

WITTENOOM CLOSURE

Statement

HON WILSON TUCKER (Mining and Pastoral) [5.22 pm]: Last week, I spoke about Wittenoom and the eviction of Lorraine Thomas, who was, up until 8 September, the last remaining resident of Wittenoom when she was forcibly evicted by the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage. Roughly a dozen people in hazmat suits showed up on her doorstep to remove her from her home and to vacate the town of Wittenoom. I took the opportunity last week to put on record the sequence of events as recorded by Aileen Thomas, the daughter of Lorraine Thomas, who was dealing with the department during those events. I ran out of time to finish my remarks so I thought that I would finish them today.

A number of issues arose from the department's handling of the events involving Lorraine Thomas that I would like to go into further detail on tonight. The first one was the coercion involved with the removal of Lorraine Thomas. A media statement was put out by the Minister for Lands, Hon John Carey, that said that Lorraine left her home voluntarily. I ask members to put themselves in the shoes of Lorraine Thomas, who is an 80-year-old lady who has lived in the town of Wittenoom for 40 years. By virtue of the fact that she lives in Wittenoom, it is probably safe to say that she enjoys the peace and quiet. Suddenly, 12 people—two bailiffs, six contractors, two police officers and a few paramedics from up the road—showed up on her doorstep one day in hazmat suits and asked her to pack her things, take her medications and valuables, and get into the police car because she was leaving her house. Whether Lorraine left that house kicking and screaming as she was dragged off her premises or whether she left under her own steam and walked out her front door and to the police car, she had no other option but to get in that police car. Certainly that day, a level of coercion and intimidation was involved in the eviction of Lorraine Thomas, an 80-year-old lady.

I spoke to Aileen, who was put on the phone at the time that Lorraine was removed from her house and she said that her mother was audibly upset, frightened and distraught. The Minister for Lands released a statement that said Lorraine left voluntarily and was not distressed, but I have heard evidence to the contrary. Based on the coercion that was evident in Lorraine's removal, it is disingenuous for the minister to say that she left voluntarily and was not distraught.

The other point I would like to raise is the accountability of the Minister for Lands. In the week prior to Lorraine's eviction, I was going to ask the minister a few questions, one of which was whether Lorraine would be forcibly evicted from her home. The minister was unavailable to answer my questions that week, which is fair enough—ministers are busy. ABC Pilbara was also trying to get a hold of the minister to ask him questions before 8 September, when Lorraine was evicted from her home. ABC Pilbara also tried to ask the minister questions about the handling of the situation but, again, the minister was unavailable to answer those questions. On 13 September, a press release was put out by the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage, not the minister through his office. It did not answer any of the questions about Lorraine's eviction as posed by media outlets. Rather, it stated that mesothelioma is bad and that no level of exposure is acceptable. We know that, and I think Lorraine probably knows the dangers of asbestos better than pretty much anyone on the planet.

After that, an article published by ABC Pilbara was not very complimentary of the minister. It highlighted some of the events I have spoken about. Following that, a statement was released by the minister and given to ABC Pilbara. It basically endorsed the actions of the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage to date. Hon John Carey said that he did not have a problem with how Lorraine was evicted.

Hon Peter Foster: Have you ever spoken with Lorraine Thomas, honourable member?

Hon WILSON TUCKER: No. I have spoken to Aileen.

Hon Peter Foster: Have you ever met Lorraine Thomas, honourable member?

Hon WILSON TUCKER: No, I have not.

Hon Peter Foster: I have on several occasions, and your commentary on this matter surprises me.

Hon WILSON TUCKER: We can talk about this after the fact.

Hon Peter Foster interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Can we have some order, please? This is members' statements, not a cross-chamber debate, so would you like to continue with your contribution, honourable member.

Hon WILSON TUCKER: This brings me to my last point, which is about the minister's lack of compassion. Ministers are the head of the food chain. They are accountable because they make the decisions. We have ministers so that one person is accountable. We expect ministers to inject a little humanity into the machinery of government, to weigh up decisions and occasionally inject compassion when it is required, which is not what we saw in the

handling and eviction of Lorraine Thomas. Aileen and Lorraine asked for more extensions on multiple occasions to allow for Lorraine to leave with some dignity and the respect that she deserves, not the situation that unfolded, in which she was coerced from her doorstep. I also spoke to Megan Woodward, who was in Wittenoom that day. She witnessed the events from a distance. Megan told me that she saw the events unfolding and that if her grandmother were in that situation, she would have been outraged. I would like to take this opportunity to ask the minister to reflect on his actions, and the actions of the Parliament in the removal of Lorraine Thomas, the lack of accountability, the coercion and the lack of compassion that was evident in her removal. If necessary, please provide an explanation—certainly a time line of events—to this place.