

**ECONOMICS AND INDUSTRY STANDING COMMITTEE**

*Fifteenth Report — “Annual Report 2011–2012” — Tabling*

**MS A.R. MITCHELL (Kingsley)** [10.05 am]: I present for tabling the fifteenth report of the Economics and Industry Standing Committee, entitled “Annual Report 2011–2012”.

[See paper 5507.]

**Ms A.R. MITCHELL:** On behalf of the Economics and Industry Standing Committee, I am pleased to present this annual report, which is the fourth annual report of this committee.

Let me say at the outset that this has been a very busy year for the committee and the staff, as reports were finalised, inquiries were commenced, and inquiries that had been held previously were followed up. Over the 2011–12 reporting period, the committee completed one inquiry, which had begun in the previous reporting period; commenced two new inquiries, and completed one of those new inquiries; and followed up on inquiries that had been held previously. It should also be mentioned that during this reporting period there were changes of membership of the committee, with Hon Liza Harvey, MLA, and John McGrath, MLA, stepping down to take up other duties, and Ian Blayney, MLA, and myself joining this committee. I must thank the members of the committee for including us as quickly as they did and bringing us up to speed on the work that was being done. I would also certainly like to acknowledge those other members of Parliament who were seconded to this committee when particular inquiries were being conducted, and the committee certainly thanks them for their involvement and their input.

During this reporting period, and because of very restrictive time limits for inquiries, much of the work of the committee was focused in Perth. This is demonstrated by the statement about investigative travel that members can read in the report. I will say that a lot of very restrictive time was put on our inquiries, and I will speak to that a bit later.

Before I joined this committee, I was well aware of the importance of many of the inquiries that the Economics and Industry Standing Committee was undertaking, and of the significant impacts and outcomes that have eventuated from the inquiries that had been undertaken. Now, speaking as a member of the Economics and Industry Standing Committee, I can confirm that there is a huge commitment from the members and staff to the work that is undertaken for these inquiries, many of which are decided by the Parliament and directed to this committee to be undertaken. There is no doubt that the Economics and Industry Standing Committee plays a vital role in the workings of Parliament, and, like other committees, enables investigations to be generated that benefit Western Australia and the people within it.

As this is the final report from the Economics and Industry Standing Committee for the thirty-eighth Parliament, members of the committee have expressed their opinions on the benefits and effectiveness of each inquiry. I can assure all members that each member of the committee has, I am not going to say necessarily fond remembrance, but certainly great appreciation of the expertise and the knowledge that has been gained. I must add that within these inquiries, a great deal of knowledge has been gained and outcomes achieved. But that has also been accompanied by a range of emotions. Our recent inquiry into the Kimberley Ultramarathon certainly highlights this other aspect of our inquiries.

I must acknowledge the former Chair of the Economics and Industry Standing Committee, the member for Riverton, Dr Mike Nahan, MLA, for his leadership and commitment to the inquiries and the committee. There is no doubt that his leadership has been greatly appreciated. I thank the committee members for their diligence and commitment to the work involved with the inquiries, and for their genuine and collective desire to reach achievable outcomes for all concerned. I also make special mention of the staff, who have kept us all on task, and have completed work within very restrictive time lines, and have done so to the highest degree. To Mr Tim Hughes, principal research officer, and Mrs Kristy Bryden, research officer, a very, very sincere thank you for your commitment to this committee and its work. To other staff who have assisted this committee over the course of inquiries, the committee members thank you also.

**MR W.J. JOHNSTON (Cannington)** [10.09 am]: I rise to make some remarks on the tabling of the annual report of the Economics and Industry Standing Committee. As the chair of the committee has just said, this is the last report of the committee. For that reason, I want to note the work that this committee has achieved over the whole of the Parliament. I will go through some of the reports that we have tabled, starting with “Provision, Use and Regulation of Caravan Parks (and Camping Grounds) in Western Australia”. That was a very detailed report. It took quite a lot of effort. It set out a real agenda for caravan parks and camping in Western Australia. I think it made a real contribution to the debate on that issue. I am pleased that the government has implemented a number of the recommendations of that inquiry.

The next report was a brief report entitled “The Potential for the Development of a Centre of Excellence in LNG Industry Design in Western Australia—A Discussion Paper”. The former chairman, the member for Riverton, was particularly keen on that inquiry. As it happens, we did not take that issue any further, but it is an example of the sorts of things that a bipartisan committee is able to achieve.

We then tabled a report entitled “The Department of Environment and Conservation’s Management of Former Pastoral Leases”. That was a very interesting inquiry. We travelled to a number of pastoral stations, met with the pastoralists and discussed the impact of the decision that led to the Department of Environment and Conservation taking over nearby pastoral leases following the Caring for our Country initiative that was funded from the sale of Telstra by the federal Liberal government.

We then had the inquiry into domestic gas prices. The resulting report is referred to quite widely in industry in Western Australia. It was the first occasion that the issue of price was dealt with in the gas supply sector. Obviously to determine price, we also had to examine a range of the supply issues. Gas is such an important contributor to the economy in Western Australia. That was a really major report. People in industry and government will be able to refer to that work for many years to come.

We also examined the Franchising Bill and tabled a report called “Inquiry into the Franchising Bill 2010”. I was in a minority position on that inquiry; I did not agree with the majority. Again, it was a valuable opportunity to get people to ventilate their views about the Franchising Bill.

Matters were then referred to us that related to park homes, and the committee tabled a report entitled “Response to House—Matter of Park Home Residents”. Again, we were able to take up many of the issues that had arisen from the caravan and camping ground inquiry. We were able to see what progress had been made by government following our recommendations and give people an opportunity to ventilate issues around a very vexed issue; that is, long-term residents in caravan parks.

Our next report was entitled “Inquiry into Ironbridge Holdings Pty Ltd and other matters regarding residential land and property developments”. That was a very interesting report because we were able to deal with some issues that were raised by individual residents. Not only that but we were able to see whether these issues were widespread across the property development industry. We determined that they were not widely spread across industry and they related to only a couple of developers, in particular, Ironbridge Holdings. When people go to the Consumer Protection Division, they are referred to the small claims process, which is a lot more complex than people realise. We were able to give people a clear understanding of how that small claims process works and make some recommendations about the way Consumer Protection interacts with that process. We identified some benefits from the new Australian Consumer Law and brought all that together. That inquiry was a very good use of the Parliament’s resources.

Our most recent report is effectively in two parts—the inquiry into the Kimberley Ultramarathon and then the tabling of the evidence. Again, that was a very complex inquiry. We were able to cut through and get to the bottom of all the issues involved. We are not experts in trying to determine what caused any issue. We were able to cut through the bureaucracy and see who had an influence and what better procedures could have been used during these types of high-risk events. I will make a comment about the tabling of the evidence because I understand that it was the first time the evidence was tabled in electronic form. We tabled an external hard drive. I will not talk about this at length but I do think that Parliament needs to deal with the question of how we deal with digital media in the future because more and more digital media will be provided to inquiries. We are happy to table a piece of paper but it is not the piece of paper that provides the information; it is the text on the piece of paper. We are really trying to preserve the information. In the same way when we table digital media, it is the zeros and ones that make up the digital information that are important, not the device. It would be worthwhile for the Parliament to think about how we could proceed with that issue in the future. With the increasing digital options and the cloud, there are many alternatives to the way we do things that can preserve parliamentary privilege to information but record it in a modern, contemporary way.

I want to briefly thank the members of Parliament who have contributed to the committee over time—retired members for Riverton, South Perth and Scarborough, who left the committee; the member for Collie—Preston, who, like me, has continued for the whole four years of Parliament; the members for Kingsley, Geraldton and Kalgoorlie; the three co-opted members, the members for Mandurah, Southern River and Midland; and the range of staff who have assisted us during the various inquiries, including Dr Loraine Abernethie, Ms Vanessa Beekingham, Mr Tim Hughes, Mrs Kristy Bryden, Mr Peter Kolf, Mr Foreman Foto and Ms Renee Gould. I thank them all for their hard work and dedication. I have found this committee to be particularly interesting. I think we have done some great work. It demonstrates the value of having cross-party committees that are able to get away from the day-to-day activities of Parliament and, on behalf of Western Australians, try to look at issues in more detail. As I said in my inaugural speech, it is my view that there should be more opportunities for parliamentary committees to take action, and I hope future Parliaments can follow up on my views on that.

I want to finally thank the Clerk and Mr Scott Nalder for the support and assistance that they have provided during what have been very complex inquiries where we have had to deal with lots of different interests in various areas. The assistance and advice given by those learned people has been very helpful to us as well.

**MR M.P. MURRAY (Collie–Preston)** [10.18 am]: I, too, want to make a few comments about the annual report of the Economics and Industry Committee and the value of committees. I have been in this house for 12-odd years and have served on committees during that whole time, having had some interesting and traumatic experiences through the committee system. Committees do work. There are cross-party agreements. When I was first on a committee, people said, “You line up and play politics.” I have not found that on committees. I have found them to be very refreshing. Most members work as a team and try to get a result. That is the real value of committees. We do not argue on a political basis; we try to get a result on whatever the topic may be.

I thank the member for Riverton, Mike Nahan, who was the Chair of the Economics and Industry Standing Committee during the 2011–12 reporting period. He was very fair, forthright and diligent as the chair of the committee. Not having worked with Mr Nahan before, I thought, “I wonder what we’re going to get here!” I found that he was very easy to work with. He certainly took his job very seriously.

The chops and changes of other committee members from day one were mentioned earlier. I thank all members for their efforts on the committee. I was probably not the best attendee, due to travel, but it certainly was great when we worked through and made sure we had a quorum and were able to do the job.

I will not go through the names of all committee staff, but Kristy Bryden and Tim Hughes provided exceptional service, especially during the last inquiry, which was harrowing and involved investigative work. Staff found a few issues on evidence given that had gone past committee members and were able to bring it to our attention to shape the last committee report we brought down.

It is incumbent on all ministers and departments to make sure committee recommendations are acted upon as far as possible. In my 12 years in this place, I do not think any inquiry has had more impact on me than the Kimberley Ultramarathon inquiry. We heard evidence from ladies and gentlemen who had been severely burnt. We saw the trauma caused as a result of a breakdown in the system. I am asking, through the Chair, that we look very quickly at an interim payment, as recommended by the committee. I have not seen anything move in that direction at this stage. The committee was unanimous in its recommendation that some sort of payment be provided. My understanding is that these people do not have any income as such. They are certainly looking at going through the court system to see whether they can get something back for their horrific burns and suffering because there was a breakdown in the system they were in.

Turia Pitt showed her humanity during a committee hearing. When Kate Sanderson started to have a bit of a breakdown when giving evidence, Turia Pitt—who herself had been severely burnt—reached across to comfort Kate Sanderson. Turia Pitt is a person of outstanding character, as I am sure the others are as well. I do not think the report should just be tabled and left. These people need support. Not only were two women severely burnt, but also Martin van der Merwe and Michael Hull were badly burnt. I cannot stress enough that here is a chance where we, as parliamentarians, can show humanity and compassion by working with these people to see whether we can get them some of the way through the healing process.

I do not think the committee system itself needs a great deal of change or tweaking. It works very well. I hope that it keeps going and picks up more of the social and economic issues that are out there that sometimes get a fleeting mention in Parliament, but not enough detail goes into them. Committee work is hard work. It puts an extra burden on many members, especially those in marginal seats, as I am sure the member for Riverton understands. I thank all the committee staff over the reporting period. I commend the annual report to the house.

**DR M.D. NAHAN (Riverton — Parliamentary Secretary)** [10.24 am] — by leave: I was on the Economics and Industry Standing Committee for a good deal of time during 2011–12. I would like to make a few brief comments. This is of course my first time in Parliament and it was my first time on a committee. I did not know what I was getting into. I had seen the Senate committees at the federal level and had given advice to them, but I had never seen committees at a state level. I would like to reaffirm what the member for Cannington has said: committees are highly productive. The committee system allows parliamentarians to put aside their guns and address serious issues. Often, they are things that only Parliament can address. As the member for Cannington indicated, the issues that the committee dealt with were varied but important. The committee’s reports made a significant contribution to the process.

I would like to commend my colleagues on both sides of the house. During my period with that committee, we worked cooperatively and effectively, and did good work. I would particularly like to thank the member for Cannington, who was the deputy chair. He carried out that role in a cooperative and effective manner.

I would also like to emphasise the point that the member for Collie–Preston made: when very lengthy reports are made, it is incumbent on the government to address them. Sometimes the bureaucrats do not like to address the

reports because it takes them off their chosen path. Governments really should put more effort into ensuring bureaucrats act on recommendations, particularly when committee reports are bipartisan and effective. The Economics and Industry Standing Committee took some time, between producing major reports, to look at some of the issues and called the major departments in. It was very effective in reminding them that we are watching. We asked them what they were doing to address matters. Some departments had not done anything; some had been quite effective. That is a very effective role of parliamentary committees.

I would also like to take up a point the member for Collie–Preston made; maybe I do not need to do this. Our last report, on the Kimberley Ultramarathon, was probably the most difficult report we did. Internationally and nationally, it was the most topical. The imagery of those two young girls burnt, wearing those masks, was embedded in most people's minds around the world. Aside from that imagery, the girls need help. We have only a few more sitting weeks left. I urge the government to address the matter effectively and comprehensively, and consider the ex gratia payments.