



PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES  
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

**FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SEVENTH PARLIAMENT**

**Motions**

4 June 2020

**AUSGRID HUNTER REGION LINESMEN**

**Ms SONIA HORNER ( Wallsend ) ( 11:03 ):**

I move that this House:

- (1) Notes during the 2007 tempest storm, there were 100 linesmen employed by Ausgrid in the Hunter region.
- (2) Notes during the 2015 east coast low storm, the number of linesmen had been halved to 50.
- (3) Urges the Minister for Energy and Environment to explain why there are only 17 linesmen in 2020.

On the June long weekend 13 years ago Wallsend was devastated when a terrible storm, combined with king tides and driving winds, brought down power lines and flooded most of the electorate. Hundreds of thousands of homes and businesses up and down the coast were left without power for days. Thankfully the 100 linesmen employed by Ausgrid worked tirelessly to restore electricity. In 2015 an east coast low threatened further flooding and brought down trees and powerlines across the electorate. Homes and businesses were again left without power. My office in Wallsend was dark for several days after the storm and it was a real worry to me because we knew that people were calling for assistance but we could not help them. Once again, linesmen at our local Ausgrid worked tirelessly to restore power but this time their number had been halved. Only 50 linesmen were employed by Ausgrid in 2015. Earlier this year another torrential storm threatened to break the banks of Wallsend's Ironbark Creek, and both Wallsend and Lambton were flooded. Thankfully, the rains eased before widespread flooding.

While Wallsend avoided major catastrophe, much of the Central Coast did not. Some 100,000 homes and businesses were without power on the Central Coast. Only 17 linesmen were employed for repairs. There were only 15 linesmen retained at the Wallsend depot in the immediate aftermath of the storm. They could have helped Central Coast residents and businesses but management refused. They were required to undertake an unnecessary training refresher course at the time. I told the Herald that day, "Ausgrid have office staff patrolling the Central Coast reporting downed lines instead of having linesmen on the ground making the area safe." Ausgrid ended up calling for assistance from the army, probably because it had less than one-fifth of the capacity it had in 2007.

As part of the privatisation deal in 2016, the Government committed that Ausgrid and other Government-owned electricity companies to be sold would guarantee a minimum number of employees until 30 June 2020. Documents released earlier this year show that as at December 2019 Ausgrid had only 3,228 employees—fewer than the 3,570 required by law, and far fewer than the almost 4,300 claimed by this Government. Ausgrid has cut 1,300 jobs from its workforce since 2015 and 3,000 since this Government took office. Ausgrid would have been able to clear storm debris faster, make areas safe and reconnect homes to power more quickly if it had the number of employees the Government had promised it would.

An Ausgrid linesman told me, "It was demoralising to be forced to sit in a room while there were people on the Central Coast without power and unqualified staff were on the ground assessing damage. We have had our workforce slashed and are being asked to do more and more with less qualified workers. We need more linesmen; plain and simple." Linesmen do a dangerous job. Robert Nichols, who worked out of the Gore Hill depot, was killed on the job in April 2019 while replacing a low-voltage power pole in Lane Cove. The work they do is vital. Without them it would be impossible to maintain the State's power grid. We in this place owe our electricity workers a high standard of care, which is why we must ensure we have enough linesmen to get the job done safely and on time for our community in New South Wales. Why are so few linesmen currently employed at Ausgrid? With dangerous weather events becoming more frequent, can residents and business owners in the Wallsend electorate really trust that such a diminished workforce can cope?

**Mr GURMESH SINGH (Coffs Harbour) (11:09 ):**

The Government does not support this motion. Ausgrid has advised the Government that as of 31 May 2020 a total of 260 linesmen were employed by Ausgrid and able to work across its entire network area. In addition, Ausgrid has arrangements in place with major contractors and energy networks across New South Wales and Australia, providing access to hundreds of additional experienced technicians and specialists who can be called in to assist during responses to significant outages and weather events. This highlights the benefits of resource sharing in a timely way to deliver faster electricity restoration times for customers and the community during times of crisis.

Clearly the storms that hit Sydney over the summer had a substantial impact on the network. This Government does not want people to be without electricity for any longer than is strictly necessary. However, the network faced a perfect storm over this past summer. Not only was the storm itself one of the worst Sydney has experienced in many years, but also it happened at a time when the industry as a whole was also trying to repair the network from bushfire damage. A total of 4,000 hazards were reported, including 13,000 fallen powerlines, fallen trees and damaged wires that needed to be cleared before repairs could begin.

Ausgrid's business approach led to crews from electricity networks across the country working collaboratively to clear hazards and make streets safe. Ausgrid's business model also includes the contracting of staff on demand, which may not reflect existing employment levels within the company. Under the supervision of Ausgrid crews, the New South Wales State emergency and relief services were also engaged to remove significant vegetation and debris hindering the recovery operations. Ausgrid mobilised these experienced crews to assist in the restoration work and restore power as safely and as quickly as possible during these extremely challenging conditions.

More generally, the Government is committed to ensuring that the electricity network is reliable, well maintained and able to cope with customer electricity demand. The Government has imposed strict licence conditions on New South Wales network operators, including minimum standards for reliability and safety. As part of their licence conditions, network operators are required to report and rectify any part of their network that does not perform to these standards. The Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal rigorously monitors compliance with those licence conditions and reports annually to the Minister on the performance of each network operator, including Ausgrid.

I say this about Ausgrid's resourcing: Ausgrid must ensure that it has the resources required to get people re-energised after a storm or natural disaster. However, we must also remember that this is ultimately paid for by consumers. For this reason, the Australian Energy Regulator has the role of independently determining the revenue that network companies need to run their business. This system makes sure that we strike the right balance between ensuring that our network companies have the resources they need and ensuring that electricity prices are as low as possible. Finally, I say this regarding the lease of Ausgrid. Ausgrid was leased in December 2016, after the Government took the policy to the New South Wales people at the 2015 election.

The successful completion of the electricity network transactions, which includes a 99-year lease to Ausgrid, has enabled the Government to deliver in full the \$20 billion Rebuilding NSW plan through Restart NSW. Restart NSW commitments include WestConnex, the Western Sydney Infrastructure Plan, the Pacific Highway upgrade—which goes through my electorate—and the new Intercity fleet. Right now, those job-creating projects are keeping the New South Wales economy going. The Electricity Network Assets (Authorised Transactions) Act 2015 also guaranteed minimum staffing levels for a five-year period from 1 July 2015. The minimum level set for Ausgrid is 3,570 staff.

Ausgrid has met the employee guarantee obligations placed on it by the New South Wales Government since 2016. In May 2020 the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal reported that for the March 2020 quarter Ausgrid exceeded the level of this guarantee by 11 per cent, equivalent to 395 staff above the minimum level set. For these reasons, the Government does not support the motion.

**Mr CLAYTON BARR (Cessnock) ( 11:14 ):**

I acknowledge the contribution of the member for Coffs Harbour. He is a new member—he has only been in the House for a little over 12 months—and what those older, wiser, experienced heads in Cabinet do is send the speech down to some of these poor new guys and say, "Listen, here is a hospital pass. No, actually, it is a really good speech. Can you just go in and read this really good, accurate speech because, quite frankly, I would rather your name go on it than mine?" That speech was rubbish. It was full of garbage nonsense, mistruths and non-facts. You do not have to be Einstein to figure out that jobs have been cut from Ausgrid. Thousands and thousands of jobs have been cut. That is a reality. That is a fact. It is in its financial end-of-year and mid-year statements. The figures were not made up by the member for Wallsend; they came from Ausgrid.

Here is another fact: I represent a community that used to have hundreds of Ausgrid workers. Hundreds of families were supported by the wages earned by the men and women who worked at Ausgrid. Now I have barely 100. The decisions that this Liberal-Nationals Government has made are costing 200 or 300 families in my community their income. Those jobs were stripped out from the time those opposite formed government in preparation for the sell-off. Then after the sell-off more jobs were knowingly stripped out. Is it any wonder we have shortages in certain skills? Ausgrid used to be a major employer of apprentices. We would produce dozens and dozens of electrical machinist fitter apprentices every single year. That all stopped on the watch of this Government—from 2011. Do not worry about the privatisation process that came four or five years later—apprenticeships stopped under this Government from the time it came to power.

Government members stand in this Chamber and decry the lack of skills in our community. It was done by their hand, their architecture, their design and their implementation. So they should not stand in this Chamber and cry crocodile tears, because they are guilty. They are guilty as charged by me in this Chamber right now. The Government is responsible for the shortages in my community. It is responsible for hundreds of families in my community being without a wage. It is responsible. Here is a piece of trivia for the House: The Government said there would be no forced redundancies. So what it did instead was put dozens of workers into rooms and in front of computer screens with no task but to play tick-tack-toe on a computer for months on end. And guess what? Eventually, the Government won. It suppressed people's will to go to work and they walked away from their jobs.

No, it was not a forced redundancy; it was a painful, punishing, drawn-out firing of those employees by the Government's hand, on its watch. Now we have an

economic crisis in New South Wales and we could have had a State-owned corporation returning billions of dollars to our bottom line every single year. That would have helped enormously during this time. It is more than just the linesmen; it is the entire workforce. The Government should be condemned for its actions at every step of the way concerning Ausgrid, not just the linesmen.

**Mrs WENDY TUCKERMAN (Goulburn) ( 11:19 )**

I reiterate that the Government does not support the motion. As has been said, Ausgrid has advised the Government that as of 31 May 2020 a total of 260 line workers were employed by Ausgrid and able to work across its entire network area. Ausgrid was leased in December 2016 with strict requirements placed on it as part of the electricity network transactions by this Government. The Electricity Network Assets (Authorised Transactions) Act 2015 provides guaranteed minimum staffing levels. The minimum level set by Ausgrid is 3,570 staff and in May 2020 the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal reported that for the March 2020 quarter Ausgrid exceeded the level of this guarantee by 11 per cent—equivalent to 395 staff.

The storms that hit Sydney earlier this year were one of the biggest storm events in the past 30 years. Now the Government wants to see people reconnected as soon as possible after they have been impacted by a storm. We also expect that Ausgrid has the resources it needs to reconnect people as quickly as possible. Reconstructing the network after those storms saw crews from electricity networks across the country working together to clear hazards and make streets safe. The New South Wales State emergency and relief services were also engaged to remove significant vegetation and debris hindering the recovery operations under the supervision of Ausgrid crews. I put on record the Government's thanks to all those men and women who worked to get the network back up and running.

It is also important to put those storms into context. First, the storms caused significant and extensive damage to the electricity network, including the Ausgrid electricity network. A total of 4,000 hazards were reported, including 3,000 fallen powerlines, fallen trees and damaged wires that needed to be cleared before repairs could begin. Parts of the network had to basically be reconstructed. Secondly, the storms hit at a time when the industry was still reconstructing those parts of the network destroyed or damaged by the worst bushfire season in the State's history. Thirdly, Ausgrid's costs are ultimately borne by consumers. That is why, while Ausgrid needs to ensure it has the resources required to fix its network, it also must make sure it is not unnecessarily adding costs to families connected to its network. That is why the Australian Energy Regulator independently decides the costs that Ausgrid can recover from consumers. The Government is committed to ensuring reliable, affordable power for the people of New South Wales.

Strong requirements are placed on the electricity network operators, including Ausgrid, to minimise and avoid outages. However, when natural disaster events such as bushfires or severe storms occur, unfortunately some outages will be unavoidable. What the community expects is that reconnections occur as

quickly as possible, while also keeping downward pressure on electricity prices. That is what the regulatory framework is in place to do.

**Mr DAVID MEHAN (The Entrance) ( 11:22 )**

I acknowledge the motion put forward by my colleague the member for Wallsend. In speaking to her motion, she mentioned the Central Coast and she is absolutely spot on. The lived experience of her constituents in Wallsend is the lived experience of constituents in my electorate, in particular, and on the wider Central Coast. The Central Coast has an Ausgrid depot in my electorate and as soon as privatisation occurred—or leasing, whatever you want to call it; the transfer from the government sector largely to the private sector—jobs were lost on the Central Coast from the ranks of linesmen, who had experience on the ground and the local knowledge to service our local area. We lost 10 per cent of those workers straight away—over 300 workers—and more have departed since then.

That has had an impact on my electorate and on the wider Central Coast. The Central Coast is noted for its green trees and its green hills, and most of our power is above ground, so whenever there is a storm we notice it. The electricity network in our area needs careful attention and a whole bunch of people on the ground who know the local conditions to address them and fix power outages as quickly as possible using their local knowledge.

Ausgrid now brings in contractors and other labour from outside the Central Coast to undertake that work during periods of need, but it can never replace the people who went through the system, had the local knowledge and knew the Central Coast's winding local streets and hot spots. That local knowledge enables them to address the issues quicker than somebody brought in from outside the area. We have experience in that. But even outside the storm period, my constituents on the Central Coast have noticed a change from service delivery to efficiencies, which has meant that people are treated as customers rather than as members of the public.

The service obligations of the privatised provider are carefully followed. In the past for a large number of my constituents who live in larger properties, the powerlines brought in from a main road across a number of properties and ownerships zones used to be serviced as a public duty by Ausgrid workers. It did not matter whose property the line traversed. But now the private operator services only properties on public land—on its land—which it is required to do under the Government requirements. If the powerlines are on a private land, my constituents are being told to clear the trees that might fall down on the lines and impact them during a storm. We have noticed the change at storm time and from day to day. The cost is being shifted to my community rather than being borne by the private operator, which is how it is making profits. The terrible question about the debate is: Where is the Minister to answer the member for Wallsend? Not many private members' motions are debated in the House on Thursdays. The member's motion is being debated and the Minister should be here to answer her questions. I support the motion.

**Mr JUSTIN CLANCY (Albury) ( 11:27 )**

Like the member for Wallsend and the member for Goulburn, I acknowledge the work that our linesmen and lineswomen have done over the past several months. They have faced challenging conditions—storms around the Central Coast and Sydney and bushfires right down the eastern coast of New South Wales—but they have responded magnificently. Essential Energy operates in our part of the world. Due to the Green Valley Talmalmo fire and Dunns Road fire, 3,600 customers went without power and 406 power poles had to be replaced. A total of 470 Essential Energy field workers were out in the field. It was magnificent to see because they were literally out in the field within a matter of hours after the fire had been through the field.

I will touch upon what the member for The Entrance said about reliability. The Government is focusing on providing affordable power pricing and reliability to the people of New South Wales, which goes to the heart of the issue. I draw the attention of the House to the fact that in New South Wales the revenue that Ausgrid receives is paid for by the consumers through network charges on their bill. The network component of New South Wales energy bills is around 40 per cent, well down than 50 per cent a decade ago. The costs are set independently by the Australian Energy Regulator, which determines the overall operating and capital expenditure of the business. The Government has been focusing on keeping the energy prices down because it knows that pricing and reliability are important for households and businesses across our State.

At the same time as network cost has been decreasing, for the past 10 years supply interruptions per customer have also been decreasing at around 1.5 per cent a year across the three New South Wales distribution network areas. That means that costs are decreasing and performance is increasing. How can we argue against that? The member for Cessnock raised the issue of jobs. Unfortunately, I have not seen such a prosecution case acted out since Rafferty's Rules. Obviously he has not seen the benefit of the Restart NSW funding across our State. My colleague the member for Coffs Harbour spoke on WestConnex and western Sydney infrastructure but I will talk about the region. In my region, there has been an allocation of \$9.9 million for the Nexus industrial hub, \$2 million for the Wagga Road revitalisation, \$4.9 million for the rail trail, which has been a magnificent thing for Rosewood and Tumbarumba as they battle the bushfire, and \$11 million for the Murray River Experience. If that has not been contributing to jobs across our State, then I would like the member for Cessnock to tell me what that money has done in his electorate.

**Ms SONIA HORNERY (Wallsend) ( 11:31 )**

n reply: I thank the members representing the electorates of Coffs Harbour, Cessnock, Goulburn, The Entrance and Albury for their contributions to debate on the motion. The choice of Government MPs to participate in the debate is

interesting. They are all terrific people but could they be any farther geographically from the Wallsend electorate? I would have loved to see the Minister explain why there have been so many job cuts at Ausgrid but the Minister is as far away from the Chamber as those contributing Government members are from the Wallsend electorate, which is unfortunate because they are terrific people.

My first point is about privatisation. Today's discussion has brought to bear that privatisation does not work. I am not saying that because I am in the Opposition; I opposed it in when Labor was in government. I publicly opposed it. I would have crossed the floor against privatisation. I opposed it because the community did not want it. It is a bad deal for the consumers and the community. The member for Coffs Harbour, who is a terrific bloke, talked about the 260 employed linesmen in Ausgrid. Where were they when the community of the Central Coast spent weeks and weeks without power this year? The notion of the 99-year lease is interesting. Is that the world's longest lease? It is privatisation by any other name; nobody is confused by that.

The member for Goulburn made an impassioned and wonderful speech but I am afraid that some of the information that Ausgrid has given her is incorrect. From the documents that we have, I believe Ausgrid is telling the Government porky pies about the number of employees it has. That is sad because ultimately that means Ausgrid is ripping off our community and not fulfilling its responsibilities to the New South Wales Government. It must be brought to bear for the lies that it is telling. The member for The Entrance spoke well about the relationship between the Central Coast and Wallsend and the similar problems that we had. Interestingly, he pointed out that as soon as Ausgrid was privatised, the Central Coast network lost 10 per cent of its employees, who were sacked.

The member for Albury spoke well and I agree with him. I acknowledge all of the linesmen and lineswomen in New South Wales. They do a wonderful job; we all agree with that in this Chamber. But I challenge the member for Albury. I do not believe that the Government is focusing on affordable power because Ausgrid is not focusing on affordable power. In fact, I believe that the Government is being hoodwinked by Ausgrid because they are not doing the right thing. I ask the Government and the Minister to hold Ausgrid accountable for the jobs they have taken away that should be there and should be on the books. There have been massive job cuts and they have impacted on the length of time that it has taken to undertake repairs in New South Wales, in particular in the Hunter and the Central Coast. I urge Government members to be sensible and to support this motion.

**TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Mr Greg Piper):**

The question is that the motion be agreed to.

**The House divided.**

Ayes            37

Noes            41

Majority       4

**Motion negatived.**