

APPRENTICESHIPS — LACK OF STATE UTILITY OPPORTUNITIES

Grievance

MR M.P. MURRAY (**Collie–Preston**) [9.23 am]: It is a bit disappointing to have to rise and grieve today. I did ask to grieve to the Premier but he does not seem to think that jobs for young people are very important, although he talks the talk but does not walk the walk. I rise to grieve about the issue of local jobs for local people, in particular the issue of apprenticeships. There has been much commentary on the skills shortage in WA due to the mining boom, but, unfortunately, the Barnett government is all talk and no action. It takes the easy way out by asking the federal government to increase the number of migrant labourers under the 457 visa scheme. We have seen many very good, skilled people brought into the state under that scheme and I am not totally against that, but what about looking at why we are not training our own?

In many cases the short, cheap, nasty, deceptive way in which this government has gone about getting labour for the north west and elsewhere has not recognised the need to train young people for government jobs. That is true about many jobs, and one I will use as an example is the refurbishment of Muja power station stages A and B in Collie. There are 150-odd people working on that refurbishment to bring it back online later this year or early next year in June. It is my understanding that Verve contracted out the job to a company called Inalco Energy, which is also in a joint venture with Verve. There is therefore no excuse about the contracts not containing a line about jobs for apprentices or young trainees. Inalco then subcontracted the job on to a company called Kempe, which has been working on the job for around 20 months. At its peak it has employed around 150 people ranging from tradesmen through to riggers, scaffolders and technical assistants, but no apprentices. These same companies come in my door and say, “When and if we get the job, we’ll help you out. We’ll have jobs for young people in rural areas such as Collie.” This is just not happening, and the proof is in the pudding with this Kempe company. I wrote to them with my concerns and until yesterday had not had an answer. When my staff asked the company what was going on and that I may raise the matter in Parliament, all of a sudden an email came back saying that it has one apprentice who is a mature-age person who is due to finish his apprenticeship but who is also a supervisor. So, talk about jobs for the boys and none for the youths! It is a real problem.

Along with providing jobs for mature-age people, we must look at putting contractual obligations on companies such as Verve to provide jobs in country areas. Verve is a government entity and it can include these contractual obligations in agreements. I am asking that that be done in future contracts that come up. That is very important, otherwise we will see the young people of country towns drift into the cities and not come back; and those young people lose the four years of certainty of being in a job. Most people in my electorate who have children who wanted to be apprentices have been disappointed. A great scheme in Collie Senior High School trains about 15 or 16 young people a year and places almost all of them around the South West. Occasionally two or three people miss out on training. We need to make sure that there is an option for them to go to these jobs. We cannot say, “No, it’s only a two-year job”, because we have group schemes. We have many group schemes in WA. An excellent scheme in Bunbury, Group Training South West, is run by Stan Liaros. I am sure the member for Murray–Wellington has heard of it. We should be using people who come out of that scheme. We could bring them up to whichever level we want. We could pick a first, second, third or fourth-year apprentice and put them on the job for the time of those contracts. There are no excuses for these contracts not to include provision for a youth employment scheme; they are with government entities. What is the point of the government having a contractor out there in the community employing 150-odd people but with no young people on the job? It is a blight on this government—an absolute blight. If we do not change the way we think, we will have no tradesmen in the future. Any time there is a downturn in the world economy, what happens? The first people who are put off are apprentices. We are paying for that now from the 1987 downturn in the economy when people put off apprentices. What has this government done about it? Nothing! It did not put in any scheme for apprentices; in fact, I believe the overall number of apprenticeships is dropping off.

It is just amazing that the Premier would not take this grievance today. He is at the leadership of this group. We hear about Collie being a super town in the future, but if there are no jobs for young people, there will be no town. Young people will just keep drifting into the cities, and when they do that they do not come back because they get a lifestyle and do not want to move. It is a shame that a government entity such as Verve and a company such as Kempe constructions have not done the right thing by our town and have not done the right thing by our young people—assisted by the Premier! That is what we have to remember here. They have been assisted by the Premier because he has not put in the hard work to make sure that these companies have a contractual obligation to provide jobs for younger people. Apprenticeships and traineeships are the sorts of things that can be done. We can then alleviate some of the shortages we have now and not be so reliant on short-term labour from overseas. I believe that the Minister for Regional Development also has a role to play. Into the future, one of the first things on the list should be for us to look at how we go about getting these people into jobs there. If we apply ourselves really hard, we can have the hook-up, not just to day jobs, which students can go to look at to see what they are

about, but to have a direct feed from high schools into these jobs. It is not hard; it just has to be written into the contracts; and, if people do not want to apply for those jobs, well and good. Come on, Premier, lift your game. This issue is a blight on all Western Australians, and especially the Barnett government.

MR M.J. COWPER (Murray–Wellington — Parliamentary Secretary) [9.30 am]: First of all, I would like to commend the member for Collie–Preston for bringing this matter to this Parliament’s attention. I have also been accused in the past of being very parochial about my electorate, but I reckon I would probably play second fiddle to the member for Collie–Preston. He greatly looks after the interests of his community, and we should all take a leaf out of his book. The particular example given by the member about the lack of apprenticeships on the Muja A and B refurbishment site is probably not a very good one, but I take his point about that particular project inasmuch as it is only a short-term refurbishment —

Mr M.P. Murray: Two years.

Mr M.J. COWPER: It is a two-year refurbishment, yet, as we know, the indenture period for an apprentice is four years, and therefore it was not seen as appropriate to have apprentices on that project.

Mr M.P. Murray: Rubbish; absolute rubbish!

Mr M.J. COWPER: I listened with keen intent to the member’s comments and I ask that he has the decency to allow me to respond.

Going back to Verve Energy, it has 16 apprentices working at Muja in Collie, and each year four of those apprentices are rotated. In Kwinana there are seven apprentices.

Mr M.P. Murray: It’s shameful!

The SPEAKER: Member for Collie–Preston!

Mr M.J. COWPER: Verve works very closely with the community, and a lot of those young people getting apprenticeships at Muja come locally from Collie. Therefore, the notion that this government is not looking after local apprentices is not quite correct. I think the member has blinkers on about some of these issues.

Mr M.P. Murray: I’m saying: what about the contractors?

Mr M.J. COWPER: With respect to Vinalco Energy, as the member correctly points out, Vinalco is a joint venture between Verve Energy and a company called Inalco Energy, and it has been given the responsibility of refurbishing Muja A and B through the Kempe Group. Kempe is a group of engineering services based in Geelong, with operations nationally, including in Western Australia, and also overseas. The Muja A and B refurbishment is a short-term construction project and, as a result, it was deemed that it was not conducive to having apprentices on that particular site because the typical period of indenture is four years. However, as part of the government’s youth development program, 10 students from Collie and Bunbury have completed work experience at Muja A and B with a focus on fitting and welding. Verve Energy has also made available an electrical apprenticeship from the Muja power station workforce as required. There are 280 people engaged at Muja A and B by Kempe and almost 50 persons are from Collie and surrounding areas. Engaging locals where practical and possible is a commitment by the Kempe Group. Verve Energy has demonstrated a long-time commitment to training, including apprenticeships, training graduates and traineeships. At Muja power station Verve employs 16 apprentices, as I mentioned before, including electrical, mechanical and instrumentation apprentices. Each year, four new apprentices are recruited, as I have said, and they are rolled over in good numbers.

One issue we have in Western Australia, member, and something of concern to us all, is the number of apprentices actually completing their indenture because of the demand for skilled workers. I take the member’s point inasmuch as it is good to keep young people in the community, at home with their parents where they should be and where they can be managed a bit better, rather than having to send them off to Perth, or wherever it might be, away from their families; I think that is a great move. That is something that this government is working towards. Members have probably heard me say this and I will bang on about it again: at Pinjarra we have a training facility for 200 local apprentices. It commenced earlier this year and we are rolling out some funding for it, which will be announced very soon. This is happening not just in Pinjarra, but also in Busselton, Bunbury, Karratha, Port Hedland and Broome. All the TAFE training centres will be given additional, unprecedented funding by this government through the royalties for regions program. We are seeing the wealth created in regional Western Australia being spread back through the regional parts of Western Australia, and there will be a strong focus on bringing on apprentices. I have a very keen interest in seeing apprentices coming on stream, because I have a young family myself and I want to see a future focus, particularly in our schools, on hooking up with more vocational education and training aspects, because not all students will go on to be academics and one could argue that an apprenticeship or a trade is probably more valuable in the current

environment in this state than a university degree. Certainly, I might note also that there are not too many poor electricians out there!

Mr M.P. Murray: What about the contractual obligations? That is where it should come to.

Mr M.J. COWPER: In addition to those at the Muja power station, Verve engages three welding apprentices through major contractor UGI, and the site contractor Jackson Electrical has two apprentices. Therefore, it is not as though there are not a number of apprentices out there on that site. For several years, Verve Energy has been a member of, and a financial contributor to, an engineering trades group at Collie Senior High School that coordinates up to the equivalent of pre-apprenticeship courses at the high school. This is something that I just spoke about —

Mr M.P. Murray: A tremendous program started by the Labor government.

Mr M.J. COWPER: — and the member should be very pleased that that program is being continued also in a school in the member's electorate, and I would like to see it perpetuated in other schools. As I said to the member before, he is a very good local member, because he has stuff in his electorate that a lot of other members in this place do not have in their electorates. Up to 16 people participate in that program each year.

On state government support for apprenticeship training on a broader level, the state government is absolutely committed to supporting apprentice training in Western Australia. The state government has invested \$58.6 million, over and above its commitment to national funding agreements, for an additional 21 000 training places, including apprenticeships and traineeships, since coming to office. Western Australia currently has a record number of apprentices and trainees in training. The latest figures from the Department of Training and Workforce Development show that 40 419 apprentices and trainees were in training in Western Australia as of 31 July 2011. The state government considers traditional apprenticeships a critical priority and guarantees funding for all training in traditional apprenticeships. To assist employers and students, the state government is working with employers to pilot models for a more flexible and responsive apprenticeship and training system. I have seen this. The C.Y. O'Connor College of TAFE based in Northam, rather than sending students to a contemporary school environment, is taking the training to the workplace. That is a great initiative by this government and something I would like to see perpetuated, because not all kids are the same; they learn in different ways.