

LIGHT AIRCRAFT ACCIDENT

Mr BLOFFWITCH to the Premier:

Overnight there was a tragic accident involving a light aircraft, which we now know has claimed the lives of the pilot and seven people who worked for Sons of Gwalia Ltd at Leonora. Can the Premier please give the House an update on this tragedy?

Mr COURT replied:

I thank the member for this question. It has been a particularly tragic week in the mining industry, with a death underground at the Big Bell mine on Saturday and this incident last night. It has been confirmed that a twin-engine Beechcraft Super King Air 200, chartered by Sons of Gwalia from Perth to its mine at Leonora, did not land as scheduled, and continued to fly over three States, eventually crashing in a remote area of north western Queensland near Burketown. This light plane is a turbo prop pressurised aircraft fitted with a supplemental oxygen system. It has been reported that the pilot of the aircraft failed to respond to radio contact soon after taking off from Perth. Authorities tracked the plane as it flew over Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland. Other aircraft were diverted to intercept and shadow the plane while continuing to try to make contact. Tragically, the plane crashed at Wernadinga station, 48 kilometres south east of Burketown in Queensland's gulf area in the late hours of last night.

At this early stage there are reports that the plane could have depressurised, rendering all those on board unconscious, with the aircraft flying on autopilot. Earlier today poor weather was hampering attempts to reach the crash site. We understand that a team of Australian Transport Safety Bureau investigators was due to arrive at the crash scene in Queensland a short while ago.

One member of the four-person Australian Transport Safety Bureau team is the same person who headed an incident in June last year involving another Beechcraft B200 aircraft. In this accident the auto-deployment of the passenger oxygen system malfunctioned and there was also a possible malfunction of the cabin altitude alert system. The Australian Transport Safety Bureau told us today that last night's accident seemingly has similarities to the incident in June last year. However, a full and thorough investigation needs to be carried out before any conclusions can be reached.

Last night's crash is a tragedy for the families and friends of the people involved, Central Air - the charter company - and the Sons of Gwalia mine. I have spoken to Peter Lalor, the Executive Chairman of Sons of Gwalia, and he has informed me that the men on board the aircraft were from Western Australia, New Zealand and Victoria. They included an engineer, a geologist, a surveyor, plant operators and a tradesperson and they ranged in age. Sons of Gwalia has been dealing personally and extensively with the families of the people who were on board. It has offered counselling and other assistance to them. A chaplain and counsellors are also on site at the mine in Leonora. This corporation has a family environment. It prides itself on being a very close company and has been struck hard by this tragedy.

We offer our condolences and our thoughts to everyone involved. Many of us on both sides of the Chamber have used the same aircraft on a regular basis. We see many of those mineworkers at the airport as they prepare to leave for their shifts. It hits home that many risks are associated with the mining industry operating in a State as large as Western Australia.

The SPEAKER: I advise members that page 53 of the standing orders refers to questions to ministers and members. It states that questions may be asked of ministers regarding matters under the minister's administrative responsibility. It then refers to the practice of the House and indicates that questions to ministers should relate to public affairs with which they are connected, to proceedings pending in Parliament and to matters of administration for which they are responsible, but not to matters arising from a minister's actions as a private citizen. There are many other practices of the House, but I bring that to the attention of members. Whether a question can be answered depends on how members frame the question.