resources on such a task and that the Auditor General's office could do as it pleased. What a disgracefully dismissive comment about the Auditor General's report.

[Member's time extended.]

Dr D.J. HONEY: If we were talking about building play equipment in a schoolyard, I am sure that people would be interested in it, but members opposite might not say that it does not deserve the attention of the opposition or that it should not be demanding a lot of information. In this case, we are talking about the largest single capital project ever undertaken by a state government and, more particularly, its competition for resources has called other major problems in our community. This is a really important project, yet the minister simply refuses to provide clarity or detail.

I ask members to cast their minds back to the Huawei contract as part of that project. Some members might like to forget about it. Due to national security concerns, the Australian government, along with our key allies, banned Huawei from participating in the national communication and development of the 5G network. That was well known across Australia and in government circles, yet during the time that all that concern was being expressed, the Minister for Transport approved Main Roads entering into a contract with Huawei. That was fundamentally against the advice of a range of different agencies; in particular, a number of governments had banned contracts with Huawei and the federal government expressed major concerns. Nevertheless, the minister entered into that contract. There was subsequent uproar and we in this place and elsewhere asked the minister to explain why and how that decision was made. Why was all that security advice ignored? When other governments were banning it, why did the minister enter into that contract? In the end, the state government was forced to cancel the contract at considerable expense to the taxpayers of Western Australia and, again, there was no transparency about it. We never had the opportunity to understand how that decision was made and to challenge it.

One of my great fears coming out of that was that the government did not have the chance to learn from that. I do not know who was responsible for that decision. Was it the minister who made that call? Was it a departmental decision that the minister was aware of but chose not to intervene or was the minister completely unaware of the decision until it was all underway and then felt she had to defend her department? We do not know, but those things are important; it is important that the public of Western Australia knows those details. As many members know, Main Roads is a bit of a fiefdom, but it is full of extremely capable people. There had to be people in that department who were aware of the public concerns and the concerns about Huawei but nevertheless that decision was entered into. Again, there was absolutely zero transparency. We can only speculate about what happened. I do not think that helped the government; it certainly did not help the public of Western Australia.

I want to talk about the Landgate building site in Midland. I will take members through a bit of the history of this because, again, it is something that members are not aware of or they have chosen to ignore it. The Landgate buildings in Midland were part of what can be described as a questionable deal during the WA Inc era in the 1980s. It involved the government taking a 30-year lease with inflated rent—as it has this time, I might say—with the building becoming government property at the end of the lease. For more than 30 years, taxpayers paid \$180 million in rent for that property. But at the end of that deal, the government owned the building. The building was valued at \$40 million at the end of the lease. It was the government's own building, owned by the taxpayers. In fact, there were two large parcels of land. One parcel of land had offices on it and the other parcel of land had a car park. What happened? The government sold it to a third party for \$20 million and, once again, leased it back from them at, as I have

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY — Wednesday, 18 September 2024]

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demonstrated in this place before, inflated rent at the top of the market. We know that government is a blue-chip tenant. Government should pay the lowest rent because it has long-term leases and always pays its bill. It is not some commercial tenant that will be there for only a few years before they go broke. The government sold the building for effectively nothing—certainly it was a fraction of the value of the land—and then entered into what can only be described as an enormously generous lease arrangement coming back in. The builder was going to do some improvements to the offices.

It beggars belief. It is an \$85 million rent deal for a 15-year term. If we take into account the \$20 million discount for selling the building, plus the rent, it will cost \$100 million for the government to use a building that it already owned—not that the government owned, but that the taxpayers of Western Australia owned. We paid \$180 million in rent. We owned the building. We sold it for less than half its actual value—it was a written-down value, but nevertheless—and then we entered into another \$85 million deal to rent back the building that we owned. Good luck to the people who bought it. They consolidated the car park under the original office area and then inherited a 3 500-metre block of land in the centre of Midland for free on which they could do whatever they liked. It beggars belief that that deal made any sense to the taxpayers of Western Australia. Why am I labouring this point? It is because I was very interested in that, and some of my colleagues were as well. We asked the Premier and the minister again and again, “Can you provide any information to us? Can you give us the business case? We are not talking about some private organisation. What was the business case you used to justify this deal?” There was an absolute, total refusal to provide any information.

I am extremely disturbed by that deal. At the very best, it represents an utterly incompetent use of taxpayers’ money—money that could be put to ample good use. I look at members in this chamber and I know that each of them could identify fantastic opportunities for that money to really go and help people. It really worries me. The best that can be said is that it was an incompetent deal; the worst that can be said is that something else was involved. Maybe it was not, but we do not know, because there has been zero transparency—none whatsoever, other than the headline numbers reported in the press.

The government made much of saying, “Oh, well, the Auditor General looked into this deal.” The Auditor General looked into it to determine whether the deal was accounted for in the proper way, because there was complexity about which government department owned the land. That is what the Auditor General looked into. The Auditor General did not look into, and has never made a finding on, whether or not this was a good deal for the public of Western Australia.

There was also the Griffin Coal payment; we heard from the Premier about that today. The Premier is someone that I hold in good regard, most of the time, but \$220 million of taxpayers’ money went to a private company and we are told, “No, you can know nothing about what that money was used for, other than it was keeping the lights on.” That was it; that is what we were told: “We have given \$220 million to a private company.” I can tell members that that equates to around \$50 a tonne of the coal that that company mines. It is my understanding that it already gets somewhere around \$50 or more a tonne for its coal, so it is double the value, but we do not know who got a commission for that deal. There were a number of consultants, and I do not have time to go through that, but a number of people were involved as consultants in that deal. We have no idea whether any of that taxpayer money went to consultancies. We do not know whether the money was used to pay off debt. We do not know what that money was used for. The Premier today said that it was commercial-in-confidence. We are not asking to know the intimate details of Griffin Coal; we are asking, “Where has that money been applied?” That is what I have asked; it is a simple question. It does not involve disclosing any commercial details of that company, and the government is obviously more than able to blank out anything that relates to the commerciality of that company, but it could tell us where that money has been applied and where it has gone. It is the public’s money, not the government’s money—the \$220 million that has been spent for that purpose.

There was the Perth Mint scandal. Again, there was an utter refusal by the government to provide any detail on that. Why are we concerned about that particular issue? We were told in this place that there were 139 000 transactions to a value of more than \$323 million on an app that did not comply with AUSTRAC’s reporting requirements. We have no idea—not from any of the information we have had from the government—whether that money was misused. That app allowed the transfer of millions of dollars overseas with no reporting through to AUSTRAC at all. Again, we had an answer from the former minister responsible to say, “Well, no-one’s reported any criminality in relation to that”, or words to that effect. How could we? We have not been provided with a single piece of information about it; we have just been told, “You have to trust us. You have to believe that we have done things in the right way.” It may be that it was not used for criminal purposes; it is equally possible that it was used for significant criminal purposes, but we have no way of questioning that deal, and the government’s response is to brush it all under the table.

There is also the East Perth power station site. Unfortunately, I do not have time to go through that in detail, but 8.5 hectares of land on the river in East Perth was given to a consortium for \$1. The government utterly refused to

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say how it chose a proponent for that. Subsequent to announcing the proponent, the government announced that \$85 million of taxpayers' money was going to be spent on that site. It is also my understanding that none of the other proponents for that site were made aware of that when they made bids for it.

It is extremely disappointing that, given the history of the Labor Party, the government is not being transparent. We would expect this government to have a gold standard of transparency, but it is anything but. It is not transparent and it is not accountable for what it does. As I have said, that is a threat to the government of this state.

MS L. METTAM (Vasse — Leader of the Liberal Party) [5.05 pm]: I rise to support the comments made by the member for Cottesloe and the motion moved by the Leader of the Opposition —

That this house calls upon the Cook Labor government to review its processes of delivering a rolled-gold standard of transparency, as promised to Western Australians, and notes its abject failure to deliver anything close to that.

As members of the opposition, we can point to many examples. When Mark McGowan and the Labor Party swept to power in 2017, the government made a bold pledge of gold-standard transparency. That promise was meant to set a new benchmark for openness, accountability and integrity; however, after nearly eight years in government, this so-called gold standard has been exposed as being nothing more than hollow words from the government, with numerous failings highlighting a significant departure from what was promised.

We have already heard about a number of examples. One of the most glaring examples of the government's broken pledge is its persistent refusal to provide crucial information regarding the management of taxpayers' funds. This is not the government's money; it is taxpayers' money. There is a reason that transparency is necessary, and the Auditor General has highlighted this on a number of occasions. In a recent report, the Auditor General criticised the Labor government for obstructing transparency, particularly in relation to the legal fees paid for advice on the Griffin Coal debacle. That is just one example. The government's initial refusal to disclose these costs, citing commercial sensitivity, was not only inappropriate but also prevented the Auditor General from adequately assessing whether the government's actions were justified. The independent Auditor General is stating that, not the opposition. These are very serious concerns. The government's secrecy casts serious doubt on its commitment to accountability, as it hid crucial financial details from both the public and the Parliament. Similarly, the Labor government's handling of major infrastructure projects has also been shrouded in secrecy. The Forrestfield–Airport Link has been plagued with safety concerns and delays, and became a lightning rod for criticism as it was revealed that the government refused to release critical taskforce minutes relating to that project. The Auditor General condemned that decision as being unreasonable and inappropriate, yet the government persisted in withholding information that the public had a right to know. After all, this is not the government's money; it is taxpayers' money, and there is a reason we need that level of transparency and accountability, as highlighted by the independent Auditor General.

The government has also repeatedly used section 82 notices—a legal tool to avoid answering parliamentary questions—at an unprecedented rate. Over this term of government, the Labor government has issued more section 82 notices than the previous Liberal–National government did over two terms combined. This is the most secretive government since WA Inc. These notices allow ministers to decline requests for information, often on dubious grounds of commercial sensitivity.

This government is the most resourced in modern history and is enjoying the largest boom our state has seen. There is a great opportunity to address the real issues that the community more broadly in Western Australia really cares about and rise up to a gold standard of transparency. Quite clearly, we have seen the opposite. Effectively, the government is abusing its power. The government will not answer the most basic questions, even from the media. In a recent opinion piece, Dylan Caporn highlighted another failure of the Labor government fulfilling its promise of gold-standard transparency. Despite the government's repeated commitments to openness and accountability, he points to a reality that is quite different, emphasising how the government continues to fall short by withholding crucial information from the public and failing to provide clear communication on the finances of project-related matters. The persistent lack of transparency raises questions about the government's integrity and commitment to the principles that were pledged so strongly in 2017. If the government cannot be trusted to be transparent with its citizens, it cannot be expected to maintain their trust in the long run.

Unfortunately, the same disregard applies also to the Parliament. The Labor government's actions have been nothing short of an attack on the foundations of democracy here in Western Australia. The arrogant and dismissive treatment of Parliament by an out-of-touch government is evident in the government's handling of the legislative process. Transparency and accountability have been replaced by secrecy and a blatant disregard for scrutiny and public opinion. The removal of regional representation under the McGowan Labor government in its first term was not only a shock announcement in 2021, but also a divisive move. The then Premier denied that the issue would be on the agenda, not once but seven times in the lead-up to the 2021 state election, misleading and lying to Western Australians. The removal of regional representation understandably sparked —

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Ms C.M. Rowe: There is more regional representation in this place than ever before.

Ms L. METTAM: That removal was absolute rubbish. The removal of regional representation sparked widespread outrage, particularly in regional and rural communities. We have seen how they have been treated since. They feel that their concerns and interests are being sidelined in favour of a metro-centric government. The government's actions have been understandably criticised. The government said and promised one thing ahead of the election and delivered something very different. As I have stated, the Labor Premier said seven times on record that such a move was not on the agenda. The government's actions have illustrated that this government does not care about regional WA. We have seen that as well with the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act. That was a disgraceful display of disregard for the democratic process. The government's approach to that critical legislation that impacted the preservation of Aboriginal cultural heritage across Western Australia was nothing short of appalling. The way that matter was treated in Parliament, a piece of legislation —

Ms C.M. Rowe: By yourselves; it was disgraceful.

Ms L. METTAM: The member said the opposition was disgraceful in relation to that. I find it incredible that the member for Belmont still stands by that piece of legislation that was presented and that process.

Ms C.M. Rowe: I stand by my comments about your conduct. It was quite shameful, actually.

Ms L. METTAM: The debate was guillotined. Rather than following established transparent parliamentary processes, the government briefed the opposition just days before introducing the bill to Parliament. It is extraordinary that Labor members in this place still believe that somehow the opposition supported the Labor government's approach to the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act.

Ms C.M. Rowe interjected.

Ms L. METTAM: It is extraordinary that the member still backs the bill that was introduced. It was a rushed and chaotic approach that left little room for meaningful consultation on the debate. It was proven to be a complete mess. The government forced the legislation through Parliament in late 2021. We are hearing from Labor members opposite the extraordinary support for that approach and that piece of legislation, which avoided the scrutiny and input that a bill of that magnitude deserved. The Labor government's decision to push the bill through Parliament at such speed, despite the complexity of the issues involved, showed a complete lack of respect of the legislative process and the broader community that would be impacted. The handling of the implementation of the act was equally disastrous.

The regulations associated with the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act were shambolic from the outset. Farmers, pastoralists and landowners were left confused and unsure about how to comply with the new rules and were angered by the government's lack of clarity and communication. Rather than addressing these legitimate concerns, the Premier stooped to using despicable tactics, accusing the opposition of engaging in dog whistling for raising very valid concerns about the act. They were proven to be true, given that this government repealed that legislation. His comment that likened the opposition to a dog returning to its vomit was a shocking and unbecoming attack. It was very divisive and further undermined any chance of reasonable discourse on such a sensitive and important issue. It is clear to members in this place and the broader public that if this government had its way, its first, second and third approach was to adamantly rush the legislation through. If it was not for the actions of the opposition but, most importantly, the broader community, we would not have seen that disastrous piece of legislation repealed. Just 39 days after the act came into operation, the Labor government was forced to backtrack. Faced with overwhelming public pressure, the government was left with no choice but to admit its failure and announce a full review of the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act. Members opposite still have an issue with that. The government's rapid reversal is a clear acknowledgement of its failure to properly consult with stakeholders as well as its inability to implement workable regulations. That was an illustration of a government that believes it is above accountability.

Over the past 18 months, the government has also neglected to disclose details of spending on external consultants, despite the clear mandate to provide those reports every six months. This pattern of withholding information is part of the growing trend whereby the government releases nothing until it is pressured by the media and the opposition. Such behaviour demonstrates a blatant disregard for the principles of open governance, leaving the public in the dark about how their tax dollars are being spent. This comes after the last report covering the first six months of 2022 was tabled in December that year, leaving a significant gap in transparency over a critical area of government spending. What makes this even more concerning is the government's casual explanation for what is a clear failure. When questioned, the government admitted that the delay was due to an administrative error. Given that these reports stem from a decree made by the former Labor Premier in 2021 aimed at reinforcing the government's commitment to openness, this so-called error appears to be part of what has become a broader pattern of neglect when it comes to transparency.

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The delayed reports, which the government hastily claimed will be tabled in response to mounting pressure from both *The West Australian* and the opposition, highlight a deeper issue of governance. Hon Peter Collier in the other place has criticised the government's lack of accountability, stating that the failure to release these reports on time is indicative of the government's broader contempt for Parliament. He argued that despite the government's frequent chest-beating about transparency, its actions show a complete disregard for it. This behaviour is particularly alarming given the government's continued rhetoric about being transparent. Labor's upper house leader, Hon Sue Ellery, responding on behalf of the Premier, claimed that reports would continue to be published regularly as part of the government's ongoing commitment to openness, yet the reality paints a very different picture. Western Australians deserve better than a government that acts transparently only when pressured and backtracks only in the face of public pressure. This delay underscores growing concerns about the government's ability to hold itself accountable.

Moving to health, since 2017, there has been a steady decline in outcomes within the health portfolio, which was led at the time by our unelected Premier. Under his watch as Minister for Health, we saw the start of a failure to deliver for the people of Western Australia. Nothing has improved under the reasonably new health minister who is failing frontline health professionals and putting what was a robust health service under the previous government into decline and failures in every metric. This government continues to deny and spin figures to convince Western Australians that their health system has improved when, quite clearly, it has not. There is no better example of how this government tries to manage its failures than the Your Voice in Health survey, a valued and critical part of frontline health care. I understand it was an election promise of the current Labor government.

[Member's time extended.]

Ms L. METTAM: Our Minister for Health promises that she and the government are listening to employees —

... we are listening to our employees, who are the most important part of our healthcare system.

... we want to hear from our employees. We want to hear the experiences of staff.

The Your Voice in Health Survey was suspended in 2022. It returned last year to reveal widespread issues around workplace dissatisfaction and culture. These are our valued health workers but 75 per cent of healthcare workers said that they did not feel they were respected or valued, and that WA Health did not care for their wellbeing. No survey results have been issued this year, apparently because the government is unable to find a provider to undertake the process. It raises the question: is this what a caring government looks like? When questioned in Parliament, the minister outlined how she was unable to commit to the survey going forward. Is the minister afraid of what the survey will reveal again? We got some *Yes, Minister* answer about how the survey would not be starting again because of an inability to find a provider. We find that very difficult to believe.

On ambulance ramping, in a move that raises significant concerns about transparency, the Labor government ceased publishing data on ambulance ramping, which is a critical measure of hospital bed-blocking, overcrowding and mismanagement. Ambulance ramping—the time ambulances are forced to wait at hospitals before being able to transfer patients—has long been an indicator of how a hospital system is working. Both the public and health professionals voiced their concerns, pointing out that withholding this information not only obscures the severity of the crisis that was emerging in health but also undermines public trust in the government's handling of health. Did the government listen to those concerns? Absolutely not. It ignored those calls for greater transparency, leaving patients, healthcare workers, and the broader public in the dark about the worsening state of emergency services. In response, St John Ambulance stepped in to fill the gap, independently releasing the ramping data in an effort to maintain transparency and keep the public informed about the true extent of bed-blocking in the health system, which has clearly only become worse under this government, with a 400 per cent increase in ramping. There was over 6 000 hours in July and August this year. This episode not only highlights the state of Western Australia's health system but also demonstrates a broader pattern of secrecy from the Cook government, which consistently fails to provide timely, accurate information on critical public services.

Incredibly, the Cook government will not even show transparency to its union base. We constantly hear from government members that it is listening to and supporting our frontline health workers, but the facts paint a different picture. Despite repeated claims of solidarity, the Cook government has failed to reach a fair agreement with the Australian Nursing Federation, leaving our frontline workers without a satisfactory wage deal. Contrast this with the Premier's rapid response to the demands of the CFMEU, when he had no hesitation in handing a 25 per cent pay rise to workers on government projects just months after the union publicly supported his bid to become Premier.

It is simply astounding that the government would force all contractors on Metronet projects to implement a 25 per cent pay rise for workers while, at the same time, nurses and health workers have had to fight so hard for the nine per cent increase that nurses have been able to attain under this government.

The Australian Nursing Federation WA secretary declared last week —

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY — Wednesday, 18 September 2024]

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“If we’re going to attract them —

That is, nurses and midwives —

we don’t just have to pay as good as NSW and Victoria and Queensland, we have to pay more.

Our nurses have gone from being some of the highest paid in the nation under the former government to some of the lowest paid under the Cook Labor government. There is also a glaring disparity between how the government treats workers who are part of the CFMEU compared with nurses.

On the elective surgery waitlist, there are also significant failures. Since 2017, wait times for elective surgeries in Western Australia have increased by a staggering 55 per cent, with more than 30 000 people now on the waiting list for essential surgeries. Even more alarming is that children in need of specialist care face delays of up to three and a half years just to see a paediatrician. This situation is unacceptable. No-one, particularly our most vulnerable children, should have to wait years to access critical health services. The consequences of these delays are severe, potentially stunting the health and development of children during their crucial early years. Rather than addressing the root cause of the issue, the health minister continues to mislead the public and deflect from the core problems.

The reality is that families are being failed by a government that has consistently underfunded, under-resourced and mismanaged child development services. Although many Western Australians are familiar with elective surgery waitlists, few understand the hidden waiting times unless they have personally experienced the system. These hidden waitlists occur in the gap between seeing a GP, being referred and finally getting an appointment with a specialist, creating another layer of delay that the minister and the Cook Labor government refuse to acknowledge. As a result, these individuals fall through the cracks and are not even included in the state’s official waiting list statistics. To the Cook Labor government, these people exist in a “statistical black hole”. Even the federal Labor Minister for Health and Aged Care, Mark Butler, has acknowledged that hidden waiting times can have a serious detriment on people’s health. The Australian Medical Association has further highlighted Western Australia’s public health crisis, revealing that the state has declined on all four key public health metrics it measures, making WA the worst performer in the country. Western Australians are being forced to wait longer than is clinically recommended at every level of the health system—an unacceptable failure of governance and leadership. Again, it highlights the transparency issues of this government. This government has clearly neglected its duty to provide timely, accessible health care, and Western Australians are paying the price.

We have asked questions and raised issues about the new women’s and babies’ hospital. This government has not been up-front about the decisions made behind closed doors about the original proposal—this was highlighted in the government’s business case—to build it within 10 years at the only location that is considered world-class in Western Australia, the Queen Elizabeth II Medical Centre site in Nedlands, alongside Perth Children’s Hospital and Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital. This week the government pushed ahead with the tender process for the new women’s and babies’ hospital, despite significant concerns raised by over 200 clinicians regarding the safety of newborns due to the distance from Perth Children’s Hospital. These medical professionals have continuously warned that this move could endanger lives but their concerns have been largely dismissed by the government. The government has argued that building the facility at the current QEII site would pose unacceptable risks and disruptions, claiming that the project would take between 10 and 20 years to complete. However, this claim has been contradicted by Labor’s own business case and the Infrastructure WA report, both of which confirm that construction at QEII could be completed within 10 years, with clinical services operational by 2034. The repeated assertion of the Premier and the Minister for Health that building the hospital at QEII would take 20 years is simply misleading. By pushing this narrative, they have sought to convince Western Australians that the Murdoch option is the better way forward, despite compelling evidence to the contrary. This strategy undermines the best interests of the health and safety of mothers and their newborns. Every other state in Australia has a tri-located health precinct where high-risk maternity hospitals are located alongside children’s hospitals, ensuring immediate access to specialised paediatric care—a gold standard that Western Australians are being denied by this government.

In a letter published in *The West Australian* on 6 September, Dr Tim Pavy, the former head of anaesthesia at King Edward Memorial Hospital for Women, warned that moving the hospital to Murdoch would “lead to the deaths of newborn babies”. His words are also the words of other clinicians. His letter highlighted the potential risks of separating the women’s and babies’ hospital from the critical care services at Perth Children’s Hospital. Dr Pavy’s concerns reflect those of many in the medical community who believe this decision prioritises convenience over safety. This move is not in the best interest of patients. That message has been made very clear. The government’s refusal to listen to the experts further exposes its disregard for the wellbeing of Western Australian families. The safety and health of mothers and their newborns should never be compromised for political expediency.

Accountability starts at the top. It is finally time to call out the Premier’s dishonesty. Both in the Parliament and outside, he has repeatedly claimed that the opposition has opposed the government’s cost-of-living measures, which

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is completely and utterly false; it is absolute rubbish. The Nationals WA and the Liberal Party have always supported measures to help struggling households. Whether it is about keeping the lights on, providing secure housing, putting food on the table or ensuring that children have school lunches and uniforms, we have put forward a number of measures that deserve the attention of this government and deserve to be considered.

MS M.J. DAVIES (Central Wheatbelt) [5.35 pm]: I rise to speak to the motion. I want to focus on a very important part of what this government has responsibility for but has failed to provide a degree of transparency or openness on. It relates to the state risk report. Members may not be aware of this body of work or the report. The state risk report was the culmination of the State Risk Project. It is the product of a national partnership agreement on natural disaster resilience between the Australian government and states and territories. There can be nothing more important than making sure the community is prepared for the very worst. It is the responsibility of not only the government but also the community. The fact that the government has failed to release this report after a significant amount of work was done goes to show that it is unwilling and, as my colleagues have already outlined, has a track record of burying information and failing to provide it through this Parliament or put it on the public record.

The project was not insignificant. It commenced back in 2013 and cost approximately \$13.7 million. It was undertaken between 2013 and 2021. It is an extensive body of work. It involved significant consultation and planning by local government and communities. The project was substantially canvassed in the State Emergency Management Committee's *Emergency preparedness report 2021*, which was not published until August 2022.

My colleague Hon Martin Aldridge, the shadow Minister for Emergency Services, has done a significant amount of work to try to get to the bottom of why this government refuses to make this report public. He issued a media statement at the beginning of last year and nothing has changed, stating —

The McGowan Labor Government has buried a report detailing worst case scenarios for 28 prescribed hazards that Western Australia might face.

Shadow Minister for Emergency Services Hon Martin Aldridge MLC has called on the Premier to immediately publicly release the 'State Risk Report' in the interests of 'gold standard transparency'.

That is the report that this government promised the public of Western Australia when it came to government. The statement continued, with Hon Martin Aldridge saying —

“This report was the culmination of eight years of work at a Local, District and State level at a cost of almost \$14 million,” ...

“The project found pandemics and animal or plant biohazards posed the highest risk to Western Australia, with that assessment occurring prior to the onset of COVID-19.”

I have already been on my feet talking about a biohazard relating to a biosecurity risk. We certainly understand the enormous economic damage that was done by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is interesting that this government has failed to release that information. I reiterate that the assessment for all these hazards took place before the onset of COVID-19. The state risk report was created in partnership with the state government. Similar projects were conducted across all states and territories. I have a list of the efforts made by our shadow Minister for Emergency Services through freedom of information requests, meetings and briefings, to try to get to the bottom of where this report has gone. It is a very specific, but very telling, example of this government's approach to providing information. Even when it comes to the most important things that our state government should prepare the community for, it refuses to provide information. I can advise the house that on 24 November 2022, Hon Martin Aldridge, via the Freedom of Information Act, the FOI process, sought access to the final state risk report. That application was made to both the Department of Fire and Emergency Services and the State Emergency Management Committee. The FOI application was acknowledged by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services on 25 November 2022 with a due date of 8 January 2023. The notice of decision by the Deputy Commissioner at the time, Melissa Pexton, was made on 10 February 2023 and purported to determine the application to DFES and the State Emergency Management Committee. My colleague advises that the State Emergency Management Committee, an independent statutory body, never responded to the application, despite numerous attempts by Hon Martin Aldridge. Deputy Commissioner Pexton's claim to determine the matter on behalf of both entities is disputed by my colleague, and he is continuing the process of trying, still, to get that information.

When I spoke to my colleague, he advised that initially, when this commenced, he sensed that DFES was preparing in good faith to process the request for the document, including a request for an extension of time. Anyone who has been through the FOI process will understand that that is not an irregular request. Sometimes there are efforts made to ensure that third parties are contacted. Sometimes the information sought by the opposition or third parties is significant. I have made FOI applications and have had extensions requested on multiple occasions. I have to say that this government has made an art form of requesting extensions for information. Hon Martin Aldridge allowed for an extension of time, which was granted, and there was a request to exclude a prescribed officer's details, which

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was not granted. A further two exemptions to exclude third-party information were granted. There was obviously work being done behind the scenes. A further two extensions of time were granted to 30 January 2023 and ultimately 10 February 2023, respectively. We now see the Labor Party at its finest! After all this and after it was well and truly on the record that we were seeking access to this document, the Deputy Commissioner came back and told Hon Martin Aldridge that the document had gone through and was now cabinet-in-confidence. Anybody who has been involved in politics for any period of time knows that the easiest way to make sure that nobody ever gets to see a document is to put it through cabinet. But this government did that after a significant time. Remember that the process was started on 24 November 2022 and on 10 February 2023 the honourable member was given the advice that it had gone through cabinet. A significant amount of time had elapsed, and work had been done by DFES and the commissioner. It was clearly the case that the government did not want this document to be seen or to see the light of day.

The honourable member had also commenced asking parliamentary questions about the report on 30 August 2022. There have been references to the document. References to the document have been made by ministers in answers to parliamentary questions, yet the document itself has not been released. In February 2023, the member sought an internal review of the decision, which was again acknowledged by DFES on 15 February 2023. On 27 February 2023, Commissioner Klemm upheld Deputy Commissioner Pexton's decision that the document was cabinet-in-confidence. This matter has now been referred to the Information Commissioner for an external review. That has not yet been determined. This is a concerted effort to hide a document that ministers have actually referred to in questions in Parliament and in public. Work has been done by departments to gather and provide the information. Indeed, they have made extension requests so that they can continue to gather information. But there has never been a document tabled or provided to the opposition or to this Parliament.

The only conclusion that we can make is that there is something in the document that this government is mortally fearful of. The McGowan government and now the Cook Labor government have buried a very detailed report into the risks that Western Australia faces from 28 prescribed hazards. That is \$14 million and eight years of work by local governments at district and state levels that has been buried completely. The project identified that the most significant risk facing WA are pandemics and animal or plant biohazards.

I raise this issue because members should be very concerned that we do not have a document that makes sure that we are building awareness in our community. Everyone understands that Western Australia is prone to natural disasters and increasingly so as a result of climate change. Since completion of the work, we have seen COVID, severe tropical cyclone Seroja, Kimberley flooding, and, as I spoke about yesterday, the recent threat of the polyphagous shot-hole borer. I think it is a complete sham that demonstrates the lack of transparency by this government. A report aimed at protecting lives and property in Western Australia has been buried deep and was considered so dangerous for the public to consume that after dillydallying about behind the scenes and trying to use the FOI process to hide it, the government then said, "We know how we'll fix it; we'll fix it so that no-one gets to see it. We'll put it through cabinet". The State Risk Project created credible worst-case scenarios for each of the prescribed hazards to inform all our emergency services on how to prepare and for everyone to have a better understanding of what these risks might be. It is everyone's responsibility. Local governments in particular have a significant role when it comes to emergency response and management. They deserve to know what they should be planning because they get a significant amount of pressure and responsibility put on them when something like cyclone Seroja takes place. It is simply not good enough. We continue to call for the state government to release this report, as Hon Martin Aldridge has done for some time now. Its behaviour over the last three to four years has been anything but gold-standard transparency. That was a promise made by the Premier and upheld by the Deputy Premier at the time, who is now the Premier of the state, Premier Cook. They have failed miserably on something that is so very important in protecting our state and allowing people to build resilience into the systems that they are responsible for when it comes to emergency preparedness. Shame on them; it is a disgrace.

I thank Hon Martin Aldridge for providing me with the background of the work that he does. I do not think anyone could call into question his work ethic or experience when it comes to emergency services. He is a diligent and very experienced person when it comes to emergency services, having been a career firefighter and now actively involved in volunteer roles, like many in this place are. He has conducted himself as the shadow minister by making sure he understands the responsibilities that are required. I would like to think that if he were to stay on in Parliament, he would be the Minister for Emergency Services. I can assure members that this kind of behaviour would never be his calling card as a minister or of our government if we have the chance to sit on the government benches.

MR P.J. RUNDLE (Roe — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [5.40 pm]: I certainly appreciate the opportunity to wrap up this debate from the opposition side and support the motion —

That this house calls upon the Cook Labor government to review its processes of delivering a rolled-gold standard of transparency, as promised to Western Australians, and notes its abject failure to deliver anything close to that.

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I think that the motion is spot on. It describes exactly what has gone on with this government.

Firstly, I want to congratulate the Auditor General, Caroline Spencer. I think she is a shining light on our Parliament, trying to hold this government to account. As the member for Cottesloe said, the work she does, without fear or favour, is excellent. I want to put on the record that I certainly appreciate her work. On behalf of the people of Western Australia, we appreciate the work that she does to hold a secretive and opaque government to account. I have said before that this is a government of strikes and unions and it lacks transparency. The people of Western Australia have woken up. The people of regional Western Australia have certainly woken up. Once again, there are no regional members in the chamber to listen to what is going on. Yesterday, biosecurity —

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Biosecurity is a very important issue, Madam Acting Speaker.

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Thank you, minister.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: What did we have? There were two members opposite—two members opposite!

Point of Order

Ms M.M. QUIRK: I understand that it is disorderly to make comments about members who are absent from the chamber. There is a tradition that that is considered disorderly.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mrs L.A. Munday): Thank you, member for Landsdale. It is not a point of order.

Debate Resumed

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Thank you, Madam Acting Speaker.

We know the likes of Hon Darren West say, “Look at us. We’re the party for the regions.” The Labor Party is the party that has put the boot into the regions, and the people of regional Western Australia have woken up. That will show on 8 March 2025; that is for sure. There are no two ways about it.

Nonetheless, I have a few issues to get on with. I am glad the Minister for Environment is here because quite a few of my subjects relate to the lack of transparency in his various portfolios. I want to start on a positive note. The Minister for Environment was first to call out the federal Minister for the Environment and Water. He said her nature positive laws were not good enough. He was very worried about them. I suspect that he is still very worried about them. I suspect he is being contacted by the business sector and many other people in Western Australia. Our big corporates have recently started to come out of the shadows and say that they are worried about what the federal government, let alone the state government, is doing in that space. I want to give credit where credit is due to the environment minister for calling out federal Minister Plibersek on some of the unrealistic programs she is coming up with for Western Australia.

I have a few basic questions for the Premier and the Treasurer, who are not here. How much is Metronet costing the government? How much will it have cost by the end of the project? When will Metronet—or Metrodebt, as it is colloquially known—finish? How much debt reduction is planned for the next financial year? They are simple questions. Considering public sector debt is expected to increase over the forward estimates from \$28.6 billion this year to \$40.9 billion by 2028, we have the right to ask those questions. I remember that every time former Premier McGowan stood up in question time, he would say, “The last government left us \$40 billion in debt.” What do we have now? This government’s debt is estimated to be \$40.9 billion by 2028. The Committee for Economic Development of Australia’s response to the budget said —

... reducing government debt is an important part of reducing the state’s financial risk ...

Back in opposition, during a presentation to CEDA, former Premier Mark McGowan said that a blowout to \$40 billion was unacceptable. Apparently, it was going to be a 20–20–20 plan —

20 KPIs, 20 per cent salary ... and a 20 per cent cut to SES.

That is a cut to the number of senior executive service members. I do not know how those KPIs are going. Quite a few of our directors general earn twice as much as the Premier.

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Member for Roe, just so I know, are you taking interjections?

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I do not mind. I am happy.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Excellent; okay.

Mr P. Papalia: Do you think she is being nice? If we preference against you, you could lose. You should be nice.

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Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I am not going to lose too much sleep but thanks for the reminder.

I look forward to seeing people at the Esperance polling booth because I can assure members that—it is unfortunate the Minister for Environment has left the chamber—about 94 per cent of the people in Esperance are very unhappy with the south coast marine park. Once again, that is a matter of a lack of transparency.

The Cook Labor government talks about rolled-gold transparency. The south coast marine park proposal is a bitter debate in the community, with even government departments at loggerheads. Fisheries and the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions are not talking to each other. At one stage, I do not think the ministers were talking to each other either. Maybe they had to sit at opposite ends of the cabinet table! It is no wonder that the people of Esperance came out in the rain in their hundreds for not one, not two but three protests. My colleague Hon Colin de Grussa stated in the other house that the quick and dirty consultation process undertaken by the Cook government came apart under scrutiny from within Parliament and on the streets of Esperance and Bremer Bay. That is spot on.

Quite frankly, the use of the 30-year-old Wilson report has backfired. The reality is that the Wilson report does not recommend the establishment of marine parks of this scale. The report recognises that there is not enough scientific data relevant to the south coast. In 2021, the government commissioned the Carijoa report, which also concluded that the WA south coast is relatively understudied. Here we are and the minister has the community against him, there is disdain from regional communities and there is no genuine consultation evident during the whole process. To top it all off, talking about a lack of transparency, the Pew Charitable Trusts is behind the government. It is a \$7 billion outfit from Boston, Washington and Philadelphia. The CEO came out and said, “We can’t mess around with the USA coastline because the people of America won’t accept it.” What has the Pew Charitable Trusts done? It has come down to Australia to mess up our south coast.

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: It is quite disturbing, Minister for Police.

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I can honestly say that the lack of transparency on what is going on behind the scenes with the Pew Charitable Trusts is quite disturbing. I will wrap up because, unfortunately, I have run out of time tonight, but I want to compliment the Leader of the Liberal Party for pressing on with the lack of transparency on the women’s and babies’ hospital. All those clinicians have come forth and given good reasons. Then, of course, we had the former Premier Mark McGowan and the Attorney General saying that regional electoral reform was not on the agenda. They said it was not going to happen and that they were not going to change the upper house. Sure enough, straight in, it was the first item of business in the new 2021 government. We saw that. We have seen the way the government has messed up the regions. We have seen the Aboriginal cultural heritage legislation mess. We have seen the firearm situation whereby 4 000 submissions came in but the minister pressed on and did exactly what he wanted to. To be honest, what has gone on in this government is quite frightening, and it will come out over time.

The people of Western Australia and the voters of regional Western Australia have woken up. I think the voters of metropolitan Western Australia have woken up, as well. I look forward to March 2025. I think the election will demonstrate the people of Western Australia have woken up about the lack of transparency.

Sitting suspended from 6.00 to 7.00 pm

MR R.R. WHITBY (Baldivis — Minister for Energy) [7.00 pm]: The member for Roe is here. It is good to have someone on the other side to focus on. At least the member for Roe has turned up, which is good to see.

It is my pleasure to respond this evening to the motion moved by the opposition. We get that the opposition has a role in the Parliament. Its job is to oppose. Ideally, it should be constructive and come up with alternative policy. However, all too often we see this opposition resorting to very cheap and puerile tactics. We know there is a dearth of policy. There is no policy that opposition members can talk about. We know they are not very good at doing their homework and doing the hard yards. I was part of the opposition before the 2017 election, and I know that as an opposition the Labor Party was ready for government because of the huge workload it took on and its keenness to develop interesting policies and take them to the community.

Ms C.M. Rowe: That’s when Metronet was formed.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Indeed. We can date the genesis of a whole range of policies to that time. We did the hard work because the Western Australian community deserves a government that is ready to govern and do the hard work.

Mr D.T. Punch: They hate negativity.

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Mr R.R. WHITBY: That is the other thing. We have an overwhelmingly negative opposition. I think that is due to the fact that the opposition is lacking in its capacity to do the work and is lacking in alternative policies. It is a very easy and very puerile course to simply grab hold of cheap slogans, such as the arrogance line. Almost every opposition tries to employ it, but it is thrown around loosely and inappropriately: “The government is arrogant; it is not transparent.” They are the things oppositions make up and grab out of the ether when they really do not have a constructive case to mount against the government.

I take everyone back to the previous period when Colin Barnett was the Premier and the Liberal and National Parties had control of the Treasury bench. Do members really think this is an arrogant government when compared with what was going on then and the nature and the approach of the former government and former Premier? Let us compare and contrast those two and the leadership we have today compared with back then. If members want to know what arrogance is really about, go back to pre-2017 when we had a Premier who optimised arrogance in the way that he conducted his affairs, by his lack of transparency and the way he wanted to bulldoze through policies and changes. Realistically, I think this government is a middle-of-the-road centrist government. That is the hallmark of this government. It is a government of moderation and good common sense. Our leaders—the former Premier and the current Premier—are both practical and moderate people who get on with industry, the union movement and community members. They can work together and collaborate. We are a very collaborative government; we are in the middle of the road. We are in the sensible centre. When a government occupies the centre ground—you see this all around the world—what does the opposition do? It has two choices—to go to the extremes of the right or the left. We are seeing some funny behaviour in this Parliament, with Liberal members standing and opposing some of the basic tenets of what we thought they were about. We have always known that Nationals members are agrarian socialists, as the Minister for Education quite correctly refers to them. They do not mind being capitalists when there is a profit to be made, but as soon as things get tough, they become socialists and they want government support. The approach by the opposition over the last couple of years—quite frankly, for most of the time we have been in government—has been to latch onto cheap headlines and say anything or drag out any fact. Indeed, it is a bit reckless, to be honest, but it is very good at looking for the extremists out there in the community—the people saying ridiculous things, making ridiculous assertions and saying things that are not based on fact. The opposition leaps on board to give those things currency, promotion and airtime and to push those false messages out.

I want to get into a couple of the examples I have mentioned from my portfolio. I will start with the environment and something that I am very proud of and that I know will be revered, respected and supported by the vast majority of the community in time—even members opposite will in time come to regard it as a good thing—and that is the south coast marine park. The approach to this by the member for Roe and his colleagues in the other place, working together, has been appalling. I remind the house of the time that I produced a pamphlet. I have it in another file, and I am sure the member for Roe is glad that I cannot wave it around again. It was a promotional flyer that the member for Roe and Hon Colin de Grussa from the upper house put out to the community in Esperance. Basically, it told a big lie. These members misled their own constituents. The claim made on the flyer was that almost half of the proposed south coast marine park would exclude the right of fishers, commercial and recreational, to go fishing there. That was never, ever true, but it was suggested and strongly implied in that pamphlet, which went all around the Esperance community. That provoked concern, as members can imagine. In fact, there was a protest when my colleague the Minister for Fisheries was in Esperance. I think the size of it was exaggerated in media reports; how many people would the minister estimate were in attendance?

Mr D.T. Punch: About 300.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: About 300; I think members opposite said there were thousands! But it is understandable that concern had been created by false information on a flyer that the member for Roe put out with his face and name on it. It said that fishing would be restricted from almost half—around 45 per cent—of the south coast marine park, and that people would not be able to put a line in. That was wrong; it was never correct, yet that was put out there. The caption to one of the media shots of the protest crowd when the Minister for Fisheries was in Esperance repeated that false claim. Members opposite have talked about transparency, decency and honesty in government. The member for Roe’s false claim was picked up, promoted and used to cause unnecessary anxiety in the community. The government has bent over backwards and gone to the extreme to ensure consultation on the south coast marine park process. There has been consultation above and beyond the statutory requirements. It has involved community consultation in ways that have never happened before, yet all the time we have had false information coming from the opposition. I will quote Tourism Council Western Australia chief executive Evan Hall. On 16 February, he said that he would —

... support maintaining all current and future non-extractive marine tourism experiences to preserve and protect ongoing visitor access through marine tours to the marine environment.”

He was supportive of what we are doing. He understands the business and tourism potential of an amazing part of our coastline. Businesses in Bremer Bay, which I listed in the chamber before, and businesses in Esperance have

said they support the marine park. However, the rhetoric we have come to hear and expect from the other side is, unfortunately, almost quoting one individual who is given to making very extreme, exaggerated claims about the marine park. That grabs a headline, unfortunately. My former colleagues in the media love that sort of extreme message. It grabs a headline but it is never honest. The unfortunate thing about members opposite is that they do not show any moderation or reasonableness or take a fair approach. They will ignore all reality. They will latch on to the loudest, most extreme, often most unhinged voice out there and say it is fact. They will then promote those views. It is very disappointing.

A representative of an organisation came to see me recently to apologise for the conduct of a former member of the organisation and the types of things that were said—claims that were made and exaggerations and falsehoods—about the south coast marine park engagement process. It was good to hear. I was not expecting it but the representative from that organisation said to me, “I’m sorry. It was wrong. We want to build a new relationship based on trust and cooperation. I apologise for what happened and what was said in the past.” When will the opposition also apologise for using the comments of that individual and promoting those views and extreme claims publicly and in the chamber? I wait for that apology. I have received it from the organisation involved. It was said very graciously and I accepted it. We moved on and will form good relationships in the future by working together. The opposition almost validated some of the things that were said at the time. They brought them to this chamber. They did not care to fact check because they wanted to cause anxiety in the community. When will members opposite apologise as the organisation has? That is the south coast marine park.

I will go on to energy, which is my other important portfolio area. We have had lots of bad faith from the opposition. The Leader of the Liberal Party has knocked renewable energy. Opposition members claim they support renewable energy and claim they are in for the transition and that they want to do something about climate change, but when an issue comes to the public’s attention about a new wind farm, solar farm or transmission line, they will find a way to undermine it to cause anxiety and unreasonable concerns. An example of this occurred recently, in the pages of the *Augusta Margaret River Times* on 13 April. The member for Vasse, the Leader of the Liberal Party, referred to the Scott River wind farm and said —

“This project has the potential to have a huge impact on ... the wider community.

“This lack of transparency is not good enough and the WA Cook Labor Government need to intervene to ensure that members of the community are provided with the full information they are seeking.”

The member was aware of that process even though no project has been approved. This was the beginning of talks and consultation with the community, which is exactly how she found out about it. It is interesting that the energy spokesman for the opposition, Hon Dr Steve Thomas, had a very different approach to this issue. He said on 6 September —

“There are a number of proposals that I personally consider are quite reasonable proposals. I think the Scott River proposal looks very good,” ...

The opposition energy spokesman is saying it is pretty good. There is a split. I know the member for Roe is not responsible for everything his minor partners or junior partners say and do, but the Leader of the Liberal Party was attacking and trying to stir up concerns in the local paper. For the broader audience, Hon Dr Steve Thomas was being fairly reasonable, saying it is a good project and that he likes it. In fact, he said it is “very good”. We have to ask opposition members whether they support it or not.

I could go on about this one for the rest of the night. It is a doozy! It relates to nuclear power. We still do not know the opposition’s—the Liberals’ or Nats’—views on nuclear power. I am not sure whether you guys are going to get together and have your own combined view or go off in separate ways. We know they sort of support it but sort of do not. They certainly have not been prepared to challenge the federal Liberal leader, Peter Dutton, when he told the people of Collie that they are going to have a nuclear power station down there. We have not seen the outrage we might expect when a federal leader, someone from Canberra, simply announces, “There will be a nuclear power station in this community.” Can members imagine if that was done by the current government in terms of a project in a community what would be said from the other side, but we do not hear a murmur about putting a nuclear power station in Collie. There is no explanation about how the opposition proposes to magically create more coal from a finite resource, from mines that are almost exhausted. The plan is to wait for nuclear power, which does not have an arrival date; it could be 20 years at least. We do not know from the opposition how it will make the coal-fired generators, even if it could conjure up some coal from somewhere. How will those generators, which are at their end of life, go on for another 20 years at least and require billions of dollars of investment, maybe replacement, and then be stranded assets when in 20 or 25 years nuclear power finally comes along?

Members opposite have no explanation of how householders in Western Australia will be able to afford the massive cost of nuclear power given we know it is a multitude of the cost of renewable energy. We know that renewable

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energy is the cheapest new form of power today and continues to get cheaper. Anyone who has bought solar panels for the roof knows how the price of renewables is always falling. We know that nuclear power is always getting more and more expensive. There is no explanation from the opposition—arrogance, one might call it, in that it is not prepared to explain to the people of Western Australia—how nuclear power will fit into our energy market. We know that when it is there, it has one speed—flat out. One cannot dial it up or down. One cannot turn it down. Because there will be lots of renewables in the system that are much cheaper, one cannot go and turn down nuclear power and then whack it up again as needed; only gas does that, and that is why gas is an important part of our transition. But nuclear power has one speed, and what that means is it will crowd out the market. It will destroy investment in renewable energy and all the good things we need to have happen for the Western Australian economy to create —

Ms C.M. Tonkin: They want to switch our panels off!

Mr R.R. WHITBY: It will disrupt the network, that is for sure.

There is no investment in renewable energy for the opposition. No-one is prepared to invest in renewable energy when there is a nuclear power station going to be built “sometime in the future”, so not only will we not have the nuclear power; we will scare off the renewables and we will be in a pickle.

The other thing is around social licence. Members opposite were stirring up hysteria down in the south west over wind turbines, which people could hardly see, yet they are happy to whack a nuclear power plant in Collie or who knows where else in the suburbs and towns of Western Australia. If members opposite want to talk about transparency and integrity and honesty and a decent approach and respecting the views of the community, on these key issues they leave a lot to be desired.

I have a lot of other things written here. I can talk about the other thing about nuclear. Forget about solar panels and the feeding tariffs and the ability to promote solar power in the home, and household batteries, because again nuclear takes over, crowds the market, and there will be only nuclear if and when it arrives. Goodness knows what we will do in the meantime! I know that my colleague has even more to say about this motion. I thank the chamber for its time. The way forward is to be reasonable and respectful. We can push our arguments and we can be passionate but we do not grab a throwaway line that has no basis in fact behind it, such as “You’re arrogant” or “You’re not transparent”. I heard the Leader of the Liberal Party earlier tonight and she was just nasty, negative and whinging. What people are looking for from an opposition is a bit of integrity, a bit of effort and a few policies. It might change its situation. It has become a splinter group in the chamber, but the way it is going, it will not change.

MR D.T. PUNCH (Bunbury — Minister for Regional Development) [7.20 pm]: Today question time was a disappointing experience because I heard that the policy of the opposition is to create anxiety and confusion and spread misinformation. Despite members of the government giving clear answers during every question time, we get the same repetitious questions. It is disappointing to get few questions about my portfolios of disabilities and seniors, which together comprise nearly 900 000 people in Western Australia, and regional development. I think I have been asked for one briefing on those issues. So much change is happening in disability and regional development. There have been so many complaints about regional development. Transparency is about asking for information and asking questions. I may have been asked five questions and have certainly had no requests for briefings. I have not received a single request for a briefing from the shadow Minister for Fisheries, yet the opposition talks about the south coast marine park.

Mr R.R. Whitby: They have plenty to say about it.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Yes, they have had plenty to say. Transparency is about asking questions and really working to try to understand the issues and apply critical thinking.

Mr P.J. Rundle: And giving answers like today.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: The member has not asked me a question.

I listened carefully to what was said today in the lead-up to this evening’s debate. A lot of it was premised on the notion that for some reason because the Cook Labor government holds a majority in both houses, that leads to arrogance. Well, that is democracy. I did not hear that view expressed by previous governments when the Liberal–National government was in power and held the majority in both houses. That was not arrogance? That is the issue. For some reason, the opposition resents the fact that we hold the balance of power in both houses. Because of that, we do not get the filibustering that we had in the previous Liberal–National government. In a very clear way, we are able to move forward our very wide and diverse agenda on law and order, safety, projects and making Western Australia a better place. It is grounded in consultation.

I had a quick look at some news articles because there was a lot of talk about the Auditor General. I found “Opposition: Barnett government in ‘computer stone age’ with online services”, a damning report by the then Auditor General, Colin Murphy. There is more, including “WA Premier Colin Barnett accused of misleading

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Parliament over advertising”, in which the Auditor General was misquoted by the previous Premier Barnett. Also, “Barnett backs Grylls over Palmer links” and the refusal to provide information. We know where the loyalties are. I also found “Grylls ‘acted inappropriately’ in fuel contract disclosure”.

Members should not come in here talking about the Auditor General because the Auditor General gives opinions. We listen very carefully. I have met with the Auditor General when she has expressed opinions about areas in my portfolios and we have acted on those opinions. She expresses an opinion, we look at it and we consider it. We adopt a very positive approach to government and we are a disciplined executive government team. Those are the Auditor General’s comments.

How many cabinet ministers in the previous Barnett National–Liberal government had to resign in very unfortunate circumstances and how many have had to resign out of our government? None—zero. We are disciplined, we are positive and we are focused on the needs of Western Australians. I have some great examples. I was up in the Kimberley talking to the community about what is important. I was able to inspect firsthand the construction of WA’s first \$60 million cotton-processing facility in the Ord irrigation area. That achievement has come out of the solid hard work of bringing all stakeholders together. It was very transparent and included First Nations people—the Miriuwung–Gajerrong people. Lawford Benning has been fantastic. The Ord River growers and the Ord River District Co-operative have been part of it. The community and the town have been part of it and they are proud of what they see.

Work followed on from that. It is great to see industry progress, but it is also important that people are proud of the place they live in. We worked hard to bring the East Kimberley Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Miriuwung–Gajerrong people, the Shire of Wyndham–East Kimberley and the regional development commission into a conversation about what it is like to live in Kununurra—a town that was sadly neglected by the previous government. They are excited, because for the first time they are talking about building a place that is inclusive, that can build relationships between people and look at how to modernise the town centre and make it an attractive, interesting place that people can be proud of and be positive about. That is about bringing the community together in conversation. We cannot get more transparent than that.

Have I been asked a question about that? No. Why? It is because it is a positive story. I contrast that with Warmun. We have been working with the Warmun community. Back in the day of the Liberal–National government, it had a very quick consultation with the community in response to the flood up there, and then went ahead and built an aged-care centre. The only problem with the aged-care centre is that it could not be licensed and used. It sat there as a symbol of despair for that community for years. It fell into disrepair. These places get vandalised when they fall into disrepair. We went and had the community conversation and worked out how it could be used. The community came back and said, “We really want to see if we can build it as a social enterprise.” They looked at the opportunities of key worker accommodation and things like it being a central cleaning area or laundry area to make use of the asset. They are excited because we have backed them. We have backed them to renovate the building and look at how it can be operated into the future. It cannot get more transparent than that. We talk to the community in a positive way, with a very positive vision for the future.

I was with the Ord River District Co-operative, and our regional economic development grant scheme provided \$220 000 to that co-op to get a cotton-classing machine. That makes the region independent. It means it does not have to go the eastern states to get cotton classed. That is a very positive story. What did I hear from the opposition? Crickets. There was no ringing up to say, “I’d like to know more about that. It sounds like a really great initiative.” There was no thinking about how the opposition might build on that as a policy option and what it could do. All we got was the same old, same old: revolving questions from the opposition and not listening to the answers, because answers are provided. Whether it is in health, policing, education or housing, the opposition has had very clear responses. The problem is that it does not like the answers. That is not in the interests of the Western Australian people. It is not how a good opposition operates. A good opposition talks to the community, finds out what the issues are from their point of view and sees whether it can put forward a better offering in a contest of ideas. It is not a contest of who can whinge the loudest, which is what we get from the opposition. We get negativity and whingeing all the time. There is not a single policy offering that comes in here that is well thought out, well constructed, put on the table and that the opposition, in a transparent way, puts up for critical review in this place. The opposition does not do it. I have not seen it, and I certainly have not seen it in my other portfolio of fisheries. In fact, what I have seen is a blatant disregard for the scientists within the fisheries section of the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development and the work they do to build sustainability. All I hear is criticism about the actions that we take on sustainability to build a future for the next generation. All members opposite do is whinge and criticise and exploit division in the community. That is what they do, and they should be ashamed about it. The Liberals and the Nationals should go away as a group, have a big get-together somewhere, really try to talk through their differences and get a little bit more coordinated and positive. If they did that, they might get a better reception from the community.

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Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.