

ELECTRICITY — OUTAGES — COMPENSATION

30. Mr R.S. LOVE to the Minister for Energy:

I refer to the \$240 in compensation paid to residents in regional Western Australia following the recent power outages, which was a once-up from the usual \$120; and the substantial losses reported by local businesses of up to \$100 000, leaving businesses to feel abandoned, pleading for the delivery of a promised support package.

- (1) How does the minister justify the compensation offered in light of the significant disruption to these customers across regional Western Australia?
- (2) How much longer will these small businesses have to wait for the minister's promised support package to be made available?

Mr R.R. WHITBY replied:

- (1)–(2) It is a delight to get a question from the opposition. When I held—I continue to hold—the portfolios of environment and climate action, the opposition never knew I was here! Not a question. It is good to get a question after a while. It speaks to the opposition's priorities, which certainly are not in the environment or climate action spaces.

Members, we know that what happened last month was an extraordinary natural event that was unprecedented in many ways. It was the most significant hit to Western Power infrastructure in Western Power's history. Right now in Victoria, similar types of extreme weather events have cut power to more than half a million Victorians. They are talking about restrictions or outages lasting weeks rather than days, so one of the things I was looking forward to hearing from this opposition when we returned to the chamber was their admiration and gratitude to those Western Power engineers and crews who did an extraordinary job in restoring power as quickly as they did. They faced an extreme and extraordinary situation. The creativity and ingenuity of Western Power engineers in coming up with a solution to energise the goldfields, way ahead of the more than a week it took to restore the 220-kilovolt line, was extraordinary. We should be grateful that we have Western Power in public hands delivering extraordinary outcomes for the people of this state. That is the first point.

It is true that power cuts are incredibly frustrating and incredibly disruptive; we know that. Some of the outages in the hills and in the wheatbelt—I concede this—lasted far longer than they did in Kalgoorlie. It was about 30-odd hours in Kalgoorlie. Because of the extraordinary response from crews and engineers, we managed to get the power back on in Kalgoorlie after that 30-hour period, but the outages lasted longer in other parts of the state. There was a series of events, from fires to supercell thunderstorms, that flattened transmission towers. Again, that had an impact in Kalgoorlie.

We know that small businesses were impacted, absolutely. I shared their frustration and their anxiety during this period. I was up there very early on the Saturday, and I know that the Leader of the Liberal Party was up there as well. The Leader of the Liberal Party was ringing businesses around the town to find out what was going on, in order to make political capital out of the extreme misfortune of those people in Kalgoorlie at the time. The member for Kalgoorlie knows that the Leader of the Liberal Party was very keen to make political capital out of their discomfort and these issues.

Ms L. Mettam: They wanted to be heard!

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I heard those people too, and I was on the ground; I was not there to put on a media show and revel in the misfortune of others. I will let the Leader of the Liberal Party deal with that. I might add that not everyone she contacted actually wanted to play her game, and she knows exactly what I am talking about in that regard.

I say to the Leader of the Opposition that the best thing we can do for the people of the goldfields is ensure that they have secure energy supplies. That is the best thing we can do for those businesses. As the Leader of the Opposition knows, at the end of last month, the Premier announced that a tender would be going to market to find a new source of resilient power for the goldfields that will increase resiliency in the goldfields and, indeed, the entire network. That is the absolute best thing that businesses or any individual in Kalgoorlie could want.

What is the government doing to ensure we have the best possible secure supply of energy? There are challenges with climate change. No doubt, we will get more and more extreme weather events, and how we deal with that is by making a resilient, futureproof network. That involves more renewables—not fewer—transmission and storage, and the responsible management and transition of coal power. I could go into what the Leader of the Opposition's policies were at the last election, which would have seen us walk away from Collie and turn the lights off —

Mr R.S. Love interjected.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: It is not a policy of the Nationals WA but a policy of the Liberal Party. I see “Don’t blame us. It’s the Liberals.” Okay, I get that. Under a government that the Nationals would have been a part of, in nine and a half months from now, we would be shutting down Kalgoorlie and coal-fired energy. That was the plan for 2025: in nine and a half months’ time, no more Collie coal in the system. What do members think that would do to the grid? It would cripple Western Australia and its economy, and put the lights off permanently.

Mr R.S. Love interjected.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: The point I am making is very clear. The best thing we can do for businesses in Kalgoorlie, throughout the wheatbelt and in the hills is to ensure that we have the most resilient energy system possible. In terms of the West Kalgoorlie power station and those two generators, there is an inquiry on at the moment to find out why that failure occurred. We have heard comments from the member for Cottesloe, who seems to know what happened. Let the experts decide. We know what happened, but we do not know why it happened and how it happened. Let us get to the bottom of that. In the meantime, the Premier has indicated that we will go to market for a more resilient power supply for the goldfields in the future.