

ADJOURNMENT OF THE HOUSE

HON TOM STEPHENS (Mining and Pastoral - Minister for Housing and Works) [5.16 pm]: I move -
That the House do now adjourn.

Western Power, Sale - Adjournment Debate

HON J.A. SCOTT (South Metropolitan) [5.16 pm]: I do not intend to keep the House very long. However, in recent times I have heard various discussions through the media involving the Leader of the Opposition in the other place, Colin Barnett, about his opposition to the sale of Western Power. Although I have not heard very much, one can only assume that the Government is considering the sale of Western Power some time in the future. Whether that is a firm proposition, I am not sure. However, I draw the attention of the Leader of the Opposition in the other place to a lot of the literature now coming from the energy supply industry here in Australia and overseas. In particular, I home in on the great concerns being expressed by the private suppliers of electricity about the amount of regulation they have. It appears that this regulation is to do with pricing.

I will quote from one article in the *Electricity Supply* magazine of July 2001, page 18. It is entitled "Electricity pricing in perspective: customers must expect to be exposed to the market's real costs". Largely, this deals with the problems with the industry in the eastern States, which, after an initial drop in the price of electricity following privatisation, are now facing sharply rising prices and a real threat that they may not have sufficient power for their needs. I will quote from that point in the article. It states -

Meanwhile demand has risen quite sharply over the past three years, partly driven by a growing economy allowing more Australians to invest in electricity-consuming products such as air conditioning and home computers. Demand has also increased because the economy has improved - business requires more power.

The article further states -

The situation in Victoria and New South Wales early in 2002 is going to become a lot more visible to customers because they will all be free to choose their suppliers. So far only high use industrial and commercial customers have been "contestable" - the jargon of the market.

Full retail contestability is going to arrive in Victoria and New South Wales just as the highest wholesale electricity prices of the past five to six years are appearing in the market - and as fewer opportunities for retailers to "hedge" their exposure to the spot market are available.

The result, inevitably, is going to be higher electricity prices for customers. Already large users whose contracts - signed in the days when wholesale prices were at rock bottom - are ending are becoming aware of the changed situation, and they are vocal in their unhappiness.

It continues -

Demand, however, is growing solidly. Between now and 2010 Australia will need to spend as much as \$20 billion on building new power stations, establishing long lines of supply from the north if they are gas-fuelled (to meet the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions) and providing a much-improved transmission system.

Distribution businesses will need to spend still more to augment inner-city reticulation systems (under pressure from demand from higher buildings, the population return to inner cities and the development of the Internet) and to replenish systems that are growing old.

Electricity prices will need to rise to support this investment - California demonstrates what happens if governments and customers try to have their cake and eat it, too, with power supply.

Watch out for something similar happening in New York City this northern summer - government there, too, has not pursued adequate generation or transmission capacity.

The already-emerging higher electricity prices and the transition over the decade to still-higher prices (and much higher ones if Australia decides to pursue a greenhouse management plan that adds to energy costs) are a cost of modern society.

We have not seen any price rises in Western Australia in recent times. It will be interesting in the upcoming budget to see whether this will be maintained. In other States companies have paid far too much for energy utilities and they have been forced to try to get their money back, but have felt constrained by the regulator and are now complaining about the level of regulation. I believe that if we proceed down that path, the price inevitably will be the same as people are now paying in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. Rather than achieving cheaper prices for consumers, we will see rapidly rising prices over time.

Certain players are moving out of the market. The trend is that a lot of the smaller players are being forced out of the market and competition is reducing. It is vitally important to maintain control of energy supplies in this State. Energy is a strategic resource and the Government would have rocks in its head if it privatised that resource. That resource is as important as water, and I do not think water should be privatised either. Governments have certain roles to play and one is the provision and control of strategic resources. As can be seen from experiences in the United States and in the eastern parts of Australia, the so-called free market has not delivered when it comes to this type of resource. It has put pressure on Governments to reduce regulation and allow price rises.

I hope that the minister in the other place takes good note of my comments before making any decisions, because the Greens (WA) will certainly not support any such move. I do not know whether this is the last resource we have left to sell in Western Australia, but it seems an ongoing trend for Governments to continue to sell public assets and not look to the long-term outcomes.

It is interesting to note the articles about the rising use of energy. As soon as we privatise or hand over the supply of energy, or anything, to the free market there is no strategic control of the use of those products, because those companies are out to sell as much as they can. We will see greater use of energy, greater use of hydrocarbons that are needed to produce that energy, and increases in greenhouse gases. It will be very difficult to control the future supplies and the level of greenhouse gases in this State. I ask the minister to advise the minister in the other place that we will not support the sale of this utility.

Birthrites, Caesarean Sections - Adjournment Debate

HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan) [5.26 pm]: I want to talk about a community-based organisation in my electorate that is providing a great service for Western Australian women. I preface my remarks by saying that it is along the same theme as one mentioned in the adjournment debate last night and may reflect the changing gender balance in this place.

Birthrites is a support group for women who, either by choice or because of necessity, deliver their babies by caesarean section. Birthrites also provides support services to women who deliver naturally. This is a very important service, because Western Australia has one of the highest rates of caesarean births in Australia.

I refer to some statistics that have been provided to me by Birthrites. The statistics from the 1999-2000 financial year indicate that 24 943 women delivered babies, and of those 5 895, or 23.6 per cent, were by caesarean section. Of those, 3 356 were elective and 2 539 were emergencies. That is an important statistic because it shows that Western Australia has one of the highest rates of caesarean births in Australia. The World Health Organisation has set a target for reducing the rate of caesarean births to no more than 15 per cent of all births. In Western Australia we are still significantly above that figure. In order to reach the World Health Organisation target rate, organisations across the world, such as Birthrites, are trying to put in place information and resource programs so that women are informed when they have to make a choice about the sort of delivery that they want.

Birthrites, which operates out of Spearwood in my electorate, is a great information resource service for women. It provides a whole range of services, including a kind of open house drop-in centre for women to attend and talk to other women who have had caesarean births or who are thinking about making a decision on whether a caesarean birth is right for them. Birthrites has a library, and it provides information on the risks of unnecessary elective caesarean sections.

One of the very important projects Birthrites is currently undertaking is the production of a booklet aimed at dispelling the myths associated with caesarean births. That will then become one of the critical tools to assist women to make informed choices for reducing the rate of caesarean sections from 23 per cent to at least 15 per cent. The booklet will include details about the medical risks involved for the mother and the child; the common reason that caesareans become an alternative to natural birth; the physical and emotional expectations after a caesarean; common questions that women ask before and after the birth of their child; and choices for future births. That final point is important because a woman might not have a choice in her first birth, but then might be required to make a decision about future births. The booklet will also include information about resources, books and contact organisations.

Birthrites operates out of the Spearwood home of Jackie Mawson, the convenor. Because she and her core group have been so successful, they are about to establish a second point of contact in the northern suburbs. I believe it will be in Nollamara or Yokine. They are also planning a conference in Perth in September at which they hope to launch the booklet.

This group provides a useful and important service in our community and I commend it.

Lesbian and Gay Law Reform - Adjournment Debate

HON LOUISE PRATT (East Metropolitan) [5.31 pm]: I am making a contribution to this debate because the Lesbian and Gay Law Reform report produced by the Attorney General's ministerial committee was tabled in the Legislative Assembly today. I thank the committee, which I had the pleasure to work with, for its hard work in putting the report together. It is comprehensive and I urge all members to read it.

I draw the attention of the House to the discrimination experienced by same-sex couples. A long list of Acts will require amendment to give equality to same-sex couples. The Members of Parliament (Financial Interests) Act requires me to disclose to the Parliament any gift from my partner - any birthday present or holiday she may pay for - valued at more than \$500. That is but one example of the ridiculous discrimination that same-sex couples live with in this State. I am looking forward to being part of a Government that will amend these laws.

Question put and passed.

House adjourned at 5.32 pm
