

ELECTRICITY REFORM

914. Mr MURRAY to the Minister for Energy:

I refer to the media comment by the Leader of the Opposition in which he attempts to undermine the electricity reform process. What will electricity reform deliver for Western Australian businesses and households?

Several members interjected.

Mr RIPPER replied:

I note the immediate interjections from members of the Opposition, one of whom said that the electricity reform will produce blackouts. What an irresponsible, scaremongering position to adopt. I would like the member of the Opposition who made that comment to go to the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia or the Chamber of Minerals and Energy and put that point of view and see what sort of response is given. This Government made an election promise to reform the electricity system, and it intends to honour that promise. Electricity reform will be one of the biggest economic developments in this State. We have at the moment a long overdue issue, which the Leader of the Opposition when he was Minister for Energy would not tackle. The issue is standing in the way of investment and jobs in this State. It is the issue of high electricity prices.

According to the Office of Energy, Western Australians pay around 22 per cent more than the Australian average for their electricity; that is, about \$136 a year more for Western Australian households. Non-residential customers pay 29 per cent more than the Australian average or \$2 400 extra per year. This must stop. This is the issue that the Leader of the Opposition when in government would not deal with, but this Labor Government will deal with. It is a question of not only prices but also choice. Why should electricity customers in Western Australia not have the right to choose their electricity supplier? If they are dissatisfied with Western Power, why should they not be able to buy their power from another supplier? If they want to buy their power from a supplier of green energy or renewable energy, why should they not have the right to go to a retailer who specialises in that form of electricity supply? The most important thing is the economic issue. While the State has high electricity prices, there is a disincentive to invest and a barrier to job growth.

That is the strategic issue confronting the State, which the Leader of the Opposition could not deal with as Minister for Energy and which he is now trying to sabotage. One of the ways in which he is trying to sabotage it is by alleging that a new power tax will be introduced. There will be no new power tax. We already pay a cross-subsidy through our electricity bills. This Government supports fair electricity prices for the country through a system of cross-subsidies. The constituents of the member for Collie probably pay more than other people through that subsidy because they are so close to the source of the power. We already pay that subsidy. The Electricity Reform Task Force is simply suggesting that that cost be made transparent so that consumers are given an itemised rather than global account. It is suggesting that we be shown what we pay for. I think that is fair. Why should Western Australians not be shown what they pay for?

This is all about the uniform power tariff, which equalises power prices between the country and the city. We know that one person in this House undermined the uniform tariff. He tried to force expanding country businesses off the uniform tariff. Who was that person? I am sure the Leader of the National Party can tell us.

Mr Trenorden: You are telling the story.

Mr RIPPER: The Leader of the National Party knows very well that the person in this House who tried to undermine the uniform tariff was the Leader of the Opposition. He is now scaremongering through reports on the front page of *The West Australian*. He is trying to undermine either much needed electricity reform or the uniform tariff. I am not exactly sure what his agenda is. It is one or the other, or possibly both. The member for Cottesloe has undermined the uniform tariff for country power customers. That is not the only thing he did wrong in the energy portfolio. We are still cleaning up the mess he made of the privatisation of the Dampier-to-Bunbury natural gas pipeline and its interaction with gas access legislation, which has resulted in legal action against the State that is inhibiting state development. That is the mess that was left to us by the member for Cottesloe. We have the same problem with the goldfields gas pipeline, about which there is legal action over the interaction between an agreement between the State and the proponents and gas access regulation. We must come up with a new source of power for the west Kimberley because the contract the Leader of the Opposition signed just days before the election fell over. That is the poor record of the Leader of the Opposition. He does not support country people or business. Only a few bureaucrats in Western Power support his position on electricity reform. That is all. The Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia, the Chamber of Minerals and Energy of Western Australia and major industry players in the energy sector support the Government's position

This Government is about implementing an election promise. It is about lower prices, jobs and growth. We will not be put off by people who have forgotten their policy credentials and who scaremonger, act as doomsayers and try whatever they can to frustrate the process of reform on a major strategic issue in the interest of purely selfish politics.