

PREMIER'S STATEMENT

Consideration

Resumed from 13 February on the following question —

That the Premier's Statement be noted.

MR R.S. LOVE (Moore — Leader of the Opposition) [12.25 pm]: I rise to make a contribution to this discussion in response to the Premier's Statement. I begin by extending my deepest gratitude to the dedicated emergency personnel who supported our communities throughout a particularly challenging bushfire and storm season. Time and time again, our emergency workers and especially our dedicated volunteers, stand as guardians of our communities, defending us against severe bushfires. Back in 2021, thanks went to those volunteers who assisted communities across the midwest from Kalbarri through to the central wheatbelt in the aftermath of tropical cyclone Seroja, a disaster from which many are yet to recover. In the same year, the Wooroloo bushfire laid waste to tens of thousands of hectares of land, destroying 86 properties and raging for almost a week. In 2023, we saw destruction across the Kimberley with floods following ex-tropical cyclone Ellie, with key infrastructure wrecked, and tragic loss of life and livestock. As Leader of the Opposition, I pledge our commitment to ensuring our communities are equipped with the resources they need to be safer and more resilient in the face of future challenges.

The trend of commencing each year with devastation cannot continue. It is acknowledged that we all live in a climate that is seeing increased events of scales that lead to devastation and destruction. Often called freak events or one-in-100-year events, these occurrences are becoming more common, as is our inability to manage the response and recovery, and the ongoing resilience of our state. We must aim to do better. The Labor government needs to address this head on. How is it planning to bolster the resilience of our state? Emergency services is a specific portfolio, but this need cuts across all government departments. We must ensure that the response and recovery from these increasing storm events and bushfires is better handled in the future. Response should be swift and recovery should be clearly laid out for the impacted communities so that they can see a light at the end of the tunnel. That is not the case for many people who are still struggling after some of the events we have seen, including cyclone Seroja. Currently under this Labor government, emergency services have fallen so far down the priority list that we seem to have forgotten about the promise of a rewrite of the emergency services legislation. The commitment that we would make is that emergency services will be at the forefront. There would be fit-for-purpose legislation and it would be enacted as quickly as possible.

During the summer recess, opposition members took the time to get back into their electorates and journey across the state, engaging directly with businesses, families and hardworking individuals to listen to their pressing concerns. A consistent message coming from these dialogues is that our constituents are eagerly awaiting the day that they can see the back of this tired Labor government. We have only 53 sitting days now ahead of us and, at the end of that, my message to all Western Australians will be clear: you hold the power to change the government; you hold the power to see a fresh direction. The imperative for change has never been clearer. Western Australians deserve a government that listens and takes decisive action to significantly improve the quality of life for all Western Australians—a government that is responsive, accountable and representative of the people it serves. The feedback we have received over the summer has fortified all our resolves to advocate for a future in which transparency, community safety and dependable infrastructure are not just aspirational goals but tangible realities. It is abundantly clear that only under a National and Liberal government can these aspirations be fully realised. The countdown has begun for Western Australians and they can look forward to a future under a fresh government that acts as a catalyst for progress in Western Australia rather than a hindrance.

Since the debate on the Premier's Statement last year, a lot has happened. One thing is that it was a different Premier who gave that address. But if we look back at 2023, it is hard to ignore the calamitous introduction of Aboriginal cultural heritage legislation under this government—a saga that laid bare this government's mismanagement and the blatant disregard it holds for the views of Western Australians. That legislation was thrust upon us without a meaningful opportunity for debate and with little regard for the consequences. It became a lightning rod for public outrage and exposed this Labor government's tendency towards hasty and ill-considered policy decisions. The manner in which this act was pushed through against a backdrop of nearly unanimous public opposition is evidence of a Labor government that is dangerously more interested in political posturing than in actually serving the genuine needs of Western Australians. In the extraordinary about-face six weeks or so after the legislation's implementation, Premier Cook was forced to publicly retreat, scrapping the act in what can only be described as a humiliating admission of failure. However, this capitulation was not born of a new-found respect for public opinion, but rather as a desperate measure to quell the growing unrest among landowners and the broader Western Australian community. The people's triumph in being heard through the opposition's relentless advocacy, community protest and the voices of over 30 000 people putting their name to a petition contrasted starkly with Premier Cook's initial arrogance over this matter and the Labor government's dismissive attitude towards legitimate concerns.

Premier Cook's leadership got off to a wobbly start. If we look back, there was a three-way contest for the position, which only ended when the union movement picked the Premier of our state. Of course, that wobbly start was only enhanced by what happened with the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act debacle. The government's stubborn refusal to listen and its late and grudging acknowledgement of the issues with the axed laws highlights a disconnect with the community's values and needs. The incident is not an isolated error, but a symptom of a broader pattern of governance under Premier Cook and WA Labor—a governance defined by rash decision-making, a lack of genuine consultation and a disconcerting willingness to ignore the people they serve. The questions that linger in the aftermath of this repeal regarding the legal advice sought, the financial implications for landowners and the mysterious influences behind the government's sudden change of heart remain conspicuously unanswered. We are left with a situation of great uncertainty. Charges have been levelled against local councils, and businesses that have been contracted by those councils are still left with uncertainty. It leaves landowners and shires genuinely unsure about how they can interact and do business, especially when they are dealing with the state's waterways. Pandora's box has been opened by the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act debacle, but the act's repeal has not closed the lid. This lack of transparency and accountability speaks volumes about the Cook Labor government's approach to leadership, further eroding public trust and confidence in its ability to govern effectively.

As we stand at the threshold of a new year in the Parliament, the lessons from the failed Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2021 are clear. Western Australians deserve better than the reactive, opaque and out-of-touch governance offered by Premier Cook and his Labor government. The people of this state have shown that they will not tolerate leaders who act with impunity, disregard the will of their constituents and fail to own up to their mistakes. It is time for a change. It is time to usher in a government that listens, respects and acts in the true interests of all Western Australians. The Cook government's legacy, marred by this and other policy failures, serves as a stark reminder of the need for leadership that is both responsive and responsible.

In the midst of discussions around the partial closure of some of Western Australia's premier tourist attractions over safety and cultural concerns, the current Labor government's approach has sparked significant concern. The potential closure of iconic sites highlights a critical concern for our tourism industry and the broad economic health of our state. Tourism in Western Australia is an essential component of our economy, contributing billions of dollars annually and supporting thousands of jobs across cities and regions. Western Australia is home to some of the nation's most spectacular natural wonders and attractions, drawing visitors from across the globe. These tourists not only experience the unique beauty of our state, but also contribute significantly to the local economy. In 2023 alone, visitors to Western Australia spent more than \$17.3 billion supporting local tour operators, local catering businesses and conservation efforts at our greatest attractions. The uncertainty that comes with the potential closure of these sites could severely impact future bookings and create anxiety amongst tour operators, employees and small businesses that rely on a thriving tourism sector. Our unique natural attractions, like Horizontal Falls, Nature's Window in Kalbarri, Wave Rock in Hyden and the Gloucester Tree in Pemberton, give Western Australia a competitive edge on the global stage. Closing these attractions will severely hinder the ability of regional families, businesses and communities to sustain themselves.

The state government and the Minister for Tourism need to address any safety or cultural concerns promptly, to ensure that these attractions remain open and accessible. It is not just about keeping the doors open; it is about securing the future of tourism in Western Australia, safeguarding jobs, and preserving the cultural and economic fabric of our communities. The importance of tourism to our cities and regions cannot be overstated. This industry is a lifeline for many, providing employment, stimulating local economies, and promoting cultural exchange.

The Tourism Council of Western Australia's chief executive officer echoes those concerns and was quoted in an ABC news online article of 27 October 2023 —

“You need certainty for the licence to operate,” ...

...

“People come from Germany, from the US, from Japan, and those businesses [in the Kimberley] ... have to spend money advertising.

“And unless we're highlighting around the world, we will get less people turning up to the Kimberley.”

That was in relation to the closure of Horizontal Falls. Despite these efforts, it seems that the current state government is not giving the tourism sector the attention it deserves, at a potential cost to the Western Australian economy and its standing on the national and international stage.

The opposition remains committed to ensuring that unique and safe tourism experiences can continue to be taken across the state. Through initiatives like the development of the Kalbarri Skywalk and the Albany Gap viewing platform, funded through royalties for regions, we have in the past demonstrated our dedication to enhancing Western Australia's tourism offerings. These projects not only made those attractions more accessible, but also ensured that they can be enjoyed safely by visitors for years to come.

The potential for Labor to close down the very attractions that bring millions of dollars into the Western Australian economy is a concerning prospect. We stand ready to oppose any measures that would diminish our tourism sector's vibrancy and economic contribution. It is time for a united call to action to preserve Western Australia's status as a premier tourist destination, ensuring that our natural wonders and cultural heritage remain accessible for all to enjoy.

A little while ago I visited Kalgoorlie, just after the disastrous situation in which that community had to grapple with frustrations towards the state government, Western Power and Telstra in respect of the failure to keep the lights on after a storm event. I went up there with the understanding that that would be the main topic of concern in the community, and yes, there was outrage and concern around that. But it also emerged very quickly that the dominant issue was a deep-rooted problem that had been simmering beneath the surface in that town for far too long: rampant antisocial behaviour and crime. These issues had been met with what appeared to be total apathy on the part of the state government and local elected officials.

I received similar feedback across my travels in other parts of regional Western Australia, but in Kalgoorlie I was told that the Kalgoorlie Chamber of Commerce and Industry had convened a forum to deliberate on the pressing issues of the antisocial behaviour and crime that had engulfed the community. The forum—which was initially expected to host 25 businesses, but instead attracted more than 70—signalled a community at breaking point, desperate for solutions and actions. From vicious attacks on local business owners, to rampant shoplifting and property damage, the narrative was consistent: a community besieged by crime and violence, with responses from law enforcement painfully slow or, at times, non-existent. Business owners experienced a sense of abandonment, with some no longer bothering to report incidents to the police after becoming resigned to the fact that their pleas would go unanswered. This situation was further exacerbated by the state Labor government's deafening silence and lack of support, which was nothing short of inexcusable. It is evident that the belated recognition of the issue led to a hurried announcement by the Minister for Police to provide some cover for what had been, hitherto, deafening silence from the Cook Labor government. It is clear that the government's reaction occurred after the opposition highlighted the concerns of the community, which raises an obvious question: where has the member for Kalgoorlie been for the last three years? Rampant street drinking and sly grogging in some regional communities highlights a glaring enforcement gap. The nefarious practice of supplying alcohol to dry communities or individuals on the banned drinkers register is not just illegal; it is morally reprehensible and contributes significantly to the social unrest we are witnessing. The federal government's decision to withdraw the Indue cashless debit card and the promised but undelivered wraparound supports have only added fuel to the fire. The spike in antisocial behaviour and crime following the axing of that card highlights the critical need for support services to be implemented effectively. The call for more short-stay and crisis accommodation, transport services to facilitate timely return to country and enhanced support for sobering-up centres, community street patrols and Aboriginal healthcare services is loud and clear. They are not just requests but essential needs that, if met, could significantly mitigate the current crisis. The current state of affairs in Kalgoorlie–Boulder is a stark reminder of the neglect faced by a region that contributes immensely to the economic health of Australia and, of course, Western Australia. It is time for the state and federal Labor governments to step up, listen and provide the necessary support to address these complex social issues. The community of Kalgoorlie–Boulder deserves better than to feel neglected by those who are elected to represent, support and protect their interests.

In the face of the Cook Labor government's proposed firearms, my colleagues and I, together with the members of the Sporting Shooters Association WA, took a stand on behalf of the community. We launched a petition that garnered an overwhelming 12 673 signatures in less than three weeks, calling for an extension to the consultation period on the firearm legislation from one month to three months. The significant show of support underscores the community's deep frustration with the Labor government's flawed consultation processes. The approach of the Labor government and the police minister to the firearm buyback scheme, which was announced in this morning's newspaper before the legislation has been placed in Parliament, showcases their disregard for the general public consultation process and the processes of Parliament, opting for media attention over proper legislative process. They have also set the compensation for firearms well below their market value and sidelined the concerns of lawful firearm owners in favour of chasing front-page headlines. The arrogance displayed by the Cook Labor government in dismissing the views of thousands of Western Australians is a glaring example of its disregard for meaningful engagement with the people they should be serving. This policy-on-the-run approach, whereby legislation is hastily pushed through Parliament without adequate community consultation, is unacceptable. Our call for an extended consultation period was a plea for respect and genuine dialogue to consider the insights and concerns of those who will be most affected by the changes. The situation was earlier exacerbated with a poorly conceived PR stunt by the Western Australia Police Force and the Minister for Police that involved releasing maps indicating the location of gun owners. This move, which was criticised for potentially increasing the risk of firearm-related crimes, betrayed the trust and privacy of law-abiding gun owners. The release of these maps, which could have provided criminals with tempting information, was an egregious breach of trust. It is concerning that this government prioritises media stunts over the safety and privacy of its citizens. I have a strong commitment to ensuring public safety in our

community and that our community's concerns are not ignored. Public interest is served only when there is respect for process and general consideration of the public's feedback on firearm reforms and any other matter. The overwhelming response to the petition is a clear message to the Cook Labor government to listen to its people, respect their calls for a more inclusive consultation process and act in good faith to address those concerns. As we move forward, it is crucial that the government re-evaluates its approach to legislation and public engagement overall. The people of Western Australia deserve a government that values their input, respects their rights and works to ensure their safety and wellbeing. It is time for the Cook Labor government to listen to the calls of its citizens and to approach this issue with the seriousness and consideration it warrants.

As we know from the many discussions in this place, the Cook Labor government, this state Labor government of seven years, has an abysmal track record when it comes to delivering for health, and regional health in particular. There is a long list of broken promises, delayed projects, staffing shortages and cost cuts across the length and breadth of Western Australia. Let us look at Geraldton, where the Cook Labor government's signature election commitment for the redevelopment of the Geraldton Health Campus will not be finished until at least 2027, over a decade after it was first promised. The Auditor General's 2023 *Transparency report: Major projects*, which was released last October, identified the Geraldton Health Campus redevelopment as Western Australia's most delayed project, at 58 months, almost six years, behind schedule. It was originally scheduled to be completed by the end of 2022 at a cost of \$45 million. The current project now sits at over \$122 million, with an estimated completion in early 2027. The failure to progress this critical project beyond the procurement stage for six years demonstrates Labor's lack of commitment to Geraldton and the midwest. Labor's decision to put the project to tender with unrealistic project costs has resulted in the lengthiest procurement process I have ever witnessed. It only concluded in December last year with the awarding of the contract to Multiplex. Although the government now claims work will commence in 2024—another broken promise because the Minister for Health made assurances during budget estimates that work would commence in 2023—we are still yet to see a project time line for when work will begin or an estimated completion date. If we are looking at broken promises, the Laverton community is still waiting for its new hospital, which was originally fully funded in 2016, prior to the Labor government coming to power. For the Premier to say that he is determined and committed to delivering this hospital absolutely beggars belief. He is the one who killed the project as health minister back in 2017. It was his decision that led to the situation the Laverton community finds itself in now. This was a fully funded project under royalties for regions, but when Labor took the reins in 2017, it slashed the funding and told the resources industry it should pick up the tab. In 2019, the federal government came to the rescue with \$16.4 million, and it was only following community uproar and opposition pressure that the state Labor government reluctantly pitched in, bringing the total funding to \$23.5 million. The community was left shocked and devastated again last year when it was revealed by the opposition, thanks to Hon Martin Aldridge, that this tender process was a sham. The Minister for Finance closed the tender process for the Laverton Hospital on 21 April 2023. Only one response was received and it took more than six months for the government to determine that that single response was noncompliant. After being exposed by the opposition for burying this information, the government quickly slapped together a request-for-information process that was open for a little over a week from 31 October to 8 November 2023. Again, it attracted just one response. In 2017, the then Minister for Regional Development defended the Western Australia Labor government's cuts to the Laverton Hospital stating, "A new government clearly needs to prioritise its own agenda."

Clearly, the Laverton Hospital was not on the Labor government's agenda in 2017, and 2024 is still clearly not on the Labor government's agenda.

The list of broken promises across regional Western Australia continues though. The community of Mullewa, in my electorate of Moore, is still waiting for its hospital to be redeveloped. This was promised back in 2016, indeed it was funded back in 2016, but there is still no time line on when this hospital upgrade may occur. The most recent update from the government is that the project would progress only after the completion of the Geraldton Health Campus redevelopment, which is still several years away, as we know, and also that further budget allocations need to be made for it to occur.

Former Premier Mark McGowan told local media in the Pilbara that construction of the new Tom Price Hospital would begin by the end of 2022. As we enter 2024, no contract has been awarded and construction is yet to begin. Meekatharra District Hospital is also in limbo after a promise made in 2017 to build a new health facility for the town. This project sits as another empty election promise with no start date and no certainty of when it will be delivered.

Labor is failing not just to build new hospitals but to maintain existing hospitals. In September 2019, the state government promised to deliver a regional priority hospital maintenance blitz and announced over \$37 million to fund urgent upgrades to hospitals, health clinics, aged-care sites and staff accommodation. However, many of these projects never eventuated. In total, 97 regional health projects with a combined value of \$14.62 million were secretly scrapped by the Cook Labor government, including a roof replacement at Bridgetown Hospital worth \$1 million; essential fire services upgrades at Gnowangerup District Hospital, worth \$883 000; and the removal of asbestos at Paraburdoo valued at \$300 000. An upgrade to Collie's nurses' quarters worth \$1 million never saw the light of

day, resulting in the facility being closed down. Consequently, WA Country Health Service is now forced to house 18 local health staff in hotels and motels. As a result of the failure by WACHS to invest in staff accommodation, we have 66 staff around WA, predominantly in the south west and the Pilbara, being housed in hotels and motels, at a cost of around \$400 000 a month or roughly \$4.8 million a year.

We also have the shameful circumstances in Carnarvon where maternity services were shut by Labor two years ago. It appears no effort has been made to restore those services, despite claims at the time that the closure would be temporary. Since its closure in February 2022, 163 Gascoyne families have been impacted and have been forced to travel as far away as Karratha, Bunbury and even Busselton, over 1 000 kilometres away, to give birth, isolated from their friends, families and communities. This comes at a significant cost. The state government paid out \$635 000 in transport and accommodation subsidies. I met with impacted families and expectant mothers in Carnarvon and they are understandably frustrated after two years of being told the closure was temporary. I join them in urging the Premier to provide a guarantee of when this vital service will be restored. The current inability to access maternity services between Geraldton and Karratha in a state as prosperous as Western Australia is simply shameful and should be unacceptable to a government with a \$3.7 billion budget surplus.

I could go on. There are also Labor's broken promises to establish urgent care clinics in multiple regional locations—Albany, Geraldton, Kalgoorlie, the Kimberley and the Pilbara—which would have diverted thousands of patients from emergency departments and helped ease the pressure on our hospitals and ambulances. The patient assisted travel scheme has the most miserly fuel subsidy in Australia at just 16¢ per kilometre, well behind the 40¢ offered in New South Wales and the 32¢ offered in South Australia. It has not been reviewed seriously in seven years since Labor came to power.

The Cook Labor government and the Minister for Health have been shamelessly evading the issue of Albany Health Campus's future, with reports swirling that the government has known since 2021 that Albany Health Campus urgently needs a redevelopment to meet patient care demand. A business case in the order of \$321 million has been completed but has never been made public. The government has known since December 2021 that Albany Health Campus urgently needs redevelopment and has had two budgets to act and billions of dollars of surpluses available, but it has failed to act. Our communities deserve better than these broken promises, delayed projects and neglected health services.

I will turn now to one of the industries that is most important in Western Australia—that is, the agricultural industry. In Western Australia, our agricultural sector is ensnared in a web of excessive regulation, which has built up under this Labor government. It is a critical barrier to prosperity and sustainability of our farmers who are the most heavily regulated in the entire nation. The findings are clear: Western Australian farmers navigate through a labyrinth of 123 regulatory categories for wheat and barley, 119 for canola and an astonishing 146 for livestock, both at a state and federal level. This burden, the heaviest across the country, highlights a Labor government that has lost sight of the principles of efficiency and support for one of our most important sectors.

Consider the implications for Western Australia's agricultural producers, leading the country in the production of wheat, canola and barley, who are forced to comply with regulations imposed by up to 33 separate federal and state government agencies. That not only stifles their ability to operate, but places a competitive disadvantage on them, both nationally and internationally. The Labor government's oversight has led to a situation in which our wheat and barley growers face 16 per cent more regulation than their counterparts in New South Wales—12 per cent more than the national average. Our canola growers and livestock producers are similarly encumbered, facing 17 per cent and 24 per cent more regulation respectively than those in New South Wales. This overregulation represents real-world challenges for those on the ground. Farmers are not only the stewards of our land, but key drivers of our economy and food security; yet, under Labor's watch they grapple with an ever expanding maze of red tape. The situation demands urgent action and a re-evaluation of our regulatory framework to ensure it serves the interests of growth, innovation and sustainability, rather than hindering them.

The Labor government must be held accountable for the current state of affairs, in which policy seems more focused on bureaucratic expansion than the growth of the agricultural sector and those who depend on it. It is time for a change, time to streamline those processes and reduce the regulatory burden on our farmers and pastoralists, ensuring Western Australia's community continues to thrive as a vital contributor to our nation's agricultural output.

As everyone knows, there was recently an incident off our coast, which highlighted the glaring inadequacies of the Labor government in handling the live sheep trade. It was the recent *MV Bahijah* event. The vessel was destined for the Red Sea, with nearly 17 000 live animals, but it was abruptly ordered to return to Australia. It exposed a failure in planning and policy under federal Labor's watch. That decision, while framed as precautionary, laid bare the government's reactive stance, devoid of foresight or effective strategy. Central to this debacle was the federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Senator Murray Watt, whose action, or lack thereof, has become a symbol of Labor's broader governance failures. This incident has highlighted a disconcerting trend within the current administration: a propensity for political expediency over practical, ethical solutions.

The plight of the vessel under Labor's directive starkly illustrates a government seemingly adrift, prioritising internal politics over the urgent needs of animal welfare and industry stability. For those of us who are more cynical about the state Labor government's flimsy claims to support an industry, while it did deals with an animal welfare party to slam the industry shut, there is a grave and growing concern regarding the federal government's response to this crisis. Did it fail to plan for the ship's return to port, or did it deliberately neglect the operators, adding fuel to the flames for the activists who wish to bring this trade to an end? Did it allow the ship to remain without a solution to allow a rise in vitriol for those groups and allow them to further the Labor government's aim of seeing the suspension and end of live sheep trade?

It is outrageous that there are people who saw the news of the good health and welfare outcomes of the livestock aboard that ship as being somewhat disappointing. We saw predictions on the news of many sick animals on the vessel and they had to be unloaded. Disappointingly for some people, we saw images of the cattle as they were being unloaded from the vessel and those cattle were in excellent condition. There seemed to me to be absolutely no threat to their welfare, other than having no final destination, and that came about due to lack of planning by the federal government.

I turn now to another pressing matter for Western Australia—the housing situation. Western Australia's housing crisis is dire. The situation has deteriorated under the current Labor government. It is characterised by a series of late-stage interventions and announcements that, sadly, have fallen short of making any real impact. The creation of the housing supply unit within Western Australian Treasury is one of a series of ongoing announcements and teams that appear to have been created that achieve nothing. It is a last-minute attempt to tackle the rental and housing affordability meltdown. It highlights the depth of the crisis and the government's failure to address it effectively. The move begs the question: is the creation of this team an admission that the current ministerial team is unable to manage one of the state's most pressing issues?

I will turn to the regions. In the midwest and Gascoyne, 191 public homes lay vacant as families navigate the instability and insecurity of homelessness, with 1 380 houses sitting empty across the state and a vacancy rate in the midwest–Gascoyne of a staggering 13.7 per cent, which is three times the state average. This crisis is more than just a statistic; it is a daily reality for many. The frustration of seeing potential homes boarded up, coupled with the Department of Communities' inability to address these vacancies swiftly, paints a grim picture of neglect and inaction by this Labor government.

Meanwhile, in Perth, the situation is also grim, with median rental prices soaring to \$595 per week, which is a significant leap from the \$360 per week that it was pre-pandemic. The rental vacancy rate plummeting to a mere 0.7 per cent shows a market that is under severe strain whereby demand far outstrips supply. The crisis has not only made renting unaffordable for many, but also pushed the dream of home ownership out of the reach of many average Western Australians, with the number of homes listed for sale plummeting by one-quarter over a year. The market's tightness is exacerbating an already critical shortage. Despite all the promises, we know that fewer social homes are available to Western Australians now than in 2017 when Labor came to office. The fact is that in June 2017, there were 44 087 social homes in Western Australia. The figures provided in Parliament in October last year show that at that point there were 43 954. The reality is that throughout its seven years, this government has managed to actually reduce the amount of social housing available, not increase it. This crisis—the worst housing crisis Western Australia has faced—is a direct result of years of inaction by Labor. This is a government of false announcements that chases front-page headlines rather than delivers tangible solutions. The question remains: how many homes will the newly announced initiatives actually build, and when will the government acknowledge that a crack team of bureaucrats cannot substitute for effective decisions and leadership by the minister? As we delve into these challenges, it is clear that the current administration's approach to housing has been marked by a stark failure to plan, a reliance on reactive measures and a distressing disconnect from the realities faced by Western Australians.

While we have a housing crisis, it is staggering that Western Power is seemingly unable to connect properties and business in a timely manner. This problem has been raised often in this house by the opposition. To highlight it again, I will read to members a letter sent to my office asking for help. Part of this letter says —

The timeframes provided by Western Power to assess, validate, design and construct power upgrades to residential properties seems to demonstrate inefficiencies within that organisation as well as a lack of understanding of regional Western Australia. Such inefficiencies are adversely impacting business and property owners. This is combined with the ageing and outdated supply assets that are in place and require such upgrades.

This is affecting not just Western Australia's regions; it is right across the state. We know that building in regions is exponentially more time consuming and costly than in the metro area. Labor has only made this worse. Generally, if we look at the energy situation, we know that the *SWIS demand assessment* showed us what many in the industry already knew; that is, the government's mismanagement is coming home to roost. The Labor government has failed to keep the lights on and industry powered. If we look at recent events in the hills, the wheatbelt and the goldfields, we can see that the government cannot fool the people of Western Australia that the government did not already

know about the risk to Kalgoorlie at the end of the long feeder line. There was a very similar power event in 2022. In fact, someone reading the news reports today could imagine they were reading the newspaper from two years before. It was an eerily similar occurrence. During this time, the government has failed to meaningfully support residents and business despite knowing that many households and businesses are suffering under the weight of the cost-of-living crisis. This is not helped by the inaction of a government that has only temporarily doubled the insignificant payments to residents for lost service, which is a slap in the face to other Western Australian residents facing similar problems over the years. Despite many thousands of dollars of loss to trades and goods, zero extra assistance is given to businesses.

Again, we see grand announcements, but in seven years, what has this Labor government done to expedite the revival and resilience of Western Australia's energy grid? Has it done something other than shovel mountains of funds into propping up the insolvent Griffin Coal, yet the Labor government has had to resort to importing coal from New South Wales? We know that it is likely that hundreds of millions of dollars in rehabilitation costs will be left to Western Australian taxpayers to clean up the environmental situation with Griffin Coal's enterprise. This is a further cost that the Labor government refuses to detail to the Western Australian community. It is potentially hundreds of millions of dollars of Western Australian funds, and many hours, days and weeks of frustration and lost productivity through this mismanagement of our energy sector. This, amongst other vital concerns, has shown the failed capacity and utter confusion of WA Labor.

Stakeholders of WA's domestic gas industry have been warning of a looming gas shortage long before the Australian Energy Market Operator recently published a paper predicting it. AEMO forecasts an average annual increase in demand of 2.2 per cent between 2024 and 2033, while supply is expected to decline 0.9 per cent, on average, each year over the same period. Furthermore, AEMO identifies an increasing need for investment in additional gas supplies and the critical role of gas in supporting Western Australia's transition to net zero.

Our resources power the state, the nation and the world, but where is the Cook Labor government? Apparently, it is paying environmental groups to fight against the critical projects that might save our energy systems from falling into complete and utter chaos. The Cook government, along with the federal Labor government, funds the Environmental Defender's Office. This is the same group of people who were recently lambasted by the Federal Court for confecting evidence and coaching witnesses, amongst other things. Why is this government funding a body that conducts warfare against our vital industries?

We have a global urgency for our critical minerals, which will power the new energy economy. We are in the box seat to drive this, yet where is the support for the development of these projects? The lack of infrastructure and the failure to provide drive towards assisting these projects leads many to turn elsewhere. We have proponents willing and able to invest significant funds into developing our assets underpinning not only WA's economy, but also the nation's economy. However, the Premier is apparently unable to send the right signals to an industry that needs long-term stable supply agreements and understandings, because he cannot decide on which side of the fence he sits—Western Australia's security and prosperity or activists who seek to undermine that security and prosperity.

Trying to get renewable energy projects off the ground is not easy either. The Green Energy Approvals Initiative was created at the end of 2022 because it seemed impossible to progress with renewable energy projects. Where is this at now? It seems that the Labor government is full of announcements but zero action. What we have seen since is nothing but a series of announcements, of teams being formed and of promises of change but nothing getting better. Labor announced a short, sharp review into the approvals process with the Environmental Protection Authority, which was the review into cutting green tape—the Vogel–McFerran review. It found, unsurprisingly, that after seven years of a Labor government, approvals processes had become overly complex, time-consuming and costly, holding back economic development without any benefit to the community. That is just another example of the confused workings and ideology of this government.

Roger Cook made himself Minister for Hydrogen Industry at the end of 2022 and then quietly dropped hydrogen as a standalone ministry altogether at the last cabinet reshuffle. What we hear from industry is a lack of clear guidance from this government regarding development, which makes it impossible to make investment decisions. Despite protracted and significant warnings from industry regarding the security of Western Australia's energy systems and supply, Labor sits on its hands.

There are only 53 sitting days left for this house—53 days to hold to account this arrogant and out of touch Labor government. There is a feeling in the air out there that discontentment is rife and I am not just talking about out there because I am sure, amongst the Premier's backbench, many will be concerned about their futures. But there are many Western Australians who are also concerned about their futures. Western Australians are tired of being locked out of consultation and ignored on crucial issues. They are tired of a government lauding a multibillion-dollar surplus but failing to keep the power on. They are tired of a government applauding themselves for banning ham sandwiches at the tuckshop while families literally cannot afford to put food in their kids' lunchboxes. It sounds a cliché to say a government is out of touch, I know, but it is the best way to describe a government that seems to

be oblivious to just how serious things are and how many Western Australians are doing it tough in a cost-of-living crisis. The Premier claims to understand regional communities, joking about becoming a farmer when he is ready for a job change. He is oblivious to the fact that his government and his party are running our agricultural and regional industries, and economies, into the ground, cutting regional communities off at the knees.

A longstanding adage—one that I hold—is that when the regions are strong, so too is the state. This is a concept Premier Cook fails to grasp. He fails to see the connection between communities in the metro and those outside Perth. If you fail to protect our food bowls, expect to see produce prices rise. If you fail to address vulnerabilities of regional road and rail networks, you fail to understand that one fire can shut down supply chains into Perth. If you continue to erode the capacity of our regional health services, such as maternity services in Carnarvon or regional radiation oncology services, or you fail to invest in staff and staff accommodation, you put more pressure on the services in Perth. Perth is fast becoming the only place in our vast state where expectant families can give birth and those battling cancer can access life-saving treatment. That is an indictment on this government. This Premier fails to understand that putting your foot on the hose of investment into regional areas destabilises our whole state.

Only the Nationals and Liberals in government are willing to deliver a statewide agenda that will decentralise our economic strengths and ensure that those communities generating the surplus this government sits on actually see the investment they deserve. Only the Nationals and Liberals in government will protect regional industries, understanding that when you fail to do so, Perth and the whole state will pay the price. Our commitment to the state is as simple as this: you deserve better than this Labor government and I will do all I can to ensure we do not continue to suffer under its agenda. We have a monumental year ahead, one of hard work for this team. We will work with local communities and industry every step of the way in crafting our policy platform for 2025. Small businesses and individuals, families and volunteers—Western Australia will see itself reflected in our policies and will see a platform designed to propel forward our state.

A key component of our platform will come in response to years of underinvestment and a dangerous lack of planning in the energy space. We must be better equipped to deal with pressure on our power systems and have plans in place for shortages foreseeable years in advance. Our state is incredibly well placed to be a leader in the energy space. Under this Labor government we are missing opportunities and failing to prepare ourselves for the changes that are coming across the sector.

Amendment to Question

Mr R.S. LOVE: I therefore move to amend the question before the house. I move —

That the following words be added after “noted” —

and that this house condemns the Cook Labor government for its failure to adequately plan for Western Australia’s shifting energy landscape and climate challenges, neglecting the crucial need for foresight in ensuring the state’s environmental sustainability and economic resilience

MS L. METTAM (Vasse — Leader of the Liberal Party) [1.15 pm]: I rise to support the amendment that has been moved by the Leader of the Opposition. There is no doubt that the severe weather conditions that Western Australians have been subject to over the past few months have been immense. We have had extreme storms and records broken by multiple days with temperatures above 40 degrees, and Western Australians have been doing everything they can to escape the heat.

Throughout January, the reality for several thousands of Western Australians in regional areas was in many respects a very different picture from what our metropolitan counterparts experienced. The reality for many was that they were forced to suffer through heatwave conditions without power or water because the Cook Labor government failed to listen to the warning signs given by its very own experts. Those opposite have been warned not only recently but for years now that the state’s regional power grid has reliability challenges. The Leader of the Opposition talked about the predictability of the blackouts that were experienced in Kalgoorlie in 2022. Those opposite had been warned that there was a need to install fit-for-purpose backup and shore up the grid and prepare the regions for the type of extreme weather events that we saw in early January. The government was warned about the potentially fatal consequences for residents and owners of small businesses. Instead of dealing with the issue, the government effectively buried its head in the sand and carried on as usual. It was warned and it did nothing. As a result, under its watch, we saw tens of thousands of Western Australians suffer unnecessarily for extended periods in sweltering conditions without power because this government failed to heed the advice of its own department. For the past two years, we have seen this represented in budget papers that have included warnings of exactly the scenario that we saw in Kalgoorlie, Giddegannup, the goldfields and the wheatbelt, and the reality of what happens if we do not heed the warnings of those experts and properly invest in the maintenance of the network infrastructure and in backup capacity.

What was the reality? There was no power, no water and no phone access and there were issues in accessing fuel. Some communities were unable to flush the toilet or to call emergency services in case of an accident. We saw the messages that were sent to people in Kalgoorlie on their mobile phones about the issues of charging their phone or needing to contact 000 and having to bring themselves to the hospital. I met with business owners and local residents in Gidgegannup with Hon Dr Steve Thomas, my colleague in the other place, a few days after the power outages had started. To say that locals were ropeable would be an absolute understatement. We spoke with David and Rattana from Gidge Thai Takeaway, who had just opened the doors of their new business the previous week. This is a very exciting local adventure for these two small business owners. They had dreamt of starting this business for years. They sank their own capital into it, pulled up their sleeves and got to work on their dream job and ambition of opening their small business.

Everything was going to plan for this couple. They had their stock set out and counters prepared, and the first day of operation went incredibly well. But a few short days later, the power went out. There was no electricity, which meant that they could not keep their coolrooms running, they could not turn their taps on and they could not open their doors for business. Worst of all, they were forced to throw out thousands of dollars of stock that had spoiled. They were uncertain about placing any future orders due to what the future might hold in terms of when they would be reconnected. There was the possibility of the power remaining off for a long period. I do not need to explain to members that this is not an ideal way to start the first week of operation of a small business.

This uncertainty and hit to their hip pocket at such a crucial point in their small business venture was certainly unfair. As David rightly pointed out, the \$240 grant offered by the government would not even pay for the fuel to operate their generator, let alone do anything to help with the thousands of dollars in revenue lost.

I have also received many letters and other correspondence from several locals, both at the time and after the fact, as many other members in this place would have. They detailed their experiences and provided feedback on how the outage impacted them on the ground, their frustration about the predictability of these storms for the community, and the previous power outages they had seen. One local was Glenda Dann and in her email to me she stated, according to my notes —

Whilst some people have generators in semi-rural locations, many do not. There appears to have been no places set up for households without any power from back-up generators. There was nowhere set-up for people to go to do even the most basic of functions, such as have a shower or charge a phone. A publicly available centre would have also provided elderly people with a place to cool-down in the face of high temperatures and no air conditioning. The combination of no power, disrupted communications and high temperatures could have resulted in loss of life either from the heat itself or people's inability to gain access to necessary information in the event of a fire close to their home. I understand that such a centre was made available in Kalgoorlie, which makes the lack of response in an area close to Perth even more difficult to understand.

Many articulated the predictability of the storms and the power outages and their frustration at the lack of maintenance and backup, which contributed to these circumstances. Glenda has articulated the heart of the issues that this community has gone through, during a cost-of-living crisis. Many also wrote to me to express their frustration at the amount of food they had had to throw out, given that the cost of groceries is such a pressure point for many families across WA at the moment.

The goldfields and Esperance region supports more than 37 000 jobs and has an annual economic impact for the state of more than \$41 billion. This is one of our state's most significant mining regions and is home to a significant amount of Western Australian history. Kalgoorlie is one of the largest outback towns and home to tens of thousands of Western Australians. I spent some time in Kalgoorlie with my colleague Hon Neil Thomson to get an understanding of the impacts that locals were facing throughout the region during the week-long blackout. Their stories were equally heartbreaking. The Leader of the Opposition has already talked about the fact that this is a community that already felt let down on other issues, such as law and order. But they feel that the power outages were a repeat of 2022; that also was expressed with great frustration. I spoke to Steve, the owner of Everett Butchers in Kalgoorlie. He was forced to throw out four tonnes of meat, the equivalent of \$100 000 worth of stock, due to the power outages. He was brave faced about the impact the power outages have had on his business, but it was clear that the impact on his bottom line was extensive.

We also heard from the owners of local cafes, chemists, pubs and various other small businesses about how much they had suffered, the revenue they had lost and how the community was forced to go without because of sweltering heat and cost-of-living pressures. Many of them made the point that the idea that a small business can jump at a moment's notice and spend thousands of dollars on a new generator and the fuel it costs to operate it is just ridiculous. Each household would have thrown out hundreds of dollars' worth of frozen food and produce and \$240 would have hardly scratched the surface. The issue of Western Australians already hurting so much was raised again and again.

Blackouts will occur across the state no matter who is in government. We are not blaming the government for the storm; we have made that explicitly clear. However, blame lies with the government for not better preparing for the predictable. The consistent theme we heard from people in these communities was that the government had not provided adequate investment in maintenance and a backup system and it had failed to understand that its job was to provide effective power backup and ensure that the gas turbines were fit for purpose in extreme weather conditions. This raised real anger among members of these communities. The resumption of two backup gas turbines in West Kalgoorlie was delayed because they immediately tripped after they were turned on. The Premier's attempts to provide an excuse along the lines of them having automatically tripped because there was literally nothing in the system—referring to the lack of existing power in the grid—hardly alleviated the concerns of residents and pointed to a lack of preparedness for the inevitable. The turbines were not fit for purpose and that failure was presided over by this government. It should not take a week-long disaster and the suffering of tens of thousands of people before this government acts, particularly given that the disaster was not without warning. Fire and heatwave outages in February 2022 raised many questions about the reliability of the West Kalgoorlie turbines. This government had two years and a \$6 billion surplus to deliver some semblance of reliability for the grid, yet the best it could offer was a few rounds of maintenance. Obviously, much more needed to be done. It took the support of a local mining company to finally bring power back to the town in the first instance. That raises questions about whether such an offer was made in the past—indeed, in 2022. It is quite embarrassing that members opposite in government could not deliver one of the most basic functions of government—that is, to ensure an effective backup energy supply for continued power so that people can turn their lights on. Neighbouring mining companies had to be relied on to get key regional communities going. Unfortunately, keeping the lights on does not appear to be a priority under the Cook Labor government. We would assume that energy security be a priority of any government. It is about keeping the lights on and keeping air-conditioners running, and it allows businesses to operate. We heard about many elderly people right across the state suffering in the heat during that period, and the frustration that was felt by many, which was really hard to hear. If we turn the power on, we turn our state on. There are a number of real issues with reliability of supply. If anything was to threaten the capacity to keep the state running and our businesses operating, why would the government fail to stop the threat? Why were those warnings ignored budget after budget? Every Western Australian will find that this government has done exactly that. Under this government's watch, energy security has simply been a talking point, not a proven ambition. It is not something this government has taken seriously. Western Australians are suffering now because this government has failed to prioritise its resources to ensure that energy needs are met.

As outlined in the Australian Energy Market Operator's latest report, Western Australia is forecasting major gas shortages in the very near future. The *Gas statement of opportunities* sounded the alarm bell, warning of a 56 per cent increase in gas use over the next decade, with a 27 per cent shortfall in supply. Gas is a major part of our energy mix. If our state faces a shortfall of 27 per cent, it will mean constrained demand and higher prices as well. If we ever hope to get out of the current cost-of-living crisis, this is not the way to go about it. This should not have come as a surprise to the government. AEMO has been warning the government for years that we are on course for a shortfall, but it has taken an election creeping up around the corner for those opposite to wake up.

The government is finally talking about environmental approval reforms, now the issue is reaching crisis point. About \$318 billion worth of projects are awaiting environmental approvals. Forty per cent of proponents are looking at walking away because of an overly time-consuming, complex, cumbersome, duplicative process for approvals. Couple this with the state's plan to close all coal-fired power stations by 2030 and concerns about the lack of work the government has been undertaking to ensure a transition away from coal, with the import of coal into Collie, and it raises real concerns about the preparedness of this government during the largest boom in WA's history.

We also had the absurd situation of both federal and state Labor governments funding an activist group, the Environmental Defenders Office, to mount legal action to stop critical supply projects, such as Woodside's Scarborough development, in WA. Both this government and the Albanese federal Labor government are happy to fund activists, put their feet on the hose and stifle new gas projects from getting up. No wonder there is a forecasted shortfall. This again illustrates a government that has its priorities wrong. It is almost as if this government is complicit in the inevitability of more blackouts and higher power prices. I leave my comments there as I appreciate other members will want to speak on this motion.

MR P.J. RUNDLE (Roe — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [1.34 pm]: Thank you, Acting Speaker, and welcome back to the 2024 parliamentary year. Firstly, I would like to thank the Leader of the Opposition for his comprehensive contribution, which covered many aspects. I support his amendment —

and that this house condemns the Cook Labor government for its failure to adequately plan for Western Australia's shifting energy landscape and climate challenges, neglecting the crucial need for foresight in ensuring the state's environmental sustainability and economic resilience

I also welcome back the Minister for Energy. It has taken an amendment from the opposition to see him in the chamber for the first time in the first day and a half of Parliament for the year.

Mr R.R. Whitby: I have been sick. Do you want to take that back? I have been ill for the last two days, member.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I look forward to welcoming —

Mr R.R. Whitby: You want to take that back, member? I have been incapable of turning up to work for the past two days. I have been very ill.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Momentarily, I will take that back.

Several members interjected.

Withdrawal of Remark

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr P. Lilburne): If that is the direction you are moving, member, perhaps you could just agree to take it back in light of the situation.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I withdraw the comment.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Thank you, member. Please continue.

Debate Resumed

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: We have seen, quite obviously, a storm event that nobody could have predicted, as outlined by both the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Liberal Party, and consequential power failures and the like. It is well known that as a result of these events and the subsequent power failures, within 48 hours there is general chaos in those environments, including at fuel stations. Supermarkets lack food or supermarkets and businesses cannot even open, as the Leader of the Liberal Party outlined. It has been a real concern because we had the same scenario in May 2022, when Premier McGowan was defending the reliability of Western Power's network following the widespread blackouts in the WA goldfields. More than 16 000 customers in the area were without power for extended periods on different days that week. Once again, businesses were without power for several days. It was blamed on issues with the transmission line between Kalgoorlie and the Collgar substation at Merredin.

Premier McGowan said the blackouts were unfortunate and he had received advice that the cause was environmental factors. After the summer storm in January just past, people, as we know, right throughout the goldfields, the wheatbelt and the hills were without power. We saw the government's announcement of the \$240 extended blackout payment, which in many cases went nowhere near cleaning up the costs that people faced.

I will briefly talk about renewables shortly, but I heard Minister Whitby's comments on landing in Kalgoorlie that Kalgoorlie could be a great renewables hub. But the focus here is on backup power and backup turbines and the scenario in which power failures are caused by these events. I look forward to the explanation of what went on prior to that.

I know this is a challenge for the current minister. Obviously, he has only been the minister for a few weeks, so he is picking up some of the activity, or lack of activity, of some of his predecessors. Quite frankly, it was a lack of activity, and I very much look forward to an explanation of that. The member for Cottesloe is very knowledgeable on some of these issues, so I look forward to his explanation as well. There was a review of the Esperance fires. We know that access to 000 is crucial. We know that the review of the Esperance fires contained recommendations about having backup power and telecommunications. Quite frankly, I have not seen this government put anything in place to deal with that. That is disappointing, because it is now eight years or so down the track from the Esperance fires and people out in the regions still have had problems accessing 000 and communications. I know the member for Central Wheatbelt will also talk about that in her contribution to this debate.

I would like to outline some things for the minister. In Bremer Bay in my electorate, new businesses want to start up but they need a reliable power supply in order to do so. We have real issues with that in the Shire of Jerramungup. Western Power cannot offer any reassurance to regional businesses that power supply will be continuous and without interruption. They cannot even get a quote for a connection at the outset. One constituent in Boxwood Hill waited 14 months for a quote and was then told that the connection time was anticipated to be four months. That was an 18-month process to run a line not too many metres from a transformer. Those are the issues facing our regional constituents. There is an abalone hatchery in Bremer Bay. I understand Western Power has a backup generator there, but businesses that want to start in that area, such as an electric car wash, cannot do so because of a lack of assurance from the power provider that power will be continuous and because of maintenance issues. The whole community in the Shire of Jerramungup and the town of Bremer Bay have been hamstrung as they cannot develop tourism businesses and the like. I will certainly take up this issue with the new minister. Business development across the electorate is being restricted. We need that surety. That is something I look forward to the minister providing in the year ahead.

I will briefly touch on renewable projects. I know the government is very focused on renewable energy, such as with the changing scenario with the power supply in Collie. We cannot underestimate the importance of baseline power. I understand that the government wants to go down the renewable energy path, but I am very concerned about the continuity of supply when we see situations like we did in January with the storms, which we obviously

cannot control. I was talking to a wind power operator the other day and was told that not one wind power project came online in the whole of Australia last year. That is the challenge in front of the minister. I know there are wind projects in my area. The Minister for Water will know that the Water Corporation has signed up to one, but there is a big difference between signing up and delivering a project to back up the power structure in this state.

Dr A.D. Buti: You do not want to.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: No. I am just saying that there are issues ahead for this minister and this government. Dealing with these issues involves looking at using renewable energy, baseline power and the combination of what will come onstream, but it does not come onstream as quickly as you would like.

The other part is the actual model for our local governments—that is, the guidelines and the regulations. We have a scenario in which the *Community engagement review: Report to the Minister for Climate Change and Energy* was finally completed in December 2023, and the federal minister recommended that a rating score be developed that jurisdictions and landholders could use to assist in their decision-making. There is a lack of guidelines and regulations to protect landholders from the current model. Different companies and landholders are out there, and it is very opaque and very weighted towards the developer. These are the issues in front of us.

There has been recommendation for mapping of information related to renewables. That should be accessible to everyone. That should be sourced from local and state governments, national parks, World Heritage parks, First Nation peoples, peak agricultural associations and peak environment associations. But the community engagement is lacking, and the state government, as far as I am concerned, is not really involved in the process. The state government is saying, “We will sit back and let the wind farm developers or the like deal with local governments and farmers and landholders, and we will just sit back and let it evolve.” There is very little regulation. I have spoken to the Minister for Lands about it. There are not enough guidelines in place. As I have said before in this place, we are getting these neighbourhood disagreements and generational disagreements that will affect many of our neighbourhoods and farming areas. The state government needs to be proactive in this role and in the development of renewables because they are growing quickly and those projects are out there. I know that at least six or seven wind farm projects are in my electorate alone, but there is nothing to regulate them. I would certainly like the minister to take that on board because I can see this becoming quite a challenge in the overall package relating to communities that will be providing that renewable resource in the future. I just add that warning, minister. These projects do not come onstream as quickly as you would think. We have seen the scenario in the likes of Victoria in which transmission lines have taken up good family farming land and created a lot of controversy. The people of Victoria, not just farmers, pushed back on it. These are the elements that the minister in his new portfolio needs to think about.

I will talk about other elements throughout the year such as pole-top fires and other challenges that our farmers face regarding continuity of power. Once again, farmers feel stranded left out there attending a pole-top fire for hours on end awaiting Western Power to arrive to stop any fires from getting away on their farm. These are the elements I will talk to the minister about over time.

I will now hand across to the member for Cottesloe to add his contribution. From my perspective, this is something that this government needs to improve on. We saw the 2022 situation out there in the goldfields repeated. Let us look at the backup situation and at Synergy and those tenders and let us have an inquiry and see whether this government can lift its game.

DR D.J. HONEY (Cottesloe) [1.49 pm]: There are some things that a person wants to be the king of, but they do not want to be the king of electricity mismanagement in the state of Western Australia. Unfortunately, that is the title that the Cook Labor government is taking on. I await with eagerness the next report from Western Power, which will look at the age of our network. Every report I have seen so far states that our electricity network is getting older. The amount of equipment that is zero to five years old is getting smaller and the amount of equipment in the other age categories is greater. It is little wonder then that we see unreliability in the electricity network, as emphasised by the recent outages in Kalgoorlie that the previous two speakers spoke about. It was *deja vu* for members on this side and the people in Kalgoorlie and all those surrounding regions, because although we did not have an identical trigger for the event at Christmas 2021, we had an almost identical outcome.

In 2021, strong winds and bushfires caused the loss of the tie line to Collie. It is little wonder because it is around 500 kilometres long. The previous Minister for Energy publicly made the point that that line would probably get outages because it is a very long line, coming all the way from Collie, and that we would probably see more issues on a 500-kilometre line than a 20-kilometre suburban line. Fair enough. That is fair logic. Of course, that has been known for a long time. It has been the case for a long time.

The Synergy power station in Kalgoorlie is specifically designed to provide backup power for Kalgoorlie in the event that the tie line is lost, and it is not an uncommon event that that tie is lost. The Premier and the Minister for Energy made various statements about how the event that caused the loss of the tie line all the way back to Collie was an unusual event. That is true. That event itself was unusual and obviously it would have been a terrifying

storm to be in. Yes, it was an unusual event, but the loss of the tie line from Collie is not an unusual event. In fact, it happens regularly. Thus, we have the two power stations at Collie.

During the Christmas 2021 outages, and thanks to the former Minister for Energy, I got to go up and talk to the staff who run the power plants, so I learnt a bit about them, and it was quite interesting. Yesterday, the Premier said that the reason we could not start up those generators was that we did not have electricity in the network, but in fact those generators are designed to start up without any electricity in the network. The issue is that when electricity is put into the network, we need to have control of a number of parameters, with frequency and voltage being the two principal parameters. The power plant has one generator that controls frequency and voltage, and that one starts up first. By the way, they informed me that they can start up that generator within about 15 minutes and they can then bring on the other single-cycle gas turbine, which brings on 30 megawatts. Those generators combined give about 60 megawatts of electricity capacity. However, more than that, Kalgoorlie is blessed with double redundancy in power generation resources.

The Parkeston power station, owned by TransAlta, has a 110-megawatt capacity. During the Kalgoorlie event, that generator was eventually tied in at the behest of other services, as I understand it. They had to urgently get power back on and there had been such a long delay, they had to bring it on. I had a discussion with the former Minister for Energy back in 2020 about this. Why was this not available to come into the system? It is fascinating to see the number of startups in that power station. There is an enormous level of reliability on startups, but, more particularly, it provides power for the Super Pit and other mining operations around the area, so it is generally running all the time.

If that power station could have been switched in, it could have controlled the frequency and the voltage and provide power to the network. TransAlta offered that service to the government for a cost. The government chose to ignore it. It chose to say, “No, we’re going to stick with the Synergy power station.” I was told in 2022 that it was—I could stand corrected on the figures—a considerable amount of money. More than several million dollars was being spent to further upgrade those Synergy power stations so that they were reliable. Yes, this was an unusual storm, but the loss of power to Kalgoorlie is not unusual. It was a failure of the system. We will be intrigued to see what comes out of that review.

What happened when the Labor Party went through power energy reforms under the Gallop government? Power prices doubled. Again, the former Minister for Energy used to love to come in here and say, “You guys increased power prices by this huge amount”, but it was actually a Gallop Labor government plan, and it stated that at the time in terms of what it would mean to divide the power system at that stage into four agencies. Imagine four boards, four CEOs, four chief financial officers and the like. Fortunately, that was shrunk back to two. That is what happened last time. What do we see now? We see a substantial threat to the power reliability of this state because of the mismanagement of the Cook Labor government and this energy transition.

I think everyone in this place thinks that it is a reasonable aspiration to say that we are going to move to a higher level of renewable energy, but we cannot have a transition timetable that is only about politics and ignores the reality of the reliability and cost of electricity for Western Australian customers. That is the problem with the plan that we have. We have had this happen fast. Yes, the government wanted to shut down the Collie coal-fired power stations. Everyone knows, given the transition of renewables into that network, that eventually those power stations will need to shut down. We also know that coal-fired power stations are not ideally suited to the variable load that will be created by the renewables coming into the system. Nevertheless, they are utterly pivotal to the stability of our network and will be for some time to come. The government was going to shut down the power stations. That was then delayed. Then we had the farcical situation of coal coming in from Newcastle to sustain those stations. Now the government is paying literally tens of millions of dollars to keep the coalmines going to provide coal to those power stations. No wonder we have complete uncertainty.

Thanks again to the Minister for Energy, who had made some comments about the modelling that I was using and the like, I had the opportunity to visit and talk with the fine people in Energy Policy WA who are skilled experts in that particular area. However, what was very clear in the discussions with those groups—perhaps I could have a little protection from noise.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Thank you, member. Could we keep the background noise down for a few more moments? Thank you, members.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I had a presentation in which they explained this iterative model they use to try to optimise the lowest cost solutions, so I asked the logical question of the office: “What are your forecasts on costs for energy?” I was told, “Oh, yes, that’s part of the model. We don’t only look at the physical stability of the network and the like. We’ve got a cost model that goes along with it.” I asked them to provide me with those predicted cost numbers. I did not expect them to be highly accurate because they were based on modelling and the like, and it was not as though within two years I was going to say, “You said it cost this dollar a watt.” They said they would see if they could do that. I tell members what, not a peep in terms of costing has come forward to me. I will tell members why. It is because the government’s plan is going to substantially increase the cost of energy to Western Australian

households. All this talk of renewables being cheap. Renewables are cheap on a side-by-side comparison of two things, but for a system they are massively more speculative.

That is the future we face. I say to the government that if it is going to have an honest conversation with the community about this transition, do not talk about just the glossy openings of a battery; talk about what is the cost impact on the community. It then has to deliver in terms of reliability and certainty. I can tell the government that a few batteries in Kwinana and Collie will not deliver the certainty it needs for power reliability. There is a huge issue for the Cook Labor government. It should be completely transparent on this and not talk in general, feel-good terms about doing this. How will it affect the people of Western Australia? It should talk about the detail of its plan because, once again, it has not done that and it has not shared the detail with the public of Western Australia.

Debate interrupted, pursuant to standing orders.

[Continued on page 93.]