

## WITTENOOM CLOSURE

### *Statement*

**HON WILSON TUCKER (Mining and Pastoral)** [5.43 pm]: On 8 September, the last resident of Wittenoom, Lorraine Thomas, was evicted from her home and from the town. I believe we are all familiar with Wittenoom. It is considered the largest contamination site in the Southern Hemisphere. The eviction of Lorraine Thomas will not come as a surprise for members. We passed the Wittenoom Closure Bill earlier this year, which gives the government the ability to acquire the remaining land in Wittenoom with the intent of flattening the town and, therefore, reducing some of the appeal of people visiting the town and potentially being exposed to the asbestos tailings and contracting mesothelioma as a result.

I spoke in support of the bill. I am not personally opposed to the destruction of Wittenoom or the eviction of Lorraine Thomas; however, I am opposed to how Lorraine Thomas was evicted and the events that led to Mrs Thomas's eviction. As we might expect, there has been a lot of misinformation floating around on social media about the events that unfolded and the intention of Mrs Thomas to stay in Wittenoom, so I would like to take this opportunity to set the public record straight and clear up some of that misinformation.

I have spoken to Aileen Thomas, who is Lorraine's daughter, and she expressed her wish to set the record straight and to highlight not only the sequence of events and the time line of communication with the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage, but also the lack of compassion shown by the department over the removal of her mother from her home. To date, the minister has not been forthcoming about the time line of communications preceding the events of Lorraine's eviction. Today I want to convey the sequence of events as recorded by Aileen. I am happy to clear up the record if the minister comes back with anything that refutes what I am saying today, but so far those details have not been forthcoming.

On 10 May, a notice of eviction was given to Lorraine, with an eviction date set for six weeks in advance, and 17 June was the date Lorraine was given to vacate her property. Between 10 May and 17 June, Aileen unfortunately suffered a number of medical issues. She fell sick with the flu. She contracted COVID, which is something I think we can all sympathise with. She also fell out of a work truck and broke her ankle. Aileen works a full-time job and is trying to help her mother move house in her spare time, so she requested an extension from the department to push back the eviction deadline. On 26 July, a letter was sent to Lorraine from the department of lands, informing Lorraine that she had to vacate. Unfortunately, that letter was sent to Lorraine's Tom Price address. Lorraine was the last resident of Wittenoom, but she never actually received that letter. On 29 August, an email was sent to Aileen, titled "Vacation of property in Wittenoom by Mrs Lorraine Thomas", and it basically advised Aileen that an extension had not been granted and that Lorraine was to vacate the property by 31 August. Lorraine had originally asked for an extension to the end of September. The department came back and said, "No. We're going to give you until the end of August." The end of August came around. Nothing happened until 5 September. Aileen received a missed call from the department of lands in the afternoon. Aileen was in the process of helping her mother move out of her home, and she sent text messages and pictures to the department, saying, "Look. The move is underway. This is the status. We'll be out of there in a couple of days."

On the night of 7 September, police showed up at Lorraine's house. I do not believe they went into the house, but Lorraine is an 80-year-old lady and she was frightened and confused about why they were there. She called Aileen, who rang the police station at 8.00 pm to find out what was going on. The police confirmed that something was happening and said they would ring the next day. On 8 September, Lorraine was evicted. At around 2.00 pm, four government employees showed up—two sheriffs and two Lands employees. I want to quickly state that I have heard some conflicting accounts about the number of government employees who attended. There was a media statement by the minister. There was also a response to a question I asked. I am not sure whether the police are included in the number of government employees. Let us say there were two sheriffs, two police officers, six contractors and some paramedics, so between 12 and 14 people showed up on Lorraine's doorstep wearing hazmat suits. At the same time, two police officers showed up at Aileen's place in Port Hedland to advise her that her mother was currently being evicted and asking her to tell her mother, Lorraine, that if she did not comply she would be forcibly removed from her home. Aileen called Lorraine in Wittenoom and the sheriff was put on the line. She spoke to Lorraine briefly, who was audibly upset and frightened. Aileen then instructed Lorraine to comply with their directions and leave the property. Lorraine promptly did. She packed up her valuables. The contractors were there to board up the house. She grabbed her medication and she was put into a car and driven to Port Hedland. Two days later, on 10 September, Aileen and Lorraine drove back from Port Hedland to Wittenoom—it is a big drive—to finish packing and allow for Lorraine to pay her last respects to her late husband, who is buried at Wittenoom. That is the time line that I have been given.

A number of issues have arisen from these events and certainly the government's handling of this situation. I want to state that Lorraine always intended to go. The bill had passed. The writing was on the wall. She was never intending to stage a protest. She was willing to leave that town peacefully. All she was asking for was a little bit more time

to do that with the dignity and grace that she should be afforded, given that she has been there for 40 years and she is 80 years old.

In the end, Aileen and Lorraine were able to move out Lorraine's possessions in two days. They asked for an extension of one more week. They were not given that by the department. Instead, they had to pack up everything and move out of there in two days. Roughly 12 to 14 people showing up at the doorstep in order to move this one 80-year-old lady was entirely inappropriate and unnecessary. I could understand if there were conflicting interests surrounding the town of Wittenoom. That is what a minister does; they look at the various circumstances that are presented to them and make a judgement call. My understanding is that there is a Wittenoom steering committee and it is debating what to do with the town of Wittenoom. Step 1 is to get rid of the last resident—Lorraine. Step 2 is to level the town. Step 3 is to figure out what step 4 is. There are no competing interests here. There is no reason that 12 people had to turn up on Lorraine's doorstep and evict an 80-year-old lady without any compassion or any understanding of her situation or her age.

Noting the time, there are a few more points that I would like to raise, but I think I will do that when I resume my comments at a later stage.