

MINISTER FOR ENERGY, POWER SUPPLY RESPONSIBILITY

4. Mr C.J. BARNETT to the Minister for Energy:

I refer the minister to the Western Power generation status review for 2003, a detailed document released in October last year that provides information regarding the development and operation of the State's electricity system, which states -

... peak electricity demand has occurred in the summer period for the past decade or more.

- (1) Does the minister acknowledge that as Minister for Energy it is his prime responsibility to ensure a consistent, reliable and safe power supply to all Western Australians?
- (2) Rather than blame Western Power, pipeline companies, the pipeline or even the Opposition, will the minister admit that he simply failed to properly plan for a normal summer electricity demand, and, in doing so, has a direct responsibility for the energy crisis that occurred on 18 February?

Mr E.S. RIPPER replied:

- (1)-(2) I thank the Leader of the Opposition for that question because I have been waiting for precisely that question to be asked.

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Members, when a minister is asked a question on a sensitive issue such as this, it is good manners to at least allow him to answer the question.

Mr E.S. RIPPER: I have been waiting for that question to be asked because the Leader of the Opposition referred to normal, hot days in February.

Mr C.J. Barnett: There were a couple of hot days in Perth; it happens every year. It is not unusual.

Mr E.S. RIPPER: Exactly. That is the comment the Leader of the Opposition made. I am pleased that he said that because it gives me an opportunity to provide to the House the advice I received from the Bureau of Meteorology.

Mr C.J. Barnett: It's their fault! Why didn't we work it out?

The SPEAKER: I call the Leader of the Opposition to order for the second time.

Mr E.S. RIPPER: The Bureau of Meteorology advises that -

The period from Monday 16 February to Wednesday 18 February represented a most unusual weather sequence for the Perth area.

Mr M.J. Birney interjected

The SPEAKER: I call the member for Kalgoorlie to order for the second time.

Mr E.S. RIPPER: The advice continues -

While it was very hot with maximum temperatures recorded at the official Bureau site at Mt Lawley of 38.5C, 41.5C and 39.5C respectively, temperatures in this range can be expected through our summer from time to time ...

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Order, members!

Mr E.S. RIPPER: Wait; there is more. Members should let the argument build up. The advice continues -

What was unusual was the humidity levels brought over the area by tropical systems moving south.

I could go on.

Mr R.N. Sweetman: You're no Jeff Newman!

The SPEAKER: I call the member for Ningaloo to order for the first time.

Mr E.S. RIPPER: He is much better looking than I am, Mr Speaker. I come to the conclusion of the advice from the Bureau of Meteorology, which I will table, and which states -

A search of Bureau records for Perth reveals that comparable combinations of high temperature and these humidity levels occur quite rarely and have not been recorded since two events in 1961 and 1955. An analysis of human stress factors using a recognised stress index indicates that for Perth:

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: I call the members for Kingsley and Roe to order for the first time.

Mr E.S. RIPPER: It is pretty clear that the Opposition does not want to hear the advice from the Bureau of Meteorology. I will table it. However, I will cut to the chase. It states that 17 February was the most uncomfortable day in Perth on the recognised stress index since 1961, and that 16 and 17 February were the two worst days for discomfort in sequence since 20 and 21 February 1955. We experienced a one in 50 year combination of -

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: I am sure the Opposition does not want question time to finish. I do not want question time to finish, but if opposition members stop the minister from answering the question, that is what will happen.

Mr E.S. RIPPER: There was a one in 50 year weather event, which produced -

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: I call to order the Leader of the Opposition and the member for Kingsley. I meant it when I said that question time would cease unless members allowed the minister to answer the question.

Mr E.S. RIPPER: A highly unusual weather event occurred, which resulted in extreme demands being placed on our electricity system. If members look at the chart I am holding, they will see -

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: I call the member for Warren-Blackwood to order for the second time.

Mr E.S. RIPPER: The Opposition either wants an explanation of this issue or it does not. If the Opposition just wants to shout, interrupt and carry on; if it has a simple proposition of "power off - the energy minister must go" and it does not want an explanation, it can carry on as it is doing now. I thought this Parliament was a place where accountability was exercised - where ministers were asked for explanations of what occurred. If the Leader of the Opposition does not like the explanation, or thinks it is inadequate and does not remove the necessity for censure of the minister, let him go and do that. However, in the first place he should listen to the explanation, so that we can have a proper debate. It demeans this place if, after a serious power crisis, members cannot even have a reasonably sensible debate and place some basic facts on the table. By all means, if the Opposition does not like the way the Government dealt with those facts and with Western Power, let it make its criticisms and censures, but let us at least get a common information base.

That common information base says that, in response to a once in 50 years weather event, on Tuesday 17 February, Western Power generated 58 000 gigawatt hours of electricity. That is far in excess of any generation of electricity in any previous peak period. The chart I am holding shows that the three peak days in Western Power's history of generation were Monday 16 February, Tuesday 17 February and Wednesday 18 February. Members should note that, even on the day of power restrictions, Western Power generated the third highest level of electricity in a 24-hour period in its history. The only two days on which higher levels of electricity were generated were the two days before that. In that week three records were set by Western Power - on the Monday, the Tuesday and the Wednesday. This other chart shows the peak demand basis. The peak demand on Tuesday 17 February was 3 004 megawatts. I had advice from Western Power before the summer peak period that the peak demand that could be expected this year was 2 770 megawatts. The figure of 2 770 megawatts given by Western Power in its advice to me on how it intended to cope with the summer peak period was exceeded tremendously, with the peak level being recorded at 3 004 megawatts.

I wanted to place those basic facts on the record, which is why I was pleased that the Leader of the Opposition asked the question. I was very displeased with the way in which he failed to exercise leadership over his colleagues, so that they are not even prepared to listen to the argument. Despite a once in 50 years weather event, and generation of electricity way above the forecast of Western Power, the community demands electricity 24 hours a day, seven days a week and every week of the year. The community does not want to hear, nor should it have to hear, that the peak demand forecast by Western Power has been grossly exceeded and therefore, because of the gas supply situation, Western Power has not been able to meet the demand. It is fundamental to the electricity supply industry and the energy portfolio that security and reliability of power supply should be the number one objective. I have always taken that seriously, and I regret very much that Western Power was caught short by that one year in 50 weather event and, despite the fact that it generated the third highest level of electricity in its history, was not able to meet the demands of the people of Western Australia on Wednesday 18 February.

Previous energy ministers have been through these circumstances. The Leader of the Opposition was Minister for Energy when, in 1994, the power went out entirely. It was not just a power restriction; the power went out entirely for five hours. The trains stopped, no-one could use an automatic teller machine, no-one could get into office buildings, and people at home on oxygen machines had no power whatsoever. Half a million litres of

sewage flowed into the Swan River, which was closed for days, because the power went out. What did the previous Minister for Energy do?

Mr J.N. Hyde: Did he resign?

Mr E.S. RIPPER: Not only did he not resign, but he did not accept responsibility. He is reported as having said, in *The West Australian* on 25 March 1994 -

He said he did not accept responsibility and ruled out compensation for businesses.

Mr J.A. McGinty interjected.

Withdrawal of Remark

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: The Attorney General has just referred in an adverse way, according to standing orders, to the Leader of the Opposition. I ask that he withdraw the comment.

The SPEAKER: I was trying to listen to the minister. The Attorney General should know whether he has done that, and if so, he should withdraw.

Mr J.A. MCGINTY: I seek the guidance of the Speaker. Is calling the Leader of the Opposition a charlatan something that should be withdrawn?

The SPEAKER: Yes.

Mr J.A. MCGINTY: I withdraw.

Debate Resumed

Mr E.S. RIPPER: The Leader of the Opposition has recently had occasion to reflect on that event. When he was asked by Paul Murray about the 1994 event, the Leader of the Opposition said -

No, look, I think... I remember that very well, Paul, and I can remember doing a television interview when I was asked who was responsible, and I said, I am the energy minister, I accept my responsibility as such.

He was reported in *The West Australian* as having refused to accept responsibility, and he was reported on a television program at the time in the following way -

But energy Minister Colin Barnett has refused to accept responsibility for the blackouts. While he has ordered a full report from SECWA, he's accused the Opposition of political opportunism.

On another television program, when asked about responsibility he said -

There have been cutbacks in some maintenance services, there's been some reduce (sic) in staffing... in fact, that occurred during the period of the previous Government.

I have put those two sets of facts on the record - firstly, the level of demand experienced by Western Power during that 24-hour period, and secondly, the principle established by the Leader of the Opposition for energy ministers when he presided over a complete loss of power in March 1994. This was only the first of two events that occurred in that year.

Mr C.J. Barnett: It was a major storm event.

Mr E.S. RIPPER: It was not a major storm. That was the second event. The first one was a mist that descended. It is usual to get a bit of humidity in March. The second one was a storm. It is usual to get a storm in May. This is a very serious event. It needs to be discussed properly. I am sure criticisms will be made of the Government and the minister by the Opposition. That is the way this place works, but let us have a debate that is more than just the simplistic notion that the power was off, therefore the Government did something wrong.