

**Division 16: Western Australian Electoral Commission, \$7 031 000 —**

Mr V.A. Catania, Chairman.

Dr K.D. Hames, Minister for Health representing the Minister for Electoral Affairs.

Ms L. Sirkett, Deputy Electoral Commissioner.

Mr G. Harrington, Manager, Business Services.

**The CHAIRMAN:** The member for Forrestfield.

**Mr A.J. WADDELL:** On page 235, I refer to the reduction in website development under the major policy decisions. Can the minister please let me know what the impact of this reduction will be—that is, what programs are not going ahead and what facilities will not be there—and what percentage of the overall website development program this represents?

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** I will say, as I have at the start of every other division so that it is on the record for each division, that I am not the minister, obviously; I am representing the minister, Hon Norman Moore. Therefore, the majority of questions will be directed to the staff who are in attendance. Ms Sirkett.

**Ms L. Sirkett:** The \$40 000 for the website development was a module that we felt we did not need to have in place right now. We did not have time between the state election last year and the referendum to consider it further. It is about candidates enrolling online—that is, actually nominating online. It is something that we will want to consider further down the track, but we felt that we could put that aside this year.

**Mr A.J. WADDELL:** What percentage of the overall website development budget is that?

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** About 20 per cent.

[5.30 pm]

**Mr A.J. WADDELL:** Going on that, how much of the web development is in-house and how much is done externally? Of the in-house web development, how much is done by contractors compared with employees?

**Ms L. Sirkett:** It is all in-house. We do not subcontract externally at all.

**Mr A.J. WADDELL:** Are they all employees?

**Ms L. Sirkett:** Yes; five employees, and one subcontractor for a short time.

**Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN:** The dot point under “Significant Issues Impacting the Agency” on page 236 of the budget papers refers to the requirement for the Western Australian Electoral Commission to conduct postal vote elections for 60 of the largest local governments in October this year and that this service is provided on a cost-recovery basis. Can the minister give me an indication of what the cost would be per council or per vote? I am interested in the figure and whether that figure has increased since postal voting was first conducted by the Western Australian Electoral Commission. I am interested in the comparison from when the commission started to conduct postal vote elections and what the cost per voter might be now.

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** Ms Sirkett.

**Ms L. Sirkett:** I draw the member’s attention to page 237. Under the subheading “Efficiency Indicators”, there is a line item that gives the average cost per elector of conducting local government ordinary elections as \$2.10. That cost is spread across the 64 local governments for which we conduct postal elections. What was the rest of the member’s question?

**Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN:** Thank you. Basically, in 2007-08 the cost per elector of conducting local government elections was \$2.03—is that right?

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** That is totally dependent, obviously, on the number of electors for each council; therefore, it is \$2.10 an elector for a council election. Mandurah, for example, would have, say, 40 000 or 50 000 electors—something in that order—so it would cost \$80 000 to \$100 000, we would imagine.

**Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN:** I suppose what I am trying to get at is simply this: having gone through the postal vote process, and many local governments do that now, has the cost for local governments purchasing the commission’s services, because it is on a cost-recovery basis, increased over time? Is it now more expensive to provide that service than it was, say, two or three years ago?

**Ms L. Sirkett:** Yes, it has, because we have picked up more local government elections as we have offered the services every two years. Therefore, when we first began we had a small core of local governments that contracted us to provide that service; it has now risen to 64. This year, when we run the local government

Chairman; Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Kim Hames; Mr David Templeman; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Bill Johnston;  
Mr John McGrath

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elections in October, it looks as though we will have about 68 councils contracting our services so, of course, it is economies of scale.

**Mr T.G. STEPHENS:** In reference to the work of the commission that focuses on electoral enrolment —

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** Sorry, we need a page number.

**Mr T.G. STEPHENS:** I hoped that the minister could guide me through the papers to that section of his budget with the details of the electoral roll matters.

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** I tried that last year when I was in opposition and the then government would not let me do it.

**Mr T.G. STEPHENS:** I have just been told it is on page 236.

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** Which line item?

**Mr T.G. STEPHENS:** It is the line item that refers to the state electoral roll—if the minister was across his responsibilities, he would see that it is the fourth line from the bottom of the page.

My question is really about the absence of effort from the Electoral Commission to maintain an effective electoral roll in the regional areas of Western Australia, specifically the Pilbara. At the most recent referendum, I discovered that the polling place, at least in South Hedland, was equipped for the first time with electronic access to the electoral roll. That immediately led to a large number of would-be voters identifying that they were not on the electoral roll despite having voted in previous elections. What efforts does the Western Australian Electoral Commission make to try to ensure that the electoral roll in regional areas actually reflects the population?

**Ms L. Sirkett:** I do not quite understand the member's question, because what I think he is referring to is the absent system that we had in place, whereby there is a computer in the polling place that marks somebody off instead of somebody crossing names off on a paper roll.

**Mr T.G. STEPHENS:** If I can explain, in the past people have made section votes or absentee votes expecting their names will be on the electoral roll. Now, for the first time we have had access to a computer at the polling place, so people have been able to confirm that they are not on the electoral roll and therefore there was no point in making an absentee vote because they have simply disappeared from the roll. They have been able for the first time at the polling place to confirm that they have disappeared from the roll, even though they were previously on it. This is a 25-year complaint of mine.

**Ms L. Sirkett:** They should have been given a provisional vote in just the same way that they would have been given a vote when the paper roll was not marked off because they were not on that roll. Therefore, even though —

**Mr T.G. STEPHENS:** Does that put them on the roll now?

**Ms L. Sirkett:** Even though it is a computer roll, people who were not on that roll who attended the polling place should still have been given a provisional vote. I had not heard anything about this matter until the member raised it just now.

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** Can I suggest that because Ms Sirkett is not aware of the issue, and the member says that it is a 25-year problem, it might be worth getting something in detail to Ms Sirkett so that she can follow through on the member's queries. I would have thought, I must say, because I have seen people rock up to vote and find out that they are not on the roll—normally, there are books for the absentee rolls, so people can see on paper whether their names are on the roll—that they can still make a provisional vote and follow that up.

**Mr T.G. STEPHENS:** What the Electoral Commission continues to fail to do, for instance, is convert the application for a provisional vote, so that if it fails to be accepted as a provisional vote for inclusion in the count, that wrapper could be a claim for electoral enrolment. However, the Electoral Commission does not even streamline the process so that when people are rejected from inclusion in the count, their wrappers trigger an enrolment. Why does the commission have no interest in securing people's participation in the voting processes of Western Australia?

**Ms L. Sirkett:** All I can say is that if I walk into a polling place and say that my name is Sirkett and that I am meant to be on the roll for Midland, and somebody says that I am not, that is marked off on a paper roll and I am given a provisional vote in the same way as if I had walked into a polling place with a computer system. The only difference is that the electoral roll is loaded onto a computer instead of having a paper roll; people will still get a provisional vote if they cannot be found on that roll. Therefore, I have no idea —

Chairman; Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Kim Hames; Mr David Templeman; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Bill Johnston;  
Mr John McGrath

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**Dr K.D. HAMES:** Ms Sirkett, the question is that if the voter is rejected, what happens to then get that person onto the electoral roll?

**Ms L. Sirkett:** When voters are rejected we receive that paperwork, as a provisional vote with a declaration slip on the top of it, in the processing centre, which for the referendum was at Claremont, and that goes for further checking to see whether they are on the roll. If they are not on the electoral roll, those votes cannot be admitted into the count. If they are not on the roll for the address that they think they were enrolled for, we can match them up elsewhere.

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** The question again is: what happens to the people who the commission has declared cannot vote because they are not on the roll, but they still live at that address and are still presumably entitled to vote? Is there a follow-up system that then allows them to be put on the electoral roll?

**Ms L. Sirkett:** Yes, we would then write to them to say that we could not find them and that these are the details we have for them. We then process them further and they are not fined.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Would the member for Pilbara please also address his question through the Chair to the minister.

[5.40 pm]

**Mr T.G. STEPHENS:** Mr Chairman, I will ask this question through the Chair, and the Chairman can then send it to whoever wants to answer the question. Can the Electoral Commission not see the cost savings associated with using an application for a section vote as a trigger for an enrolment application? If the vote is accepted in the count, fine; the person can then be placed on the electoral roll. If the vote is rejected, it should be treated as an application for electoral enrolment and trigger that enrolment, rather than requiring that a letter be sent out in the hope that someone will respond to it. Why can the Electoral Commission not show some commitment to securing better participation in the electoral roll?

**Ms L. Sirkett:** I can say only that we would need to look at what the member is suggesting. I think the member has raised this matter with us previously by mail. I would need to take that as a question on notice and review it and give the member a response.

**Mr T.G. STEPHENS:** I am just bringing up an issue that I have been raising for about 20 years.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** I ask this question on behalf of Hon Ken Travers. I refer to page 235, "Item 21 Net amount appropriated to deliver services". I assume that part of that cost is for maintaining a separate Western Australian electoral roll. If that is the case, what is the cost of maintaining that roll?

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** That is a good extrapolation!

**Mr G. Harrington:** There are two components to maintaining the roll. We have a joint roll with the Australian Electoral Commission. That costs us in the order of \$1 million a year. That changes yearly according to a formula based on the current consumer price index, plus the number of people on the roll. In addition, we have the cost of the staff in the enrolment branch, which number about 10.

**Mr A.J. WADDELL:** I refer to page 236, "Outcomes and Key Effectiveness Indicators". The average percentage of enrolled electors voting in local government elections is projected to decrease from a 2008-09 estimated actual of 35 per cent to a 2009-10 budget target of 34 per cent. Given that the government has just implemented a simpler first-past-the-post system to attract more people to vote in local government elections, why is the Electoral Commission modelling that there will be a reduction in the number of people participating in local government elections?

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** I think that the figure of 34 per cent was the actual for 2007-08. The estimated actual is marginally higher at 35 per cent. I do not really regard 34 per cent or 35 per cent as being substantially different. The member is suggesting, given that we are bringing in a first-past-the-post system, we should be anticipating a higher participation level. I do not know why a different voting system would result in any change whatsoever.

**Mr A.J. WADDELL:** I believe that was the point the government made when it brought the legislation in!

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** Do either Mr Harrington or Ms Sirkett have any suggestions about why that might be the case?

**Ms L. Sirkett:** The participation rate fluctuates widely from council to council, depending on local issues. Generally, there is a degree of apathy for local government elections. We are trying to work with the Department for Local Government on how we can improve local awareness.

Chairman; Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Kim Hames; Mr David Templeman; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Bill Johnston;  
Mr John McGrath

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**Dr K.D. HAMES:** It sounds as though it is a very good argument that a member from our side put forward! Time will tell whether the department's estimate is correct or whether the member who made that particular statement is correct.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** I refer again to page 235, "Item 21 Net amount appropriated to deliver services". The estimated actual for 2008-09 was \$26.402 million. Obviously that was for a general election, which will result in a much higher cost for delivery of services than in a normal year. I will not worry about the intermediate years, but the forward estimate for 2012-13 is \$21.5 million, which is significantly lower than the estimated actual for this year. Is there a particular reason that the next general election is expected to cost the Electoral Commission \$5 million less than the election that has just been completed? I will not comment on the fact that the budget was \$22 million and the commission spent \$26 million, because obviously the cost will vary from election to election. However, it is a heroic assumption for the commission to make that in four years it will be spending \$5 million less on the general election.

**Mr G. Harrington:** That cost for 2008-09 includes the referendum costs, so that is the main difference between that figure and the figure for 2012-13.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** I refer to page 236. The third item under "Outcomes and Key Effectiveness Indicators" is percentage of enrolled electors voting in state general elections. My question is a general one. How many people failed to vote at the last state election; of those people who failed to vote, how many were sent infringement notices, and how many people were fined; and where does the fines money go from people who failed to vote?

**Ms L. Sirkett:** At the state general election last year, there was an 86 per cent turnout. There were 320 000 non-voters. We fined 33 000 of those people. About 660 of those people did not pay their fine and were referred to the Fines Infringement Registry. The money that we received from those fines went to the Department of Treasury and Finance.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** So one in 10 of those people did not have a reasonable excuse for not voting?

**Ms L. Sirkett:** That is right. After the first letter is sent out, people will either have a valid excuse or pay the fine. A second letter then goes out; and the third time we contact the person, the matter is referred to fines enforcement.

**Mr J.E. McGRATH:** Do the proceeds from those fines go to Treasury or to —

**Ms L. Sirkett:** It all goes to Treasury.

**Mr A.J. WADDELL:** What is the cost to the commission of issuing the fines?

**Mr G. Harrington:** The total cost of our non-voter process for the state election is in the order of \$300 000 or \$350 000. That includes, obviously, the cost for the casual staff whom we bring in to assist in that process. A large component of the cost is postage. As Ms Sirkett mentioned, we have a series of three mail-outs to these people, and that is a large component of the cost. The cost is in the order of \$350 000 for a state election at this point.

**Mr A.J. WADDELL:** I refer page 235, "Appropriations, Expenses and Cash Assets", and the line item "Amount Authorised by Other Statutes". For the Electoral Act 1907, the estimated actual for 2008-09 is \$3.908 million. I assume that is public funding. However, in the last year of the forward estimates, 2012-13, a zero figure is shown for that line item. Can the minister tell us about that?

[5.50 pm]

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** Mr Harrington will answer that question.

**Mr G. Harrington:** Yes, at this point that amount is not included. In discussions with Treasury, it was decided not to include it then because we were not sure at that stage when the amount would be required. If we have a later election, the period of time in which the political parties have to claim their funds could stretch out and it may go into the next financial year. In fact, that occurred in our budgeting process this year because the election was called early, so we had to bring the funds forward a year. It was considered that that amount is appropriated directly due to the Electoral Act 1907, so it was decided to leave it until the event was closer to the knowledge date.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** That is fine; as long as it is not indicating a policy change.

**Mr G. Harrington:** No.

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** Further to that, what is the time gap between holding the election and the requirement to provide those funds?

**Mr G. Harrington:** Six months, I think.

Chairman; Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Kim Hames; Mr David Templeman; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Bill Johnston;  
Mr John McGrath

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**Dr K.D. HAMES:** Six months?

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Parties have 90 days to make a claim, and then that is it.

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** We should be asking the member that question!

**The CHAIRMAN:** Does the member for Cannington have another question?

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Not on that topic. If other members want to ask a question, I will come back to my other topic later. It is a fresh topic, so the call can go to someone else.

**Mr T.G. STEPHENS:** I want to ask what effort —

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** Which page?

**Mr T.G. STEPHENS:** It relates to page 236. The percentage of eligible Western Australian electors on the state electoral roll is identified as being 93 per cent. What is the cash value of the effort, or the percentage of the Electoral Commission's effort, that is spent on securing compliance with the requirements of the Electoral Act for people to be on the electoral roll in Western Australia?

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** Ms Sirkett.

**Ms L. Sirkett:** I think I would have to take that question on notice and respond to the member. The member's question is again about people on the electoral roll and who do not participate.

**Mr T.G. STEPHENS:** No, it is not. My question is about the Electoral Commission. The Electoral Commission has a responsibility under a statute. That statute requires Western Australians to be on the electoral roll. I am asking, as an agency, what percentage of the Electoral Commission's effort does it allocate to discharging its responsibilities under the Electoral Act to secure more comprehensive participation in the voting process? I am aware that it spends a lot of time getting people off the electoral roll; I am trying to work out what it does about securing what Parliament has asked it to do, which is securing full electoral enrolment and to assist people in complying with the Electoral Act.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Can the member address that question through the minister?

**Mr T.G. STEPHENS:** I have.

**The CHAIRMAN:** The minister has the call.

**Mr T.G. STEPHENS:** I do not need the assistance of the attendant; I know what I am doing, thanks very much. I have asked the minister.

**The CHAIRMAN:** The minister has the call.

**Mr T.G. STEPHENS:** I am not inexperienced in these things and I know where to address my questions. I do not need the Chair's help.

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** Neither does the member need to question the Chair, who happens to be from the member's own side and deserves respect!

**The CHAIRMAN:** Members, the minister has the call.

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** Ms Sirkett will answer the question.

**Ms L. Sirkett:** We collaborate, as the member knows, with the Australian Electoral Commission, from which we purchase services, in effect, to manage the roll. We collaborate on its fieldwork activities in the north west, we are part of an Indigenous reference group, and we undertake a remote strategy, which is that we will be present with a stand, encouraging people to complete enrolment forms at things like the Croc Festival in Broome and Fitzroy Crossing activities and so forth. It is limited because, as a state Electoral Commission, we have a limited budget. We have to work in with the Australian Electoral Commission, and really they undertake, I guess, the majority of the roll stimulation activities of encouraging people to get on to the roll. That said, we also do a mail-out to young people who are turning 18 years of age. They can become provisional voters at 17 years of age; they get a birthday card when they turn 18 years old to remind them to make sure that they are on the roll and that it will be their first opportunity to have their say. That takes up, I guess, not an insignificant part of our time, but I would have to go back and look up the figures for the cost. How many staff are involved? We have an electoral education centre of three people, but we are limited; we have a core staff of 48 people.

**Mr T.G. STEPHENS:** Through the Chairman, and through the minister to whoever wants to answer the question, can I ask for a supplementary answer to that question with more detail?

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** I think that is not unreasonable.

Chairman; Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Kim Hames; Mr David Templeman; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Bill Johnston;  
Mr John McGrath

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**Mr T.G. STEPHENS:** I thank the minister.

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** That is obviously a vexed question for the member, and one that the member requires an answer to. It obviously relates to the member's last question.

**Mr T.G. STEPHENS:** It does.

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** Which was about trying to get people on to the electoral roll.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Perhaps the member for Pilbara can detail what he wants to know.

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** Will the member clarify what his supplementary question is?

**Mr T.G. STEPHENS:** I would like a two-part answer to a two-part supplementary question. The minister will be able to read it in *Hansard*, so he should not worry about taking notes. The first question is: what effort is made around securing the compliance of Western Australian communities with the requirement for the full enrolment of all eligible people in Western Australia? The second question is: for what reason does the Electoral Commission not adjust the application form for a provisional vote so that it is providing all of the information necessary? If rejected for inclusion in the count, why does it not trigger successful enrolment without a costly extra step in the process of sending a letter to the unsuccessful voter? It is a two-part question about those two matters.

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** They got all that, and that will be in *Hansard*.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Yes.

[*Supplementary Information No A11.*]

**Mr A.J. WADDELL:** There is an item "Net Cost of Service" on page 237, which is projected to be \$6 627 00 in 2009-10, after a deduction for income of \$2 543 000. Does this net cost of service include any provision for potential by-elections; and, why is that figure lower than the 2007-08 actual amount and the cost of service? Does that figure include a provision for any by-elections?

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** Mr Harrington.

**Mr G. Harrington:** Through the Chairman: the 2009-10 figure for total cost of service of \$9 million includes the cost of conducting the local government elections, which are conducted on a cost-recovery basis. That is reflected in the \$2.5 million income. That is almost totally associated with local government. There is no provision in these figures for any potential by-elections; any costs of by-elections will be treated as supplementary funding during the year.

In answering the member's question about the reflection back to 2007-08, again, the income back then was mostly associated with local government elections, and with some other cost-recovery elections that we conducted. If the member wants some more detail on the \$10 million total cost of services, as opposed to the 2009-10 budget target, I am happy to provide that in an additional answer, if the member wishes.

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** We need to clarify that. Mr Harrington offered that as an additional answer if the member wished to have it. I saw the member nod, so we need to have that as a supplementary question presumably, and we need to clarify exactly what the supplementary question is.

**Mr A.J. WADDELL:** The supplementary question would be detailing what is projected to be the income in 2009-10 versus what was the actual income in 2007-08.

[*Supplementary Information No A12.*]

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** Can I just refer the Chair to the time? We have to pass this division before 6.00 pm, so at some stage we need to vote.

**The CHAIRMAN:** I thank the minister for that. We have time for one more question. The member for Riverton has the call.

**Dr M.D. NAHAN:** I will pass on asking the question.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** This is a very, very quick question, and it is about page 236 and the percentage of eligible Western Australian electors. It is a policy question, and I am very happy for the minister to reply subsequently. Homeswest tenants are required, by operation of their agreement with Homeswest, to comply with the law. One such law, as the member for Pilbara said, is to be on the roll. What action is the government intending to take to ensure that all Homeswest tenants are properly enrolled? If the minister wants to supply an answer to me later, I am happy to have it done that way.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Perhaps the member for Cannington can put that question on notice.

**Extract from *Hansard***  
[ASSEMBLY - Tuesday, 26 May 2009]  
p70b-76a

Chairman; Mr Andrew Waddell; Dr Kim Hames; Mr David Templeman; Mr Tom Stephens; Mr Bill Johnston;  
Mr John McGrath

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**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Absolutely.

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** That is an excellent idea!

**Mr T.G. STEPHENS:** It could be taken as a supplementary question.

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON:** Could it be taken as supplementary?

**Dr K.D. HAMES:** I do not know if there is time to do that.

**The CHAIRMAN:** It is past the allotted time; the member can put that question on notice through the appropriate channels.

**The appropriation was recommended.**

*Meeting suspended from 6.00 to 7.00 pm*