

ESPERANCE LEAD POLLUTION

453. Mr P.D. OMODEI to the Premier:

Madam Deputy Speaker, before I ask my question of the Premier, it seems as though we are being invaded by the students of Scotch College. They have been in the gallery a number of times this week. Welcome to the students from Scotch College on behalf of the member for Cottesloe.

I refer to the findings of the parliamentary inquiry into the cause and extent of lead pollution in the Esperance area, and ask -

- (1) Given the damning findings of this inquiry, will the Premier accept that this represents a major failure of his government across three portfolio areas; namely, environment, resources, and planning and infrastructure?
- (2) Will he concede that these multiple failings are unprecedented in the history of this state?
- (3) What will he do to ensure that this disgraceful situation never arises again?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER replied:

(1)-(3) I thank the member for the question, and I appreciate the gravity of this issue; it is very serious. As I recall, 46 recommendations were made, and the government will work assiduously on those recommendations to ensure that this does not happen again. Whether it is the greatest failing in the history of the state, I not able to say. I do not know of any other circumstance -

Mr P.D. Omodei: The first time a community has been poisoned and your government did not do very much about it.

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: I do not know that that is the case. I do not know about Western Australia, but anyone who has driven through Broken Hill will see that a huge community has been poisoned for a very long time. I do not know that that is the case in Western Australia. I am not prepared to argue that it is not. This was a very serious, unfortunate issue. I congratulate all the members of the committee. I listened to all the speeches on this issue this morning and I thought they were all well delivered and very considered. It is clearly an issue that has been addressed seriously, as it must be, and in the right spirit. I congratulate the acting chair of the Education and Health Standing Committee and the chair who stood down to allow the process to be seen to be uncontaminated, and all those members who took part in the inquiry. I hope that, to the credit of the Parliament, we can put aside the politics of issues in a situation like this and address these matters objectively.

It is almost like an era from biblical times when birds fall dead from the sky and people wonder what is happening. However, it happened in 2006, not 200, 500 or 2 000 years ago. Birds fell dead from the sky in Esperance, and that was the first indication the community had that something was wrong. It should never have happened. I believe the recommendations point to a way forward, and they will be pursued.

I listened to the way the events leading to the contamination were stepped through; and it was a situation that was clearly avoidable. Every member who spoke - I think there were six - pointed out that the contamination was avoidable. Yes, we acknowledge that there were failings by the departments.

Mr P.D. Omodei: Massive.

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: Yes. On behalf of the government, I express sincere regret and apologise to the people of Esperance that this has happened to them. It should never have happened. I am quite happy to do that, although "happy" is not the right word. I sincerely apologise to the people of Esperance for what has happened there; it should not have happened. There were severe failings across government. The report points out that nobody acted in a deliberate way to contribute to this circumstance. I think that is the case. It also recommends that no minister be held responsible or be sacked, and I accept that. It was up to the committee to recommend otherwise.

As a community and a state we are very fortunate that a major tragedy did not occur. It did not occur because nature indicated that something was wrong. Human observation missed it. Nature told us that something profoundly wrong was happening in that community, so we avoided a tragedy.

Mr P.D. Omodei: Lead was being transported in open conveyors and nobody knew it was a problem? Come on!

Mr A.J. CARPENTER: All I can suggest to the Leader of the Opposition, honestly, is that he read the remarks of the members who spoke on the report, read the report and make his own judgement. We are very fortunate that we have avoided a tragedy. In the words of the member for Peel, or perhaps a subsequent speaker, it would be a tragedy for this event to define Esperance in the future. Esperance is a magnificent community, and people

who live in that community have a right to expect that their wonderful lifestyle will be protected and fostered in the future. They have a right to expect that the government of Western Australia will look after them, and we must make that commitment. Esperance is and will remain a great place to live in. The recommendations point the way forward and I congratulate the authors. Those recommendations will be pursued.