

TRANSFER OF MANAGEMENT OF THE FREMANTLE CEMETERY TO THE METROPOLITAN CEMETERIES BOARD

Standing Committee on Public Administration and Finance Inquiry - Motion

Resumed from 10 September on the following motion moved by Hon Simon O'Brien -

- (1) That the Standing Committee on Public Administration and Finance be directed to inquire into and report on the transfer from 1 July 2003 of management of the Fremantle Cemetery to the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board, with particular reference to -
 - (a) the history of the Fremantle Cemetery Board;
 - (b) the respective financial positions of each authority at the time of the decision to transfer management of the Fremantle Cemetery;
 - (c) the processes of consultation and decision-making that gave rise to the decision;
 - (d) testing the claims of improved efficiency and elimination of duplication asserted by the Minister for Local Government in support of the decision to transfer management of the Fremantle Cemetery to the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board, against counterclaims of reduced competition and increased costs; and
 - (e) the impacts upon the community served by the Fremantle Cemetery if the transfer of management proceeds.
- (2) That the committee do report not later than 31 August 2003.

HON JIM SCOTT (South Metropolitan) [2.03 pm]: I support the motion moved by Hon Simon O'Brien to allow a committee to properly examine the issues he has raised. The issues are valid. It appears from information provided to the House that the Fremantle Cemetery Board is operating more efficiently than the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board. That is backed by the raw data. It appears crazy to want to change the current operations. I made an interesting calculation from the data provided. It shows that each employee at the Fremantle Cemetery Board looks after 100 clients - if I can call them that - but employees of the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board each look after only 80 clients. The Fremantle Cemetery Board is achieving more through each employee. Unless there are other issues that have not been presented to us in previous arguments and in the papers I have been given, I cannot see that an inquiry would be a problem. The committee will be able to determine whether there are any matters that have not been considered that might give rise to the need to move from the Fremantle Cemetery Board to the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board. I concur with Hon Simon O'Brien that this issue should go to a committee to allow the Fremantle Cemeteries Board to remain in place. Indeed, people are prepared to work on the board. It should be allowed to continue to run more efficiently, as it appears, than the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board.

Point of Order

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: I am taking a point of order now because the debate has come on more suddenly than I had anticipated. The report date of 31 August 2003 in the motion needs to be amended. I imagine that I do not have the capacity to move an amendment because I must close the debate. I ask the advice of the House about the mechanics of moving an amendment.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Hon Adele Farina): That is correct. The member is unable to move an amendment. I suggest he arrange for another member to move the amendment on his behalf.

Debate Resumed

HON BRUCE DONALDSON (Agricultural) [2.07 pm]: As I have not spoken on this debate, I believe I am able to move an amendment.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: That is correct.

Hon BRUCE DONALDSON: The amendment is commonsense. There is a willingness within the House to proceed with this motion. However, I am not presuming anything but I perceive a consensus.

Amendment to Motion

Hon BRUCE DONALDSON: I move -

To delete "31 August 2003" and substitute "30 November 2003".

This amendment will allow the committee to examine this matter. As we know, 31 August 2003 has passed us by. When motions are first put up, it takes some time to work through the system. As such, this is a consequential amendment.

Amendment put and passed.

Motion, as Amended

HON SIMON O'BRIEN (South Metropolitan) [2.10 pm]: I thank the Minister for Local Government and Hon Jim Scott for their support of this motion; I also thank Hon Bruce Donaldson for facilitating this inquiry with his amendment. I hope the scope of this inquiry will not be particularly wide. While I am aware that our standing committees are currently under pressure because they do not have the resources to do everything they would like to do - that is a debate for another day - this will not be a significantly large inquiry and it should be completed well in advance of the date Hon Bruce Donaldson has indicated. I appreciate the work done by the Standing Committee on Public Administration and Finance. I would like to participate in this inquiry and, through the chairman, ask to be a participating member in due course. If this motion is carried, and if I can further assist by being a substitute member and help reduce the workload of the committee, I would be more than happy to do that. I thank members for their support.

Hon Tom Stephens: I was downstairs with a group from a remote school. Were I to seek leave to complete my remarks, would the honourable member be interested in hearing the rest of my comments in support of his motion?

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: That is in the hands of the House. I am more than keen to hear anything the minister has to say. Just as the minister was returning from urgent parliamentary business, I was thanking him for supporting the motion. I do not have any objection.

HON TOM STEPHENS (Mining and Pastoral - Minister for Local Government and Regional Development) [2.12 pm] - by leave: I thank members for their forbearance. I had previously indicated to the House that there was merit in the carriage of this issue. We as a Government had agreed to the argument that savings were to be made as part of the amalgamation. The first study that was done indicated some equivocation about which way to proceed and, on balance, Cabinet decided not to amalgamate the two boards. The second time around, a stronger argument by the functional review committee led to the cabinet decision to proceed with the amalgamation; hence the discrepancy between what the board was first told and what it was subsequently told. There were in fact two separate decisions.

Hon Simon O'Brien: Who knows, the committee might find it to be more efficient for Fremantle to take over Karrakatta.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: It virtually has. There is a Fremantle-based chair in Ross Bowe and a deputy chair in Jean.

Hon Derrick Tomlinson: Jean Bowe.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: I beg the member's pardon - that is Jean Hobson. There is also a third member from the Fremantle board. I inherited these administrations from the previous Government, but I have sensed that the chief executive officers of both organisations are extremely skilled administrators. The former CEO of Fremantle Cemetery has taken a redundancy package as part of his contribution to the decision of government leading to the amalgamation of the two cemeteries. The standing committee will have an opportunity to look at a range of issues in cemetery administration. I have discovered that the administration of these cemeteries is a much more interesting area of government activity than I would have ever dared to imagine. Some major borrowings have been approved by Treasury with reference to the Fremantle Cemetery - the \$5 million approval for borrowings associated with its mausoleum proposal. That approval is still in place and is now being worked through with the new board. Some major issues for mausoleum developments will have to be considered by the amalgamated board, but there is clearly an ambition by government that organisations like this will not draw too heavily upon the borrowing capacity of the State, because that would impact on its overall borrowing capacity to deliver vital services that are needed across Government, as well as these services that are needed for the recently deceased - the mausoleums, the crematorium and the like. We believe this amalgamation will see optimum use of the scarce resources of the taxpayer and will lead to greater efficiencies.

Already I am alerted to the fact that the work force is settling down in the new structure and is benefiting from the opportunity to move across the cemeteries of the metropolitan area. Previously, employees with the Fremantle board had a fairly limited terrain in which to operate; they now have the opportunity to be part of a larger organisation and the chance to move around, as needed, into other locations to pursue their professional development as well as delivering their services in the gardens. This organisation has award-winning skills on display in the gardens in the Pinnaroo Valley Memorial Park. Many members who are familiar with the Pinnaroo Valley Memorial Park will be aware that it has become a great tourist destination. People effectively jump off the planes in Perth and go to the Pinnaroo Valley Memorial Park to see the fauna and the flora in that environment. Visitors can experience kangaroos and wallabies in that location in ways that are a sheer and utter delight. This is a by-product of the essential functions of the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board, but it is a valued

part of what is now the conservation estate. The board has the difficult challenges of dealing with Bush Forever and the Bushplan across metropolitan Perth -

Hon Simon O'Brien: They are very grave issues indeed.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: They are. I want to alert the chair and the members of the committee to the fact that these are great issues. The metropolitan area of Perth has the task of working out how it will accommodate the cemetery facilities in the eastern corridor towards Armadale, how the new amalgamated board will acquire and obtain land, and in what circumstances it will obtain land. Historically, there has never been a cemetery requirement for the acquisition of land. As a result, the community of Western Australia will be the beneficiaries of the policies of governments for the allocation of land, and this amalgamation will work through that issue and how it is done. There is also the issue of the Rockingham Regional Memorial Park, as that town's cemetery comes to its natural completion date, which is anticipated to be about 2007.

Hon Barry House: I would like to see how it is done in Cannes and Paris.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: I hope the member takes the opportunity to ensure that we have world's best practice.

These are very good issues and they range from land and Bush Forever issues to the positioning of cemeteries in areas like Guildford and how we can expand a cemetery that is adjacent to an airstrip. There are difficulties in accessing land in the face of Bush Forever ambitions and of utilising land that was previously used for the burial of pets. There is also the difficulty of clashes with cultures and religious traditions, such as those who adhere to the Islamic faith -

Hon Barry House: We will be constrained to the administrative aspects in all of this.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: Yes. The abovementioned issues were on the boil and made the amalgamation sensible. The Metropolitan Cemeteries Board faces many issues and leaving the Fremantle Cemetery Board responsible for the one operation did not make it easy to tackle the wider and broader issues of the metropolitan area. The amalgamation made administrative sense in tackling the broader issues. As members can picture, we have to deal with the changing needs of today's society and how it wants to commemorate and memorialise the dead. We have seen what is happening with the memorialisation of the dead, particularly when deaths occur on road verges and highways. Increasingly, people are utilising roadsides to memorialise those whose lives have been lost in traffic accidents. That presents an opportunity to remind people not only of road safety, but also of the risks associated with that type of memorialisation. People find fixtures on road verges, which can be distracting and pose a hazard to traffic. That is an issue for the community. How can we respond in a way that will keep the cemeteries of the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board attractive as the natural place for memorialising the dead? Some in our society refuse to memorialise their loved ones in cemeteries and, regrettably, they are becoming vandals in the wider environment because they are putting plaques on headlands and other locations to memorialise the recently deceased. That is not the appropriate response for a community that has chosen to memorialise its dead in the cemeteries that have operated under the board. Our task is to ensure that the board continues to have the capacity to deliver a range of attractive options for the broader community.

People wrestle with whether they will bury or cremate the dead and, if they choose to cremate, what they will do with the ashes. One issue the House and the committee must be aware of is the ashes fee and the rationale behind the decision of previous administrations to retain that fee.

Hon Simon O'Brien: The one that Fremantle got rid of on 1 July 2000.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: Correct. The Metropolitan Cemeteries Board has removed it. We have to determine whether its removal was and is appropriate. The committee should consider that issue because in the case of the Fremantle Cemetery Board, it would appear that there is a higher incidence of people leaving their ashes uncollected because there is no collection fee. By comparison, at the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board people have to pay a fee and they make a conscious decision to collect the ashes and decide what they will do with them. People in grief and at the point of bereavement need the guidance of structures and methodologies that will help them make decisions that are in the long-term interests of the bereaved. They need to be aware of the shared experience of bereavement to understand what is necessary in bereavement. Universally, people tend to want to memorialise the dead. How should that memorialisation be carried out, for how long, and what is the appropriate tenure of memorials in cemeteries? As members know, graves under the current Cemeteries Act have a tenure of 25 years, plus a 25-year extension. These issues are absolutely germane to the sustainability of metropolitan cemeteries in this city. We have to determine whether that is an adequate time line. If it is not, and we opt for a longer time line, what problems will that cause in terms of the sustainable provision of cemeteries that carry the costs of user-pay principals into the future? How do we accommodate the needs of the Italian community for aboveground mausoleum burials? How do we cater for the Chinese community with its increasing interest in aboveground burials? How does a cemetery respond rapidly to the needs of the Islamic

community and other Middle Eastern communities that want to bury their dead rapidly - that is, within 24 hours and before the sun sets on the day of death? These are the big-time pressures that the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board must juggle and wrestle with day in, day out.

The Metropolitan Cemeteries Board recognised that one of the big costs associated with cemeteries is the people who come from all over the State, nation and the world to attend funerals. It responded to that with the web casting of funerals. People can log into web casting to share the experience of grieving for someone with whom they were intimately connected or who was a part of their family without sending themselves broke and when they do not otherwise have the opportunity to physically attend the service. Hopefully, this service will soon be available at the Fremantle Cemetery. E-memorials, which allow for virtual memorialisation, are being explored by the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board. These issues are being explored creatively by a team that I inherited from the previous Government. As the responsible minister, it has been a privilege to work with that team on new initiatives. Quite frankly, the team from the two cemeteries is at the cutting edge of how to respond to all the competing demands that arise when tackling issues of death, grief and burials. These days it is a much more complicated business. Most of my experience has been in the bush. If a friend or family member died, people whipped in and participated in the process, including digging the hole and burying that person with the help of extended family members and friends. My bush experience has left me with the notion of doing it myself. Undertakers were foreign to me during my years in the Western Australian bush. When my parents recently died, I transplanted that experience by leaving aside all the support systems that are available from undertakers and the like and physically taking on the responsibility of digging the holes and burying their bodies. That personal need emerged from my experience of life in the bush, and it was an appropriate response to my needs. It was not something my siblings understood. They were surprised that I felt the need to dig and fill the graves of my parents.

Hon Barry House: You did not display this much enthusiasm about your last portfolio.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: I have enjoyed every aspect of every part of every portfolio I have ever had. I have discovered that if a member is lucky enough to know why he is in politics, he can use those portfolios to service the community and in the pursuit of the ambitions that led him into politics - I do not want to test the theory too much in case my portfolio is reduced to absolutely nothing. I do not know whether that is the shared experience of others but it has been my experience.

Hon Bruce Donaldson: Does this portfolio enthuse you because of the thought that you are being brought closer to God?

Hon TOM STEPHENS: I will pass on that. I look forward to the report. If the report says that the Government of Western Australia has got it wrong and should have done it differently, I will position that report in front of my cabinet colleagues. I do not think we have got it wrong. It is the sort of exercise that is a good lesson for all parliamentarians, including opposition members, to make sure that Oppositions do not make the mistake of committing themselves to things they should not commit to. It is important to keep the machinery of government trimmed and overhauled. Political necessity creates enough government agencies at various times. A crisis can occur in an area and, suddenly, the politics of the day will demand that another government agency spring up. Thankfully, we have been able to get rid of this government agency by amalgamating it with another, and more of this should happen across government. Government agencies spring up out of political necessity and every now and then they have to be trimmed back. Incoming Government's should do much of this trimming early in the piece because it gets harder as the term goes on. A mistake was made in acting on a second, more convincing report rather than doing this earlier after the initial equivocal report. We probably should have bitten the bullet on the first lot of equivocation. Quite frankly, I went into Cabinet at that time and presented the case on one hand and then on the other hand, and left the decision to Cabinet. Cabinet decided to take the other hand. The first time around I went in without a recommendation so I did not have a view because the report had been equivocal. I then went back to Cabinet and said that the second report had been quite forceful and suggested we go down this path. On the second occasion Cabinet agreed to accept the more convincing second report. This is not big bickies in terms of savings - it is tiny savings -

Hon Simon O'Brien: But it matters to people. People are our business as much as money, as I think you are acknowledging.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: Absolutely. Interestingly enough, however, the people for whom it matters the most are largely those who have been on the boards. In my experience as minister, no complaint has been made to me about this issue other than those coming from former board members. There is a family of board members out there who are nurtured in this experience of the cemeteries. They get caught up in the experience and they are a family, which is good. As former board members they are interested in the future and the wellbeing of the cemeteries. However, it is interesting that this expression of concern has not been more widespread. I think a

complaint was made by the Melville City Council and a motion was carried and relayed to me. However, that was driven by -

Hon Simon O'Brien: It was driven by a former board member who is a member of the council -

Hon TOM STEPHENS: Yes, the Melville City Council. The committee members will find that this is not a big community issue. It is an issue for a group of people who are familiar with the operations of the Fremantle Cemetery Board. They have been board members and are supportive of its being retained like that because of the ownership they feel for it.

I have unashamedly said to the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board that I want to see some runs on the board for the Fremantle Cemetery. For instance, as a person drives down the road alongside the Fremantle Cemetery -

Hon Simon O'Brien: Leach Highway.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: Okay. It is a disgrace that the land between Leach Highway and the Fremantle Cemetery is a wasteland. I have asked the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board to favourably consider prioritising the landscaping of that terrain so that the Fremantle Cemetery can pick up some of the benefits that come from being part of a wider organisation with more resources available to it. I am requesting - not directing - that some of the priorities are moved. Fortunately, the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board is considering that proposition and prioritising some of the landscaping, which will get some runs on the board for that cemetery.

Interestingly enough, people are now involved in running heritage tours around Western Australia and have requested permission - it goes before the board this week or it went before the board last week - to conduct tours inside the Fremantle Cemetery in which many distinguished citizens of Western Australia and others have been buried. I do not know much about pop music. I was in the seminary, as many members know, for a long time and there is some bloke buried at Fremantle Cemetery called Bon Jovi or something -

Several members interjected.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: It was Bon Scott. He is buried there and his grave is a source of enormous interest for a lot of music history buffs. People use the heritage trail in that cemetery that has been created by people who have more of a sense of heritage than I do. It is a source of visitors who draw upon the resources associated with the kiosk. That in turn helps with an income stream to maintain the kiosk that is then on offer for bereaved families, which is the primary function of the cemetery in the first place. Having people regularly moving through the cemetery that provides for a safer environment. Increasingly these days there is not the comprehensive respect for cemeteries in our society that used to exist and, therefore, they are at risk of vandalism. Visitors who go to the cemetery to look at the graves during the day and, increasingly, at night, create a presence which provides a natural protection for the cemetery. That produces an economy for that cemetery and other cemeteries that will have the opportunity to hold these tours. These are great issues.

On balance, members will find that we have made the right decision. Governments of all persuasions need to produce efficiencies like this. In the portfolio of local government and regional development there is only a small number of opportunities for those sorts of efficiencies, at least in terms of state government agencies - this agency was one of a few. The community of Western Australia still has the challenge of dealing with the rest of my portfolio, which contains the 144 local governments that serve Western Australia. That task of reducing the cost of the administration and delivery of municipal services through that tier of government is yet to be adequately responded to by the community. At the moment, the little community of Narrogin is struggling with that issue when it should have already had the matter solved for it. Unfortunately, the two shires at Narrogin are struggling over how to amalgamate. They want to do what was done at Albany but to do it because -

Hon Simon O'Brien: Amalgamation is an issue.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: Forced amalgamations are not an issue because the Government has declined to do that. However, we do not want any obstacles in the way of those councils that wish to amalgamate, and, regrettably, there are some obstacles to that process. When amalgamations are on offer to government for its utilities, boards and agencies, and when machinery of government can be reduced, as we have done in this tiny way, I would have thought that a better motion to be carried by this House today would have been along these lines: that the House rises as one to congratulate the Minister for Local Government and Regional Development for acting upon the long and deep felt conviction of this House that there were too many state government agencies and state government boards. I would have thought that Hon Simon O'Brien would be leading the applause, and that Hon Bob Pike, God bless his soul, would be dancing in his grave - or dancing in heaven -

Hon Derrick Tomlinson: Alongside Bon Jovi!

Hon TOM STEPHENS: Yes.

Hon Norman Moore: This speech is by leave, you realise!

Hon TOM STEPHENS: Yes. I know that Hon Bob Pike at least would be pleased with what I have done, because he was one member of this place who recognised that a number of these things -

Hon Norman Moore: But he would still want to know why you are doing it, and he would be cynical enough to know that what you are saying today probably has nothing to do with the decision at all.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: It has everything to do with the decision. The Leader of the Opposition has been here for too long. When one has been here for only a short time, like me, one does not have quite the same level of cynicism.

Hon Simon O'Brien: You have not been here long enough to be cynical!

Hon TOM STEPHENS: That is right.

Hon Norman Moore: I am talking about Hon Bob Pike.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: Hon Bob Pike would, I hope, be pleased with the efforts that he made in highlighting the lunacy of having so many government boards and agencies and so many non-departmental agencies. In the life of this Government, a number of those boards and agencies have been shut down, amalgamated or converted back into departments. I think I have done a service to the people of Western Australia in delivering upon this outcome in reference to the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board.

Hon Barry House: So long as the service is still delivered.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: Yes. The member will have the opportunity of exploring these issues, and I think he will be both inspired and satisfied by the progress that is being made. As I have said to the member privately, and as I now say publicly, the committee will find this an enjoyable term of reference. It is an extremely interesting area.

Hon Barry House: I am dying to get my teeth into it!

Hon TOM STEPHENS: If the committee is tempted to come back and give me a whack -

Hon Barry House: You have the numbers on the committee, so I seriously doubt that will happen.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: I do not mind getting a whack for the sake of politics, but the committee should not give me a whack and lose in that process the support for this trimming up. Hon Norman Moore had a go at trying to sort out a government board.

Hon Norman Moore: I created quite a few new agencies, because I have a different view from you about this matter.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: Members may remember that Hon Norman Moore tried to get rid of the Hairdressers Registration Board.

Hon Norman Moore: Yes, because that board is unnecessary. However, that does not mean that getting rid of things is always a bad thing and creating new things is always a good thing. It depends on the circumstances.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: I agree. However, to have too diverse and widespread an apparatus of government, and to have too much machinery of government that just adds cost and has no necessary benefit, is not something that we should be delivering, either as a Parliament or as a Government, for the people of Western Australia. I had the misfortune of actually being on three sides of the argument with the Hairdressers Registration Board. In those circumstances, I am not pretending that I have always been pure on these questions of -

Hon Norman Moore: Of consistency.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: I have not been consistent on this issue. That is the nature of politics. I think that, in the end, the politics of that issue required a vote that was in the opposite direction from the one that I had subscribed to previously, certainly when I was serving on the standing committee.

Hon John Fischer: You are the same bloke who just said that he hated wasting seven minutes!

Hon TOM STEPHENS: It was not a waste. I do not think anyone could say it was a waste, could they?

Several members interjected.

Hon TOM STEPHENS: Members should be enjoying themselves.

[Applause.]

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Hon Adele Farina): Order!

Question (motion, as amended) put and passed.

Extract from *Hansard*

[COUNCIL - Wednesday, 17 September 2003]

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Hon Jim Scott; Hon Simon O'Brien; Deputy President; Hon Bruce Donaldson; Mr Tom Stephens
