

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

**INQUIRY INTO PASTORAL LEASES  
IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE  
TAKEN AT KALGOORLIE  
MONDAY, 4 NOVEMBER 2013**

**SESSION THREE**

**Members**

**Hon Liz Behjat (Chairman)  
Hon Darren West (Deputy Chairman)  
Hon Nigel Hallett  
Hon Jacqui Boydell  
Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson**

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**Hearing commenced at 10.40 am**

**Mr STEPHEN TONKIN,**  
**Director, Gindalbie Pastoral Co, sworn and examined:**

**Mrs JO-ANNE TONKIN,**  
**Director, Gindalbie Pastoral Co, sworn and examined:**

**The CHAIRMAN:** I need to again go through the formalities. By the end of the day, everybody down here will be able to recite this verbatim, I am sure, but bear with us! On behalf of the committee, I welcome you to the meeting. Before we begin, I must ask you each to take either an oath or an affirmation.

[Witnesses took the oath.]

**The CHAIRMAN:** You will both have signed a document entitled “Information for Witnesses”. Have you both read and understood that document?

**The Witnesses:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** These proceedings are being recorded by Hansard. Your transcript of evidence will be provided to you. To assist the committee and Hansard, please quote the full title of any document you may refer to during the course of this hearing for the record. Please be aware of the microphones and try to talk into them. Ensure you do not cover them with papers or make noise near them. Please both try to speak in turn for the purposes of the recording. I remind you that your transcript will become a matter for the public record. If for some reason you wish to make a confidential statement during today’s proceedings, you should request that the evidence be taken in closed session. If the committee grants your request, any public and media in attendance will be excluded from the hearing. Please note that until such time as the transcript of your public evidence is finalised, it should not be made public. I advise that publication or disclosure of the uncorrected transcript of evidence may constitute a contempt of Parliament and may mean that the material published or disclosed is not subject to parliamentary privilege.

That is the formalities out of the way. Perhaps you might like to start off by just giving us the background about Gindalbie and what happens at your station.

**Mr Tonkin:** I will start just with a very quick history so you know where we are coming from. It will be quick though. My grandfather started in the goldfields southern rangelands in 1926 and my parents, took over from him up until 1984, when Jo-Anne and I bought the property off my parents. We have been there running sheep from 1984 until now. We have two sons working for us. We are third generation and they are fourth generation. I guess you could say, “They are poor old cockies stuck in the bush”, but it shows a commitment to the country. We have done 87 years of continued pastoralism. If we were out to damage the land and hit it and run, we are doing it pretty slowly. We are out there to sustainably manage the land and run livestock but still have a good asset to hand on to our family. It has happened, as I say, for three generations and I have a couple of sons helping. We ran sheep continuously from when my grandfather started right up until when we sold our last 1 300 sheep in 2009. The numbers dropped terribly from about 2002. I blame dogs predominantly; there were other factors, but it was predominantly dogs.

**The CHAIRMAN:** That was in 2009 you said?

**Mr Tonkin:** The end was 2009. From 2002 the numbers started dropping pretty predominantly. We have tried to convert to cattle on the station. It is a huge investment changing from sheep to cattle. I

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suppose we are trying to get our boundary fence done first to try to hold our stock within the lease. We need yards and there is just a lot of infrastructure required. The sad fact is that I do not believe cattle are suited to the goldfields. We do not have the grass. The property is only 205 000 hectares. That is just not big enough; we cannot carry enough stock.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Geographically, where is Gindalbie located?

**Mr Tonkin:** We are 60 kilometres north east of here. We are what they call the gum belt, which is around Kalgoorlie. It is a lot of bluebush, saltbush, perennial bushes, but not enough grass to run a big sustainable mob of cattle. In the Kimberley they run big numbers.

**Hon NIGEL HALLETT:** What number would you suggest is sustainable?

**Mr Tonkin:** We are probably able to run 1 000 breeders, I would think. That is once we get our infrastructure fully up. When we were running sheep, we were running 8 000 to 15 000 depending on the seasonal conditions. From that we made a very good living. We managed to keep the station building up. We managed to get full, total grazing management of the property, which is the word on everybody's lips. To be able to control the grazing on your property, to look after the country, you need total grazing management—that is of roos, goats, sheep everything. We managed to get Gindalbie up to total grazing management and we also managed to put four kids through boarding school, which is no mean feat. It was a good operation. It is one cattle cannot supply. That is the history. Would you like me to say where I think we are at now?

**The CHAIRMAN:** Please do.

**Mr Tonkin:** What I would like to communicate to this committee is what we are dealing with in the southern rangelands now. In the last 10 years, we have been decimated by dogs to the point we no longer run small stock units. Our rents have doubled. I believe we are getting very little support from the government departments and therefore difficulty in allocating or directing funds that are put towards the dog problem.

**Hon NIGEL HALLETT:** Stephen, could you just give an indication of what your rents are now?

**Mr Tonkin:** They are about \$7 500 a year. I believe the Department of Agriculture and Food in this area is absolutely gutted and so there is very little ability to give us any advice.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Your rents have doubled over what period of time?

**Mr Tonkin:** In the last 10 years.

**Hon NIGEL HALLETT:** Does that include the shire rates or not?

**Mr Tonkin:** No, that is just pastoral rents. Like the City of Kalgoorlie–Boulder, your rates are taken off your annual rental and so in the rents doubling, our Kalgoorlie–Boulder shire rates doubled, because they are not a pastoral-friendly shire. We have been able to get other shires to drop the pastoral rate or the shire rates because of the increase—shire rates are taken off your unimproved capital value, which is 20 times the annual rent. As I say, we are in Menzies shire and the City of Kalgoorlie–Boulder. Menzies shire cut our rates in half, which meant the same rate, whereas the City of Kalgoorlie–Boulder just doubled them because it is a city council. That was another flow-on effect from the increase in rents.

We have had the inquiry into the southern rangelands that Wendy Duncan ran and one of the major outcomes of the inquiry was that the government should work out whether or not they needed, or in fact wanted, the pastoral industry. What message does this sort of thing send to that question? It is quite interesting. We have been trying to get better land tenure for 30 years and there was a bill that, again, Wendy Duncan supported and that stalled before the last election. I felt that was probably a good step forward.

Then there is another matter, which is a federal government matter, which is that the federal government took off funding to lawyers to try to get Aboriginal native title negotiations. Whilst that

is a federal matter, the PGA approached the state government to see if they would take it on and they would not. So we are now in a situation where we have a station we cannot run sheep on and we have a station we probably have not got a lot of title to unless we paid lawyers' fees to negotiate with the Aborigines. It is all a bit interesting, I think.

Now this lease agreement, I think, has a few problems with it. It is very quick and there are no rights for the pastoral lessee. It makes us answerable to a lot more of the more radical-type groups—animal libbers and the greenies—and their departments.

[10.50 am]

**The CHAIRMAN:** Expand on that for me, if you would, how you see that that is an issue there that you are answerable to those environmental groups.

**Mr Tonkin:** Well, in several places in this lease agreement it says that it is all government departments. Yes, that is probably all I am saying—what I am sort of saying is that it says that you are meant to accept direction and do any request, any law of any government department.

**The CHAIRMAN:** And you do not feel that you are required to do that now under the terms of your existing lease, even though it might not be written there in black and white?

**Mr Tonkin:** I believe we have got a little bit of security there. Yes, they are coming in, but I believe we have got a little bit more security in the existing lease that we do not have to—you know, we have not got the forfeiture provisions. As Mark said, there seems to be a few more steps before forfeiture rather than “wham-bam, you're out”. And as I said, I have seen in here there is no —

**The CHAIRMAN:** Have you had any direct experiences with any of these environmental groups that you have referred to coming into Gindalbie and creating problems for you?

**Mr Tonkin:** I did get reported to the RSPCA once.

**The CHAIRMAN:** You did get reported?

**Mr Tonkin:** Yes, I did.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Can you talk to us about that.

**Mr Tonkin:** Yes. I was actually in Perth, but a lady rang the RSPCA representative in Kalgoorlie and —

**The CHAIRMAN:** Just a random lady?

**Mr Tonkin:** A random lady out there, did not tell anybody—an anonymous lady. I got a phone call from this person; she gave directions. She could see the aerial of the homestead, which meant she was about a kilometre and a half away, and this ewe was dead near the trough. So, yes, we went out there. The information I got from the RSPCA officer was that she picked her up and tried to give her a drink at the trough. I thought: thank God for that, she has got a drink, you know, so I was not in trouble there. But it turned out, yes, this ewe died lambing. She was having trouble lambing and she died lambing, despite the fact the lady tried to pick her up and give her a drink. So the RSPCA did not sort of take it any further because you are running —

**The CHAIRMAN:** I would imagine that is a fairly natural occurring thing on a large station.

**Mr Tonkin:** Yes, that is exactly right; they are big operations. But that is a classic example. Someone comes out, you know, it is probably a pretty horrible thing to see a ewe dying lambing, but sometimes it is nature.

**The CHAIRMAN:** So you were reported to the RSPCA. The RSPCA came and had a look at the situation. They were satisfied that there was nothing further that they would do.

**Mr Tonkin:** Yes, that is right.

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**The CHAIRMAN:** And there was no action taken?

**Mr Tonkin:** No, that is right.

**The CHAIRMAN:** So under the terms of the new draft lease, there would be no action there, so there would be no —

**Mr Tonkin:** Yes, all right —

**The CHAIRMAN:** Nothing further would happen.

**Mr Tonkin:** That is one situation. Thankfully, I have not been reported again, but I suppose —

**The CHAIRMAN:** So you were a bit unclear also?

**Mr Tonkin:** — there are more of those people around now. That would be—what, 15 years ago. There are more of those people around now, I think. The people are much more mobile; there are much more people running around. Our place is pretty rich in alluvial gold. There are people running around with detectors everywhere. I just think that there are more people around and we are going to get more and more trouble from that.

**Hon JACQUI BOYDELL:** But you do not at the moment?

**Mr Tonkin:** We have got a lot of people running around.

**Hon JACQUI BOYDELL:** But you have not had any trouble?

**Mr Tonkin:** I have not done anything wrong.

**Hon JACQUI BOYDELL:** No. Well, that is my point.

**The CHAIRMAN:** This is the point we have been —

**Hon JACQUI BOYDELL:** That is exactly my point.

**Hon DARREN WEST:** If I might ask a question on that. I work with sheep, too, and I can fully understand that you feel as though you are defending something when you have not actually done anything wrong. If you look at the old lease and the new lease in that situation there, would you feel any better or worse off under either of those leases or is that sort of something —

**Mr Tonkin:** I probably feel that the reference to forfeiture is more in this lease than the other one. I think the other one—you have obviously got to get a smack on the knuckles, and it is something that is not acceptable; it is not desirable; nothing is good about it. But, you know, I expect a smack on the knuckles or something and somebody saying, “Lift your game”. Whereas, here it appears to say that, you know, “Bang, you’re out”. I find that sort of a bit more threatening, I thought.

**Hon NIGEL HALLETT:** A bit heavy handed.

**Mr Tonkin:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Without putting words into your mouth, you would think it would be more acceptable if, in the terms of your lease, there was perhaps a series of, “If this sort of incident occurs, these are the steps that would be taken that ultimately might culminate in a termination.” So that there might be a warning, or there might be even like a demerit system or something like that. A bit like your driver’s licence, once you have hit 12 points, you are off. Do you think that that needs to perhaps be expanded on in the lease? Is that a fair summation of what you are saying?

**Mr Tonkin:** Yes, I would think that would be.

**Hon NIGEL HALLETT:** Is there right of appeal in that?

**Mr Tonkin:** I have not seen a right of appeal in here, no. I have written down there is no right of appeal and I have also written alongside this animal welfare that it is not a perfect world. Things happen, you know, ewes die lambing.

**Hon DARREN WEST:** There are so many degrees of it, too.

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**The CHAIRMAN:** You said in earlier evidence that the government is certainly not doing enough about the dog problem. What needs to be done?

**Mr Tonkin:** It is a huge problem. I believe that Central Australia is full of dogs, and anybody in Australia that is adjoining Central Australia has got a dog problem, be it Longreach, Gindalbie—anywhere. I believe the only people that are running stock successfully alongside Central Australia are the ones with the dog fence. I believe that probably the only way we are going to run small stock units is to fence. A point here: when I start talking about support from agriculture, there are various heads of agriculture that have said most of the dog problem is caused by pastoral apathy, and that hurts. Our local member, Graham Jacobs, the member for Eyre, he is trying to get a loan—not funding—to put a cell fence around our stations. He is not getting a lot of support for it, but the head of the ag department stated that the sheep had gone long before the dogs got here. Well, it is misinformation; it is wrong and it hurts, you know. There were 100 000 sheep in the area when the dog got here and there is none now. There are none in the Goldfields; 600, perhaps, Edjudina have put a dog-proof fence in and they are running 600 dorpers out there. But that sort of information does not help, and it really does hurt. That is what I am saying; we are not getting the support from the departments.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Any further questions?

**Hon DARREN WEST:** No. Look, I think you have pretty much covered it for me, Stephen. It is stark reality and that is what we need to hear.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you have any other issues that you would like us to think about to take away with us?

**Mr Tonkin:** Probably just talking to this document, I will say where I believe there is a bit of problem—that is, in your number one, where you are looking at overstocking. I do not know whether you can do anything about it, but we are small stock units and have been all along. The places are designed for small stock units. What is happening now is we are not overstocked; we have got cattle here. We are not overstocked, but they are overstocking sweet country, and therefore, really, to run cattle properly there needs to be a huge injection of capital to do internal fencing to stop these stock overstocking your sweet areas. We are not overstocked at all, but, by gee, we are having a lot of trouble in our best country—the union moving them away and they are coming back. It is still the fact that it is not suitable country for cattle and there is not the money in the industry to build this infrastructure up. There are no pastoralists in this industry that are not getting alternative incomes. We, too, do; in fact, we harvest sandalwood, and that is our alternative income. We competed on the open market by tender to everybody else that was interested in harvesting sandalwood and we won the tender on Gindalbie. So sandalwood is our alternative income, which sort of backs up what Mark Forrester was saying, that we can live on the property, we harvest our sandalwood, and the money we get from sandalwood goes into our infrastructure. So it is a fully—I suppose, unit located in one area—and really backing up Mark Forrester's comments.

Probably one more comment is: I believe the tenure bill that was put forward in the previous term of government was quite a good document. I think probably land tenure should be involved with the new lease. Otherwise, that is it. Thank you very much.

[11.00 am]

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you both very much for coming today. All the stories that we are hearing are obviously going to help us with our inquiry, and your story is obviously a little different as well. So good luck with the diversifying into cattle. I hope it works for you, but the dog problem certainly is an issue.

**Mr Tonkin:** Thank you.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you very much.

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**Hearing concluded at 11.01 am**

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