

KATANNING SALEYARDS — PRIVATISATION

296. Mr M.P. MURRAY to the Minister for Agriculture and Food:

I refer to the recent industry speculation that the Katanning saleyards will be privately run and that Palisade Investment Partners is the frontrunner to be awarded this contract by the Department of Agriculture and Food.

- (1) Will the minister seize control of the Katanning saleyards from the Shire of Katanning and hand it over to a private company?
- (2) Is the minister aware that former National Party federal member of Parliament and Deputy Prime Minister Mark Vaile is now chairman of Palisade Investment Partners; and does the minister acknowledge that his current chief of staff, Scott Mitchell, was formerly employed as an adviser in Mr Vaile's office?
- (3) How can other companies tendering for the contract have any confidence in a level playing field when the chairman of the frontrunner is a former boss of the minister's chief of staff?

Mr D.T. REDMAN replied:

- (1)–(3) There are a number of components to the question. I responded to one of the elements of the question before, on this government's commitment to rolling out the regional saleyards strategy. That is about putting a new set of saleyards at Katanning and Boyanup, and upgrading the Plantagenet Great Southern regional cattle saleyards. That is something that the government will be measured on. A business case has been presented to me by Treasury, and in due course the Liberal–National government will make decisions on that to substantiate our ongoing commitment to the farming community of Western Australia. I have some concerns about the point that the member raised in respect of the notion of considering private investment in saleyards, because I think it is a notion that is a sound one to consider. If we are going to run an efficient government, as the Liberal–National government has so far, we need to consider all options on how best to invest the taxpayer dollar to make a difference in all the respective portfolios that we have.

My commitment to the agriculture and food portfolio will be exactly that—to demonstrate that we are spending taxpayers' dollars in the most efficient way to get an outcome for the farming community of Western Australia. We will be making a decision on the regional saleyards strategy soon, and then the member for Collie–Preston and others in the farming community will have the benefit of that decision and know how we intend to move forward on that matter.

The other point the member has raised is that my chief of staff, Scott Mitchell, worked under former Deputy Prime Minister Mark Vaile many, many years ago. In fact, he also worked for the National Farmers Federation prior to moving to my office. I am aware, as the member highlighted, that the former Deputy Prime Minister worked for Palisade Investment Partners, which is a company that is showing some interest, along with other companies, in some investment in saleyards in Western Australia. I have had discussions with some of those groups; I cannot be specific about which ones, but I have certainly had discussions with some of those groups. I have met with Mark Vaile as a representative of one of those groups.

I will add a couple of points. The notion of a conflict of interest is absolute nonsense. Although my chief of staff worked for the former Deputy Prime Minister in the order of six or seven years ago and has since then worked for the National Farmers Federation, the member is trying to imply that there is a conflict of interest because he now works in my office and there is some potential private investment in this sector about which we have not yet made a decision. I can present a number of things. In fact, my notes highlight that it has been six years. I can be accurate on that point—it has been six years since he worked in Mr Vaile's office. My chief of staff also sought advice from the Commissioner for Public Sector Standards, who confirmed the view that there is no conflict of interest. In essence, my chief of staff has had nothing to do with the former Deputy Prime Minister for many years; in fact, he has had limited contact with him. He holds no current personal or business relationship with the former Deputy Prime Minister or his company. When that notion was raised with some of the rural media, I asked about it, and I am very comfortable that no conflict of interest exists. This government has been presented with no decision that would generate a conflict of interest. The member can be assured that I will act in the best interests of the taxpayers of Western Australia. Any decision that is made by this government is made by the cabinet of the Liberal–National government. We will be measured on our performance in rolling out assets, decisions and policies to support the thriving agricultural community in Western Australia.