

SENIOR PUBLIC SERVANTS - WAGE INCREASES

130. Mr P.D. OMODEI to the Acting Premier:

Before I ask my question, I welcome back to the chamber the member for Southern River.

[Applause.]

Mr P.D. OMODEI: I refer to the granting of wage increases of between seven and 24 per cent, or up to \$66 000 a year, to senior public servants.

- (1) Does the government support these wage increases?
- (2) Given these increases, what is the Acting Premier's target percentage increase for the wages of nurses, police officers and schoolteachers?

Mr E.S. RIPPER replied:

- (1) I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his question. The senior Court government established the Salaries and Allowances Tribunal, and it continued to operate throughout the subsequent Labor government and the previous junior Court government. The Salaries and Allowances Tribunal has made determinations on the salaries of politicians, judges and senior public servants for about 30 years. I understand that the purpose of establishing the tribunal was to remove from politicians the ability to determine the allowances of public servants. Whatever views people have about the nature of the tribunal's recent determination - I accept that many people in the community will regard the wage rises as excessive - it is better that these wages be determined by an independent tribunal following expert examination rather than by politicians. Regardless of whether the government would have made a similar decision, by law, the Salaries and Allowances Tribunal determination has effect, and that is the end of the matter. The personal views of members of government are irrelevant. By law, the determination of the Salaries and Allowances Tribunal stands.

Members of the opposition ought to have more respect for the work of senior public servants. I was appalled by the comments of the Liberal Party's new mentor, the member for Cottesloe, in which he publicly disparaged the contribution made by senior public servants, and by extension, members of the public sector generally. They make a great contribution to our overall wellbeing and deserve support from each member of Parliament. I will not stand by and fail to defend the public service when it is subject to the types of attack that the mentor for the opposition - the member for Cottesloe - has engaged in. The opposition ought to understand also that the salaries of senior public servants in Western Australia have fallen behind those offered in smaller and poorer states such as South Australia, let alone the private sector. We cannot continue to have a situation whereby a smaller and poorer state such as South Australia can poach our senior management talent. We cannot have that sort of situation because we know that service delivery to the people of Western Australia is partly dependent on the quality of people occupying chief executive officer positions. If we have poor CEOs because we cannot compete in the war for talent, service delivery to Western Australians will be compromised.

However, I say this about the Salaries and Allowances Tribunal: I believe that people who make decisions like that should be accountable to the public for the decisions that they make. They should be prepared to explain those decisions, and they should be prepared to answer the questions that the public has about those decisions. Therefore, my view is that, rather than the Salaries and Allowances Tribunal issuing its determination and then asking politicians to explain a decision that they have not themselves made, the Salaries and Allowances Tribunal should answer questions from journalists and explain the position to the public.

- (2) The second part of the question was about wage increases for nurses, police officers and teachers - indeed, public servants. These public sector workers perform an enormous service for the people of Western Australia. They deserve fair wage increases. However, the wage increases must also be realistic, bearing in mind the capacity of the budget and the need to provide improvements to services and improved infrastructure and to maintain our capacity to offer tax relief. Our position is that we will not be leading the private sector; we will not be lagging behind the private sector. We will make fair offers to those employees; and, if they do not like the offers, similar to others, they have access to independent arbitration.