

**“THE PRINCIPLE OF INTEGRITY IN OFFICIAL CONDUCT” - REPORT BY THE
COMMISSIONER FOR PUBLIC SECTOR STANDARDS**

Standing Orders Suspension - Motion

HON NORMAN MOORE (Mining and Pastoral - Leader of the Opposition) [4.10 pm] - without notice: I move -

That so much of standing orders be suspended as would enable Hon Helen Morton to move the following motion, to enable the motion to be debated, and if not resolved before 10.00 pm, the question to be then put -

That this house expresses its deep concern at the revelations contained in the report of the Commissioner for Public Sector Standards relating to the principle of integrity in official conduct tabled in the Legislative Council on Tuesday, 8 May 2007.

Yesterday Maxine Murray, the Commissioner for Public Sector Standards, tabled in this Parliament report 4, which is part of a 10-year review, of her reports to Parliament about the way in which public sector management is functioning within Western Australia. Her report contains a number of recommendations and comments that are of considerable concern to the opposition. It is our belief that today, the day after the tabling of that report, this house needs to look very seriously at the information and the revelations contained within that report. We have taken the rather unusual course of action of seeking to suspend standing orders to enable us to debate this report. The wording that I have used in my motion does not do anything other than express deep concern at the revelations. It is not judgemental in any sense. If the government has an argument that the revelations in the report can be repudiated, this would provide it with an opportunity to do that.

Having read the report and having heard some of the comments made today by the Premier and others about this particular report, I am very concerned. Members may remember - perhaps they do not, but I do - that when we debated the last budget, I spent considerable time looking at the policy office within the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. I discussed in that particular appropriation debate how many people are located in that office and how much it costs. I also referred to the appointment of very large numbers of people to that policy office. There was no doubt in my mind at that time that the policy office was the 197 St Georges Terrace branch of the Labor Party, being paid for by the taxpayer to provide policy advice to the government. For policy advice, we can substitute the words “political advice”.

Maxine Murray makes some comments about this particular policy division within the Department of the Premier and Cabinet in her report. I do not have a problem with governments appointing as policy officers or as term-of-government employees people who clearly have a political objective to assist a minister in carrying out his or her functions. I do have a problem when these political appointees start directing public servants and involving themselves in the administration of the state. Therein lies a significant problem that needs to be debated today. A suspension of standing orders would allow us to do that.

Under the heading “Policy Division” on page 82 of her report - this is the reason that there is an urgency attached to this motion - Maxine Murray said -

The structural arrangements of government need to support the boundaries between ministerial staff and the public sector. In the Commissioner’s view, the arrangements in the Policy Division of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet compromise the impartiality of the public sector.

I repeat the last few words - “compromise the impartiality of the public sector”. She then talks about the findings of the WA Inc royal commission and refers to the issues related to the role of term-of-government and political appointees within the public sector. She goes on to say -

These same risks apply to the Policy Division within the Department of the Premier and the Cabinet. While the Commissioner’s preference is for the Policy Division to be located within the Premier’s Office so that the Premier can supervise . . . the Commissioner is mindful that it is for the Government to decide how it wishes to organise itself. The Commissioner believes that the function of the Policy Division should be recognised for what it is, that is, a political unit that coordinates public sector advice for input into government strategy.

The Public Sector Standards Commissioner is one of those individuals within our political system who is ostensibly independent of the government and who reports to Parliament. The position was created as a result of the WA Inc royal commission, at which significant concern was expressed about the role of various people within previous governments in Western Australia. I will not go into the detail of that now for obvious reasons. The Public Sector Management Act created the Commissioner for Public Sector Standards, and it was envisaged that the role would be independent and that the person holding that role would report directly to Parliament. It

would be a similar role to that of the Auditor General, the Ombudsman and those sorts of positions within the government processes. On page 21 of her report Maxine Murray says -

The Commissioner maintains independence in exercising this discretion by collecting relevant information, assessing it in relation to principles and standards and by applying judgement free of any pressure and influence.

We have before us a report from an independent officer reporting to Parliament, expressing serious concern about the way in which this government is operating and the way in which political appointees are having a significant impact on the way in which the public sector operates. As I said earlier, Maxine Murray refers to the impartiality of the public sector being compromised. These are not the words of the opposition. These are not some allegations being made by the opposition for a political attack on the government. This is not some backbench member of the Liberal Party making up stories about the government. These are not comments being made by a shadow minister to attack the government. These are comments made by a person who believes that she is acting as an independent person appointed to do a job, and part of her job is to maintain integrity in the public sector. When a person of this calibre in a role such as hers brings down a report such as the one tabled yesterday, it is incumbent upon us to do something about it. As Maxine Murray says in her report, her office has been described as a toothless tiger because she cannot do anything to change the way in which the government operates other than to report to Parliament. Whether that is a good thing or not, I do not know. We brought in the Public Sector Management Act when we were in government. We made the decision that the Commissioner for Public Sector Standards would not have an administrative role or a role whose determinations had to be implemented. We decided that the person in that position would advise Parliament of his or her concerns about the way in which the public sector operates and that Parliament would do something about it.

Today I am moving a motion to suspend standing orders to enable Hon Helen Morton to move a motion. I have read it out but I will read it again for the benefit of the house. It states -

That this house expresses its deep concern at the revelations contained in the report of the Commissioner for Public Sector Standards relating to the principle of integrity in official conduct tabled in the Legislative Council on Tuesday, 8 May 2007.

As I explained earlier, the reason we think this matter should be dealt with today and warrants the suspension of standing orders is that this report has been written by an officer who reports to Parliament, and that is her only way of achieving some redress for the concerns she has expressed. It is my view that we should deal with this issue as expeditiously as possible, and, therefore, it is appropriate that we debate it today.

I would be interested if, by way of interjection, the government might indicate whether it is prepared to support the motion to suspend standing orders. As the government knows, two opposition members are not in the chamber - one is overseas and one is in the eastern states for personal reasons - and the numbers do not fall in favour of the opposition's motion to suspend standing orders. We therefore are reliant upon the government to agree to suspend standing orders so that this matter can be debated. I am aware that the last time I tried to do this - I might add that this is done on very rare occasions - the government did not support the motion to suspend standing orders, and so a motion that I sought to deal with on the opening day of Parliament was not dealt with until it became a motion, and now we deal with it every day. In retrospect, it would have been a lot easier to deal with it on the opening day, but it goes on every day now, week after week. I would be interested if the Leader of the House could indicate, perhaps by a nod or a shake of the head, whether the government will support this motion. We could then curtail the debate on the suspension motion and get on to the motion itself; otherwise, we might finish up having a very long, drawn-out debate on whether standing orders should be suspended.

Hon Kim Chance: No, it is not my intention to support the motion. I have only just got the report and I am up to page 7.

Hon NORMAN MOORE: Why would the Leader of the House not be prepared to allow the house to debate a matter of this magnitude?

Hon Kim Chance: Because I would like to read the report before I debate it.

Hon NORMAN MOORE: I undertook what I considered to be a reasonably proper process in this matter and advised the leader's office as soon as I could that the opposition would do this. Indeed, the officer expressed a view to me about the report, so he has read it. I have sat on that side of the house when these sorts of motions have been moved without any notice and without having the numbers and they have been debated at the time because the opposition of the day used its numbers to make it happen. It is an inadequate response for the Leader of the House to say that he has not had time to look at the report. He could listen to Hon Helen Morton, who, as the shadow Minister for Public Sector Management, has a lot to say about this issue. She has read the report in detail and can tell him all about the matters that are of concern to her.

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Hon Kim Chance: I think the report might contain some factual errors, but I do not want to go on the record saying that until I have had the opportunity to check those issues.

Hon NORMAN MOORE: Does the Leader of the House think we should just leave these issues until he is ready?

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: That's a good idea!

Hon Kim Chance: It would be nice to debate something on the basis of factual knowledge, yes.

Hon NORMAN MOORE: With respect, Leader of the House - I presume he is the minister responsible for public sector management in this house; I am not sure, because he is responsible for a long list of things - it was not beyond the Premier's capacity to spend some time today getting stuck into the Commissioner for Public Sector Standards. Obviously, he has received some advice on it. The Leader of the House has had a few hours' notice that I would seek to move this motion today. I thought that he might at least listen to what was said about it by the opposition. I would be more inclined to listen to his argument if he said that he did not accept what we were saying, but that we could finish the debate the following day when he had had more time to look at the report. I must emphasise again that this is a damning report. I do not know whether it contains factual mistakes or whether it is the opinion of one person that cannot be substantiated.

Hon Kim Chance: Nor do I; that's the problem.

Hon NORMAN MOORE: All I know is that a particular person, who I think might have been appointed by this government and who I understand is not to be reappointed by this government -

Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich: That says it all.

Hon NORMAN MOORE: The Minister for Local Government laughs because that is the way she thinks. When I say that an independent officer who reports to Parliament and who has presented a report in which she has attacked the government will not be reappointed, the Minister for Local Government thinks that is a joke because that is what will happen, and she knows it. That is the way the government operates. If somebody says something that it does not like, it sacks that person.

Hon Kim Chance: That is the problem, Leader of the Opposition. I'm not sure that the commissioner has attacked the government. Indeed, in the parts of the report that I have read, she actually praises the government.

Hon NORMAN MOORE: The Leader of the House might like to talk about that, too.

Hon Kim Chance: That is why I would like to read the report.

Hon NORMAN MOORE: The commissioner has made a very damning statement about the policy office of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, which is the engine room of the government's apparatchiks. She says that what it is doing is compromising the impartiality of the public sector. That is a very significant, a very important and a very damning comment. If the Leader of the House does not think it is, I do not know what is going on opposite. Perhaps he believes the public sector should be partial. That is what Brian Burke once said. The Leader of the House will remember when Brian Burke said that it would take them 40 years, or a period of that magnitude, to clean out the public sector after he had been in government for five years, because he just parachuted into the public sector people who had a political persuasion and they were made permanent public servants. This is not what the commissioner refers to in this report, which we should debate later on. She refers to those people who are, in many cases, term-of-government officers, and to the permanent public servants in the policy section. She refers in her report to the way in which they are politicising the public sector. If the government thinks it is good that the public sector should support the Labor Party, let us hear the government say it, instead of pretending that somehow or other the public sector should be impartial and should provide impartial advice to ministers. I have no doubt that in some ministerial offices and government agencies, there is no hint of partiality. Indeed, I suspect that those ministers who have respect for the Westminster system would make sure that they do not appoint to positions within their jurisdiction people who are just there for the most blatant and baseless political purposes.

I talked about this policy office in the Department of the Premier and Cabinet during the budget debate in this house last year. It is clearly a political organisation. The Commissioner for Public Sector Standards points out in this report that that particular arrangement is compromising the impartiality of the public sector. The reason that that office is so significant in this debate is that the Department of the Premier and Cabinet has an overarching role in the way in which every government agency and every ministerial office operates. That was the Burke change to the way in which public sector management operates in Western Australia. In fact, he created a scenario in which the Premier's office and the Premier's department grew dramatically to enable them to oversee the operations of all ministers and all the ministers' officers and as many government agencies as they could. That has continued. I suspect that there is an element of that in the Howard government. Certainly, there was an element of that in the Whitlam government and in the Hawke-Keating governments. This tendency to

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concentrate power in the Premier's office is a significant concern, as has been pointed out by the Commissioner for Public Sector Standards. She is concerned that concentrating this power in the hands of a policy office in which many of the officers are blatant, political appointees is having a significant impact on the way in which the public service operates.

Again, I ask the Leader of the House to reconsider his refusal to suspend standing orders and perhaps contemplate a scenario in which he allows the debate to at least begin and then, after he has spoken, he could ask that we adjourn the debate until tomorrow so that he could get back to us on some of the issues raised. I do not have a problem with that. Although I do not have a problem with it, I must admit up front that I do not have any control over that either. It seems to me that it is a very poor reflection of the government's response to this report if it says that it will not suspend standing orders and that no debate will be held on the matter or that we should put the matter on the notice paper to be debated in six months' time. We are giving the Leader of the House an opportunity to hear our concerns and to hear what the house thinks about it, and for the government to respond to that if it can, or to respond to it tomorrow if the government thinks that there are mistakes in the report. There are some things in the report that the government would be pleased to read about and tell us about. However, some fundamental issues need to be debated today. I am very anxious for the government to consider this proposition and to allow the house to debate it today.

HON KIM CHANCE (Agricultural - Leader of the House) [4.33 pm]: I thank the Leader of the Opposition for raising these issues. However, nothing has changed my point of view. There are serious issues, and it is because they are serious that they deserve to be fully considered when members on both sides of the house have a proper understanding of the report. That is the only way we can deal with the issues properly and seriously. Perhaps I should have read this report earlier, but honourable members understand that I was handling legislation yesterday, and they may or may not know that I had a very early start this morning. Therefore, I have not had time to look at the report and did not see it until 3.30 this afternoon. It is not only members on the government side who must be better informed about what the report says. During question time yesterday, I think it was the Minister for Fisheries who received a question that was couched in such terms that indicates opposition members also need to gain a better understanding of what the report actually says. The question was phrased in terms that indicated that what the questioner was seeking and was asserting were not in fact what the Commissioner for Public Sector Standards said. I am not suggesting for a moment that an assertion was made that was untrue; rather, I think there is a lack of clarity and understanding about what the report says. As an illustration, we have heard from the Leader of the Opposition about issues that are purported to have been raised by the commissioner, yet the commissioner also said that unlike some other jurisdictions in Australia, Western Australia has a good governance framework.

Hon Norman Moore: Framework and behaviour are quite different things.

Hon KIM CHANCE: There is regulation regulating the relationship between ministerial staff and the public sector. Unlike some jurisdictions in Australia, we actually have it right in Western Australia. It is possible that the commissioner was making comments about jurisdictions other than Western Australia because she commented on Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Australia nationally by comparison. I do not know how those matters are tied back to the state, but I would like to know because they may be valid comparisons that need to be made. It is because I thought I might be involved that I looked at the issues that were raised in relation to ministerial staff because I believed that it was stated in the report that ministerial staff numbers in Western Australia had increased by 50 per cent. I think that was reported in the paper today, and it surprised me. However, I then realised that the base number was from 2001. There was no attempt to make comparisons across governments; it was only a comparison between how our government was structured in the rigorous conditions that existed in 2001 and how they are structured now. We must also bear in mind that our economy has now nearly doubled in size since 2001. The allegation was, as I understand it, that we had increased the number of ministerial policy advisers from 115 to 150 or 154. I wondered what set of numbers applied in 2000, because that would have provided a valid comparison. What I found was quite interesting. In 2000, the Premier's office had 18 staff and on 1 May 2006 the Premier's office had 16 staff. In 2000 there were -

Hon Norman Moore: The Premier's office is different from where you put the policy office.

Hon Ljiljana Ravlich interjected.

Hon KIM CHANCE: In 2000 -

The PRESIDENT: Order, members! Members are beginning to interject. The Leader of the Opposition was heard in silence. It is not helpful for interjections to be made by either side. I note that some government members are starting to interject. This is a fairly limited debate. However, I note also that the Leader of the House is staying within the confines of that limited debate by referring to the need to clarify certain matters contained in the report, and that is to do with the timing of when a debate on the report should take place.

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However, pointing out the need to clarify should not go too far. The Leader of the House is not going beyond those confines at this stage.

Hon KIM CHANCE: I thank you very much for that guidance, Mr President. I will not go into detail too much. However, I thought it was necessary to put those factors in context because they were issues that were reported in a newspaper today.

In 2000, the number of ministerial officers was 192, and on 1 May 2006 the number of ministerial officers was 189. There is virtually no difference. By comparison, there were 210 staff in 2000 and 205 on 1 May 2006. It is important to understand that those 205 staff are not all term-of-government officers employed under section 68 of the Public Sector Management Act. It is very important to understand also that section 68 officers - term-of-government officers - are not all senior staff; they are not all chiefs of staff and media advisers. We have receptionists and correspondence officers on term-of-government contracts. Indeed, term-of-government officers were quite properly introduced by the Court government some 13 years ago. I say "quite properly" because I supported it then and I support it now. There clearly is a need to separate those people who serve a ministerial office or the Premier's office from the other people who are in the office as a result of their membership of the public sector. There should be no interchange between those two.

The PRESIDENT: Leader of the House, I do not know how many other speakers will be involved in the debate, but I am conscious that other members are not as experienced as the Leader of the House or the Leader of the Opposition; those members may not appreciate that there is a difference between expressing an argument in terms of a need to clarify a matter and then proceeding to clarify a matter. I know that the Leader of the House appreciates the difference.

Hon KIM CHANCE: As always, Mr President, I appreciate your advice and the subtlety with which it was delivered. I appreciate that I have stepped over the line by going into specifics. I did so because I wanted to demonstrate that there are important issues to consider. However, if we are to have a valuable debate on them - I offer to the Leader of the Opposition that the government will provide an opportunity to debate these matters - it must be a debate that is properly informed and is carried out with a clear understanding of what the report actually says in its full context.

HON MURRAY CRIDDLE (Agricultural) [4.39 pm]: I am interested in what the leader of the government said in reply to the Leader of the Opposition just then. He started off by saying that he had not read the report and did not have a clear understanding of what was going on. You, Mr President, clearly pointed out that we were moving into the debate, which is exactly the issue of which the leader of the government said he was not cognisant. Obviously, there has been a fair amount of work done on the background needed for the debate in this place.

Hon Kim Chance: No, I researched that because it was in the newspaper this morning. That is why I did that.

Hon MURRAY CRIDDLE: The Leader of the House is an experienced debater in this house. I recognise his capacity to debate the issues and get some of the information out without saying that he knows the background to the information. The Premier has been around the place debating this particular issue today; therefore, somebody in the government has a clear understanding of what is going on.

The issue I want to point out is that it would be very handy, as it is often in second reading debates, to hear Hon Helen Morton put her facts in front of the Parliament and for the Leader of the House to come back tomorrow - if he cannot do so today - and give us a clear understanding of what the issues are from the government's point of view. Otherwise, we will go away from this house now and come back in almost three weeks and the whole issue will have gone into the aether. It is time that the government answered these particular issues if there are indeed some real problems here. There is a perception in the community that the public service has been infiltrated by people from the government's side of politics. From information that is passed to me quite regularly, that is a real issue in the community. I therefore believe that it is time that we got some facts on the agenda. This issue is obviously an issue with the Commissioner for Public Sector Standards, a person who was appointed by this government, and it should be debated now rather than later. As I say, we will leave this Parliament tomorrow afternoon and not come back for almost three weeks. By that time the whole issue will have evaporated and the issues will have gone away. I know that would be handy for the government, but it is not handy for the community. I say to the Leader of the House that it would be very handy for him to have stood and listed the processes that he would go through. I know we cannot win the argument from this side of Parliament because we do not have the numbers in this place.

Hon Norman Moore: We can win the argument; just not the vote.

Hon MURRAY CRIDDLE: We cannot win the argument because we will not be able to debate it; that is the issue.

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I say to the Leader of the House as a member of the government that these issues should be debated. I can recall as a minister being on the other side of the house and having to debate an issue almost immediately it came up. It happened to me at least three times. I recall Hon Tom Stephens standing and moving motions, saying that I had to account for the substance of the motion, and that I must do that on the same day.

Hon Norman Moore: With no forward advice at all!

Hon MURRAY CRIDDLE: Yes, no warning at all. Hon Tom Stephens stood, drew a line under the debate in *Hansard*, said that I had misled Parliament and that we would debate the issue. He lost the lot of that argument. The point is that we answered the issue there and then. It would be useful, Mr President, for the community, for the house and for the Parliament in general to have a clear understanding of what the government's position is on this report, which, after all, has been put forward to this Parliament for answers.

HON HELEN MORTON (East Metropolitan) [4.43 pm]: I am disappointed that the Leader of the House does not acknowledge that this situation requires from him some statesman-like quality, that he needs to admit that this is an extremely serious situation, and that debating this matter in the house today would send the best signal to members of the public sector who are floundering under the current situation. It would send the best signal to the community that the government takes this matter seriously and that it can take on board a debate about integrity. This is not an issue about numbers, although the numbers are quite damning; it is an issue about the integrity, honour and accountability of the public sector. This is not the first report that the Commissioner for Public Sector Standards has brought to the attention of this Parliament; it is the fourth in a series of reports and it pulls together the threads of all the previous reports.

In enabling this debate to take place today, the Leader of the House would send the signal that he is a statesman of the Parliament, and that it is the right signal to send to members of the public sector. The debate must go ahead because there is a crisis of confidence by the community in this government, and some early and decisive action must be taken. That action could occur through enabling the debate to take place today. As Hon Murray Criddle said, putting it off for two weeks, and perhaps another two weeks after that, would only send the wrong signal. It would send a signal that the government is made up of spin doctors - exactly what the report says - and that they will look for a way to spin themselves out of this situation. The debate is a matter of integrity for the public sector and a matter of integrity for the state of Western Australia. This debate must go ahead so that the government can signal its concern and commitment to do something about it. One issue that must come out in the debate is that the public sector's integrity has been significantly undermined under the Premier, his ministers and staff.

Mr President, you will suggest that I am getting into the substance of the debate; however, I say that we must draw this situation to the attention of the Premier. The point I am trying to make is that this is one of those times when we must acknowledge that the executive government is subservient to the Parliament. As this issue has been brought to the Parliament's attention by the Commissioner for Public Sector Standards, it is an issue for which the Parliament has responsibility. It is essential that the leader of the government in the Legislative Council take responsibility for it, enable debate on it to take place and take the result of the debate in a message back to the government as soon as possible. In the absence of enabling the debate to take place, I fear that we will pretty much go back to the days of WA Inc. I suggest to the Leader of the House that by not enabling the debate to go ahead, he will give himself time to find a way of putting a spin on this report, or perhaps find a way to defame or discredit the author of the report, which is really unfortunate.

Hon Kim Chance: Why would we want to do that?

Hon HELEN MORTON: I do not know why the Leader of the House would want to do that. Why does he not want to debate the issue today? If he does not want the time to do those sorts of things, he should allow the debate today and get some of this information out. He should demonstrate some of the qualities he has, as Leader of the House, to enable that to take place.

Hon Kim Chance: It seems to me that the commissioner is saying some very good things about the government. Why would we want to defame the commissioner?

Hon Murray Criddle: Get up and say so!

Hon Kim Chance: I already have.

Hon HELEN MORTON: The report is in three sections. The first section does contain some good things. I am sure the Leader of the House has already been through the first section. However, unfortunately, there is not too much in the first section. I will not go down that track. I know that you, Mr President, are looking at me and will tell me that I am getting into the substance of the debate. However, I want to enable the Leader of the House to talk about how he would consider some of these matters that need to be taken to the government and, in sending that signal, what some of these issues mean to the government. The Leader of the House talked about

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the numbers and I will refer briefly to them. The numbers are not good, but the numbers are not the big issue. It is all about what the ministerial staff do. It is the way in which they go about their business that is the essence of this motion. The Leader of the House does not need to worry about the numbers to debate the processes that are in place and the integrity of official conduct. The numbers are bad, and the report indicates an increase of 50 per cent in political appointees. It also states that Western Australian ministers have six times as many ministerial staff members than do ministers in the United Kingdom. It also states that in Western Australia there are more ministerial staff per minister than in any other state in Australia.

Hon Kim Chance: You are wrong. I have told you that.

Hon HELEN MORTON: Leader of the House, I have the most recent information that was delivered to me only yesterday or the day before from the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. That information makes it absolutely clear that WA has a higher ratio of ministerial staff to minister than any other state in Australia. It is higher than the ratio in Queensland.

The PRESIDENT: Order, member! The Leader of the House raised the issue of the need to clarify and I mentioned in the course of his observations that the need to clarify is one thing, but clarifying is another. I ask the member to be careful with her remarks so that she does not go beyond the bounds of the procedural motion, in a sense.

Hon HELEN MORTON: We are talking about whether the information is distorted.

The PRESIDENT: The motion before us is a motion to suspend standing orders in order for a particular matter to be debated. It is important when members are speaking to the motion that they say why in their view standing orders should or should not be suspended. The Leader of the House and the Leader of the Opposition carefully constructed their speeches, as the member is constructing hers. I point out that the member is getting close to the boundary.

Hon HELEN MORTON: I suggest that the leader needs to take responsibility and allow the debate to take place. Ministerial responsibility is a significant element of this report. It suggests that ministerial responsibility is a thing of the past these days, given the way in which ministers treat it and the effect it has on the resignations and retirements of chief executive officers. I am appealing to the Leader of the House to take on the leadership responsibility he has as Leader of the House. He should demonstrate that that leadership responsibility can be shown across all governments by allowing the debate on the motion to take place.

The real reason that I want this debate to take place is that it will allow us to demonstrate once again that the warnings that have been given to this house have not been ignored. The Commissioner for Public Sector Standards has expressed concerns about those warnings being ignored over and over again. The Leader of the House will send the right message, if he allows the debate to take place, to ensure that those warnings are not ignored yet again.

A series of recommendations that are made in the report are worthwhile mentioning in the debate. It is worthy of recognition that only yesterday - it is another reason that the debate should go ahead today - a new code of ethics that incorporates some of the issues we are talking about was gazetted. Having the debate would allow that code of ethics to receive the right level of support from the minister and the Leader of the House. It will bring home to ministerial staff and others concerned that it is a serious matter and that the code of ethics will be taken seriously. It is hard to imagine how we can expect ministerial staff to take these matters seriously if ministers and leaders will not accept responsibility and allow this debate to take place.

Another matter which needs to be raised in the debate today and which should not wait for another fortnight, month or six months is the promise that was made to undertake a functional review of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. We have not heard a single word about it. We do not know whether that functional review is taking place or has been put on hold. It would not be a bad thing for the Leader of the House to stand in this house today and say that that functional review has commenced, who is doing it, what is the time frame or that he does not know what is happening.

Hon Kim Chance: Why not ask a question in question time?

Hon HELEN MORTON: I will.

Hon Kim Chance: I will answer it then.

Hon HELEN MORTON: I reiterate that it is absolutely essential that this debate take place today. It will send a message to the community, public servants and ministerial staff that this is a serious issue and needs to be treated seriously and urgently. If that does not happen, it would appear that the government is trying to sidestep the issue.

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HON GEORGE CASH (North Metropolitan) [4.56 pm]: I also support the motion moved by the Leader of the Opposition in respect of the content of the report that was tabled in the house yesterday. The Commissioner for Public Sector Standards is known to be a responsible person and holds a very senior and responsible job in Western Australia. She is an officer of the Parliament. When she produces a report and provides it to both the Speaker and the President of the Parliament, it is provided so that the Parliament can take direct action on the matters raised. That is to say that the Commissioner for Public Sector Standards does not work through a minister and have her report filtered through the minister; it is provided directly to the Parliament so that any so-called filter cannot exist. That is done for very good reason.

It is fair to say that the manner in which the opposition has conducted this debate this afternoon has been very reasonable. As has been the case in years gone by, every opposition member could have turned on a hysterical act to embarrass the government into doing something. I do not believe that, firstly, it is the way we should conduct ourselves and, secondly, that it would do justice to the content of the report that the opposition seeks to discuss.

There is no doubt that the Commissioner for Public Sector Standards in her report raises some matters that compliment the way in which the government is handling the public sector in Western Australia. However, the commissioner also raises some other very serious matters that she believes should be drawn to the attention of the Parliament so that we can improve the way in which we manage the public sector; in particular, she raises the issue of ministerial officers. The question of ministerial officers being political agents or biased in the way in which they handle various matters on behalf of their minister is not new in Australian politics. A number of papers have been written on the use and actions of ministerial officers in the federal Parliament. I understand there is a recognised code of conduct for the way in which ministerial officers in the federal Parliament are supposed to carry out their business. There may of course be a code of conduct in Western Australia with respect to ministerial offices but, if there is, it seems that there is some slippage in the system, because the Commissioner for Public Sector Management is quite clearly saying that they are not carrying out their duties in a manner that is consistent with the Public Sector Management Act and the good governance of the state of Western Australia. I say to the Leader of the House that when a report such as this comes before the house, there is an opportunity to run. In this case, the Leader of the House has decided that he wants to run for at least three weeks, hoping that this matter will blow over. However, the matters raised by the Commissioner for Public Sector Management are bigger than the Leader of the House wants to believe.

Debate interrupted, pursuant to standing orders.

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