

ABORIGINAL COMMISSION OF ELDERS, FUNDING

**355. Mr BLOFFWITCH to the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs:**

I am aware that the Aboriginal Commission of Elders has been asking the major political parties about the continuation of funding after the state election. Will the minister confirm that the coalition will continue to fund the Aboriginal Commission of Elders after its re-election?

**Dr HAMES replied:**

I thank the member for some notice of this question.

As members know, this Government established the Commission of Elders early in its term of government to create an opportunity for Aboriginal people, particularly Aboriginal elders, to have input into government policy and to have the ability to directly communicate with me as the minister and the Premier.

In my recent discussions with the Commission of Elders, I was asked what would be the Australian Labor Party policy towards the Commission of Elders, should it be elected at the next election, and would it receive the funding of close to \$500 000 that it currently receives to enable it to continue. It is reasonable that the Commission of Elders should express concern about what the Labor Party may do with Aboriginal communities in Western Australia, because trying to get policy on Aboriginal affairs out of the Labor Party has proved to be almost impossible. A recent debate took place in the other place about Aboriginal issues, which referred particularly to the native title issue, especially the Labor Party's ineptitude -

Several members interjected.

Dr HAMES: It is a bit hard to hear, Mr Speaker, with three members having a go.

The Labor Party has obviously been inept in its native title management policy regarding native title in this State, particularly about Aboriginal issues. A former member of the Labor Party, one of those to whom the Premier referred, commented about his former party and its position on Aboriginal issues and Aboriginal policy. I shall quote from the *Hansard* part of the recent debate in that House. Hon Mark Nevill in earlier comments referred to the lack of opportunity for any Labor Party member to be able to make any comment on Aboriginal issues. I would have thought that a member such as he is, whose electorate covers large numbers of Aboriginal communities and who has a very good relationship with Aboriginal communities, would have been allowed to have some input into Aboriginal policy. He said -

When we had the debate on this issue in 1998 I was gagged by the ALP Caucus - there was to be only one speaker. That was organised by Hon Tom Stephens and Hon Geoff Gallop.

Hon Mark Nevill was therefore gagged from making any comment on Aboriginal issues. He then went on to make comments about the Leader of the Opposition in the other place and Aboriginal policy of the Labor Party. He said -

The Leader of the Opposition always goes the other way when there is a debate on Aboriginal affairs. We recently had a debate on Aboriginal education and he absented himself from the Chamber.

He will never give his views. In six or seven years have we ever seen a policy paper on Aboriginal affairs from this opposition spokesman on Aboriginal affairs?

He said in a later part of the debate -

The reason there has not been a policy paper from the Leader of the Opposition -

He was not referring to the Leader of the Opposition in this place but to the leader in the other place -

the opposition spokesman on Aboriginal affairs - for seven years is that he is absolutely bereft of ideas.

The Labor Party is bereft of ideas on Aboriginal issues, and it is about time it gave some direction on what it will do to support Aboriginal people -

Dr Gallop: My friend, One Nation is not bereft of ideas on Aboriginal issues, and your party regards it as higher up the scale than the Labor Party. That tells us something about your attitude.

The SPEAKER: Order, members! When I indicated to members that I would allow additional interjections, there was one small condition; that is, they had something to do with the matters under discussion, not other matters. Perhaps the minister will finish his answer.

Dr HAMES: The Leader of the Opposition talked about his interest in Aboriginal issues in this State. The debate to which I referred was about the native title issue. Once again I quote Hon Mark Nevill -

This Labor Opposition has no interest in solving the native title problem. The problem is that no member of the Labor Party knows anything about it, including the Leader of the Opposition, who has the most deficient knowledge of the Native Title Act of any person I know.