

TRANSPERTH BUS FLEET

As to Motion

HON J.A. SCOTT (South Metropolitan) [3.47 pm]: I seek leave to amend the motion I originally read and substitute therefor the motion that appears on the Notice Paper. Originally the motion did not conform to standing orders, so it needed to be changed.

Hon N.F. Moore: On a point of clarification, will the President advise me what was wrong with the previous wording so that I can make a judgment on why the changes are necessary?

The PRESIDENT: It is my understanding that when the motion was originally presented, it was worded in such a way that it was somewhat convoluted, and perhaps even vague. The member was invited to put it in a form that could be better understood by the House. Is that a fair comment?

Hon J.A. SCOTT: It might have gone slightly beyond what I could ask of the minister.

The PRESIDENT: Yes. As I said, I can only tell members what I understood the situation to be.

Leave granted.

Motion

HON J.A. SCOTT (South Metropolitan) [3.49 pm]: I move -

That in relation to a recently published peer review of a study by an expert reference group - Euro II and Beyond - commissioned by former Transport Minister Eric Charlton to determine the future fuel needs of Transperth's bus fleet -

- (1) This House notes the findings of the peer review of the ERG report.
- (2) Calls on the Minister for Transport to -
 - (a) explain why flawed and inaccurate data was used to justify the purchase of the Transperth bus fleet;
 - (b) describe the current contractual arrangements between Transperth and Mercedes-Benz;
 - (c) identify the number of diesel-powered buses Transperth is bound to purchase;
 - (d) confirm whether Mercedes is able to provide, as an alternative, sufficient numbers of high-performance gas-powered buses to meet Transperth's needs; and
 - (e) state if he is prepared to re-examine the ERG recommendations and reassess the purchase of further diesel-powered buses.

This is an extremely important issue, which has receded somewhat in recent times. However, it is all the more important because of the current concern about the very high fuel prices that are currently being experienced in Western Australia and worldwide.

I will provide members with a brief background on this issue. Members will be aware that this city is in the process of replacing its bus fleet with 848 new buses over a period of 15 years. This is a huge investment of public money and it should have required accurate, well-researched information and a very strong appraisal of the available data prior to the Government proceeding with this purchase, but the reverse is true. The Department of Transport issued what I would call a series of political statements trying to ensure that the purchase was of diesel buses rather than gas buses. Members will be aware that we had previously discussed these implications in the report of the Select Committee on Perth's Air Quality in the other House, which pointed out that diesel particulates were very dangerous for public health, so it was rather important to get that right for health and environmental purposes.

I will cite a few examples of the misleading information that was provided by the Department of Transport. Firstly, the departmental officers made statements doubling the differential between the cost of diesel and gas buses. They then said that they could not get gas supplies at the same price as that in the eastern States, so they could not compare the cost of running gas buses in Sydney and Adelaide, in particular, with the cost of running them in Western Australia. The day following that statement, a spokesperson for AlintaGas pointed out that it had been in discussions with the Department of Transport for some time prior, and that officer should have known that AlintaGas would supply the gas for the same price or within a fraction of a cent. The next piece of misleading information came from the same departmental officer who said that this meant the Department of Transport would have to put in place very expensive infrastructure to fuel the buses with compressed natural gas. This was immediately denied by AlintaGas which said that that was part of the purchase price. Both statements

must have been made in the full knowledge that they were untrue. The person who made those statements - a senior officer within the Department of Transport - could not possibly have been unaware that his department had been in discussion with AlintaGas, that the department had been told fuel would be supplied at the same price as in the eastern States and that AlintaGas would also provide the infrastructure.

We then heard a range of stories about the reliability of gas buses compared with diesel buses. It was claimed that gas buses constantly broke down and reliability was the basis for their rejection by the department, although at that stage the department had not made up its mind on the contract. Interestingly, a series of other statements followed as to the size and weight of the tanks on the gas buses and the reduced number of passengers to be carried to compensate for the extra weight and extra tyre wear. All of these pieces of information proved to be gross exaggeration. Following discussions with the company, then called Transcom, we found that the department had provided very old information - it compared the very first generation of buses that had been converted from diesel to gas. These prototypes had significant troubles, such as overheating. The company overlooked these prototype buses, but since then three new generations of gas buses had been developed. Considerable debate took place in this House about the efficiency and cost of those buses, but I was concerned at the amount of misleading information - provable with regard to the cost of fuel and infrastructure - which indicated a huge discrepancy between the department's statements and the views of industry and other people about the virtues of the various types of buses.

Steps were then taken to purchase the buses. Prior to that, the then minister set up an expert reference group to conduct a study called "Euro 2 and beyond". That group looked at the different values of the fuel types that could be acquired for these buses. The Government called for tenders for the buses and, as members know, despite there being some concern about the tender process, eventually Mercedes-Benz got the contract - not to provide a percentage of the buses but to provide the whole 848. We were told at that time - I presumed this was some sort of fob - that among the first batch of buses to be presented to Transperth would be 128 diesel and five gas buses. By way of clarification, these five gas buses - not with gas engines; this is an important issue as members will see later - did not arrive on time. I asked a number of questions at that stage and was told the buses would arrive later. I questioned the minister during a hearing of the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations about the ability of Mercedes to provide to the Department of Transport the latest fuel technology, multipoint electronic fuel injection, CNG buses.

Hon Bob Thomas: If they were gas buses, surely they would have gas engines.

Hon J.A. SCOTT: That is a very good observation; they should have gas engines. The important point is that I asked a question in the estimates committee about the ability of Mercedes-Benz to provide that information. However, despite the minister's tabling a response to that effect, that was not true. Mercedes-Benz did not have that technology. One of the paragraphs in this amendment refers to the contractual arrangements. It is important to know whether Mercedes-Benz won the contract on the basis of being able to provide that technology as it had claimed it could. If it could not do so, a falsehood was claimed in this Parliament.

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.