



STATE DEVELOPMENT AND REGIONAL INDUSTRIES COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr CG Whiting MP—Chair
Mr MJ Hart MP
Mr RI Katter MP
Mr JJ McDonald MP
Mr TJ Smith MP

Member in attendance:

Ms A Leahy MP

Staff present:

Ms S Galbraith—Committee Secretary

PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO THE INDEPENDENT ASSESSOR AND THE PERFORMANCE OF THESE FUNCTIONS

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

MONDAY, 28 FEBRUARY 2022

Townsville

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The committee met at 9.07 am.

CHAIR: I declare open the committee's inquiry into the functions of the Independent Assessor and the performance of these functions. My name is Chris Whiting. I am the member for Bancroft and the chair of the committee. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today and pay our respects to elders, past, present and emerging. We are fortunate to live in a country with two of the oldest continuing cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, whose lands, winds and waters we all share.

With me here today are committee members: Mr Jim McDonald, the deputy chair and member for Lockyer; Mr Michael Hart, member for Burleigh; and Mr Tom Smith, member for Bundaberg. Soon we will be joined by Mr Robbie Katter, member for Traeger. We also have Ms Ann Leahy, member for Warrego. Ann will participate in the hearing today with leave of the committee.

This hearing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence.

Media may be present and are subject to the committee's media rules and the chair's direction at all times. You may be filmed or photographed during the proceedings and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. Please turn your mobiles phones off or onto silent mode.

Finally, in line with Queensland's COVID-19 requirements, all members and witnesses will be required to wear a mask during today's proceedings. Members and witnesses may remove their mask while speaking. I now welcome the mayor of Townsville City Council.

HILL, Ms Jenny, Mayor, Townsville City Council

VERWEY, Mr John, Councillor Advisor, Townsville City Council

CHAIR: Good morning and thank you for appearing before the committee today. I invite you to make an opening statement after which we will have a few questions for you.

Ms Hill: Thank you for inviting me to make a submission to the committee's inquiry into the functions of the Independent Assessor and the performance of those functions. I am appearing here today in my capacity not only as mayor of council but as a member of the LGAQ board and policy executive. As someone who has been involved in local government for 25 years, I have witnessed significant changes to our system of local government in Queensland.

Since 2017 there has been a significant upheaval and overhaul of the Local Government Act. One of the biggest changes in this period of reform has been the introduction of the Office of the Independent Assessor. I acknowledge the work of the department including in its previous iterations as well as the former ministers, Furner and Hinchliffe, in implementing this system. That is not to say it has not been without its challenges. In the early days of the OIA there were teething issues and this has led to significant backlogs which were noticed across the local government sector. These backlogs did not lend much confidence in the first instance by elected councillors, nor I suspect the general public whose complaints were often stuck in the system for months or even years.

Relating to the terms of reference for this inquiry generally, I think the OIA's function has largely been good for the sector, and the design of the system is consistent with the objective set out in the 2017 report by Dr David Solomon, Mr Noel Playford and Mr Gary Kellar in my view. In my dealings with the OIA, Kathleen Florian has been a fair and solid leader of the office. She has brought a significant degree of expertise and knowledge in prosecutions as well as the criminal law more generally. However, the matter relating to the Barcaldine Regional Council mayor has left me wondering why someone with this background would bother pursuing such a trivial matter. Nonetheless, I think there are the two main ways the legislation could be improved to increase the OIA's credibility in the expectation of many, particularly those in elected local government office.

The first relates to section 150EX paragraph (b) of the Local Government Act as well as section 150AV(1) and to a lesser extent section 150R(3) of the act, which relates to vexatious complaints and other complaints not made in good faith. I contend that the legislation does not provide sufficient guidance for the OIA to deem a person as a vexatious complainer. I maintain that the maximum penalty of 85 units, currently \$11,717, is an insufficient deterrent to vexatious complaints. A very small number of loud and determined voices work in an insidious manner to besmirch the name of all the local government representatives with whom they have different beliefs or values. These people utilise every avenue possible, whether through anonymous blogs, through proxy campaigns or through institutional methods like the OIA, to discredit good people. It serves to discourage many good people from putting their hand up to contest or recontest local government elections.

Under our current system, there is little to no resource for elected members as very few of the people who should be deemed as vexatious complainants actually are. I would suggest the insertion of a definition in schedule 4 of the act to define the words 'vexatious' or 'vexatiously' as being repetitive, malicious or otherwise not in good faith. I would even suggest that the legislated threshold be set to determine the number of complaints that are being dismissed before there are investigations of a single complainant. Any person who breaks that threshold automatically should be declared a vexatious complainant.

My second suggestion relates to the publication of the outcomes of complaints for those who have had complaints dismissed out of hand or have been investigated only for no further action to be taken. I have raised this with local government ministers, as have many of my fellow Townsville city councillors.

In public life, perception is everything. Where a councillor has been subjected to dismissed complaints or where there is found to be no case to answer, those decisions should not be required to be published. It should be up to the councillor in question to decide whether or not they wish to have the results of unsuccessful complaints published or not. Some may say that if there is smoke there is fire. Despite being exonerated, a very small number of community members seek to use that information to discredit councillors who have done nothing wrong. Thank you, Mr Chair. I look forward to answering any questions that the committee may have.

CHAIR: Thank you, Mayor. You mentioned resources. When a councillor gets a notice from the OIA about an issue pertaining to 150AA, what is their immediate response? Where do they usually turn for advice? Would it be within council or would they turn to the LGAQ or other resources? What would usually be the first step?

Ms Hill: It would depend on the type of complaint. If it is about a councillor's behaviour at council, they would probably turn firstly to the legal services which we have within our organisation. You must remember, the smaller councils do not have that capacity and would turn then to the LAGQ for advice.

CHAIR: You talked about the publication on the register of anything that comes to the attention of the OIA—even if it is dismissed. What resources go into maintaining that register on the council website?

Ms Hill: That register is usually maintained by our legal services for the CEO. The CEO is required to maintain that register. The issue is around the perception. If you are found to be innocent or you have no case to answer, why should your name be put up on a register to say that you have been investigated? What purpose does that serve?

CHAIR: Do you find that the presence of such a complaint on the register is utilised by people for a variety of reasons—political or otherwise?

Ms Hill: Some of the blogs that have been posted are not particularly flattering to council. There are not many people who are viewing it—it seems to be a closed system. We are not in election mode at the moment. Perception is everything. It is a public area. People may think, 'Oh, the mayor has had 20 complaints made against her, there must be something wrong,' even though none of the complaints may have been upheld.

CHAIR: I understand. Your register is testament to the good work that you do in council. Your register contains one major complaint which has been upheld but 25 or 26 that have been dismissed or have required no further action. I am keen to know what internal policies or training you have for councillors around code of conduct, conflict, the register or behaviour. What training do you have in place to work with your councillors on these issues?

Ms Hill: Firstly, we use the LGAQ as an independent source of training. We run training updates for elected members. We have staff who travel around the state to provide training to the councillors. Occasionally I have made certain training compulsory for councillors, particularly around Townsville

issues such as changes to local government legislation and requirements under the act, to ensure everyone is made aware. For example, the state government changed the act around conflicts of interest. It is probably clearer now than what it was previously. Obviously, all councillors have been trained in this important area.

Councillors are required to be honest in updating their register as well. We can only assume that everyone is honestly doing what they should be doing. It does not preclude people from not being totally truthful in other areas. We have to rely on councillors to do the right thing. I would say that, by and large, they are. The other area of training is through the department. We have had a training session recently with regional manager Jai Aloul.

CHAIR: To clarify, you said that you would call for some compulsory training for councillors?

Ms Hill: I do say it is compulsory, yes.

CHAIR: I do not think we have an issue with that. It is good to see that there is an emphasis on training.

Mr McDONALD: Thank you for your presentation. Is there any reason you did not provide a submission?

Ms Hill: We did provide information to the LGAQ. Otherwise, you will end up with 70 submissions when maybe one well thought out decent submission might have more impact.

Mr McDONALD: In a couple of briefings, the department has said that the legislation is sufficient but that the problem is in the interpretation of that legislation regarding the standards of inappropriate behaviour and vexatious complainants. Whilst you have given us a recommendation about changes to that legislation, can you comment on that statement?

Ms Hill: What can I say? Everyone has a different view on things. I know that in a number of the complaints that were made against me, the threat was made to the complainant that they would be deemed as vexatious. I would have thought that the OIA may have made it clearer. I think I had six complaints from one person. It would have been far better if the complaint had been made vexatious. Legislation provides guidance; clarity comes from the definitions. In reality, is it really the legislation itself or is it the definitions that need to be made clearer to give better guidance to everyone involved?

Mr McDONALD: There have been 43-odd complaints over a period of time. Could you comment on the impact of timeliness of the matters being resolved?

Ms Hill: There have been some issues with that very early on. We know that a number of complaints that had been sent to the CCC eventually wound up with the OIA. We know that the OIA was poorly resourced to begin with, which is one of the reasons a lot of councils viewed them initially as being problematic, dare I say. It is also problematic for the complainant. I believe the OIA is better resourced now. They are moving through their complaints far quicker than they were previously.

Mr McDONALD: Larger councils like yours contains a legal services section. Could you quantify for the committee the cost to ratepayers—whether it be staff time or independent legal advice—of these matters?

Ms Hill: I would have to take it on advice, because I would need to get those figures from our CEO. There is a significant cost to council.

Mr McDONALD: Could we allow that to be taken on notice?

Ms Hill: I would like to see if we could get that figure to you. It has been significant. I would probably say the cost of a playground.

Mr McDONALD: Per complaint, or in total?

Ms Hill: In total.

Mr McDONALD: A playground in Lockyer might be different from a playground in Townsville!

Ms Hill: I gathered that. I am thinking in hundreds of thousands of dollars, whether it be through us or through the LGAQ.

CHAIR: If you could help us with that information. Be as specific as you can, but we do not require it to be comprehensive.

Ms Hill: Certainly.

Ms LEAHY: I am aware that for some of these complaints to councils, it is not only the time of the councillor but it is the time of the council staff, particularly when they have to go back through minutes to see who voted where and when on what—all those sorts of things. Is there any way to quantify what time it costs staff?

Ms Hill: I will ask the CEO to provide that as well because that is what I would expect in the costings. We literally have to have an area just for RTIs now, and I do not think the community realises how much that costs to run and you do not get that money back from people who submit RTIs, as you know. The concern I have is that the OIA and those sorts of investigations may eventually require councils to have specific funds set aside for them. As you know, often when the complaint is made the OIA requires information. Someone has to go in and provide that information to the OIA to determine whether or not they need to pursue the matter further.

Ms LEAHY: Often that is your CEO, council staff or executive directors.

Ms Hill: Exactly.

Ms LEAHY: And that is taking them off their day job, as well.

Ms Hill: That is right.

Ms LEAHY: If there is something that would be very interesting, I think.

Ms Hill: Certainly.

CHAIR: Bearing in mind that it is obviously hard to separate out everybody's time in dealing with these issues, but certainly any information you have about RTIs would be quite interesting. That will give it some context if you have that information.

Ms Hill: Okay.

Mr McDONALD: In regard to the interpretation of the legislation, Ms Florian herself said they have taken a risk-averse approach to interpreting that legislation. We were also told that members from the Councillor Conduct Tribunal are spending 200 to 300 hours on matters that end up in an education or training situation. Have you had any experience in terms of the cost versus the outcome?

Ms Hill: I would have to take that personally. You really cannot put a cost on it personally because every time you get one of these complaints, it preys on the mind of the councillor. I have had to counsel a couple of my councillors. I have had some of them in tears in the office. Some of them come in very angry and are trying to deal with that personal feeling of 'What have I done wrong? I did not think I did anything wrong, I think I followed everything. Oh my God, what does this mean for me?' You just have to sit them down and calm them down, especially the first-term councillors. There is a financial cost, but there is also a personal cost. In this process you sometimes feel that you are guilty and that you need to prove your innocence. That, to me, is the biggest issue of all. People need to feel like they have not necessarily done anything wrong. Let it go through the process, and they will be fine. As you have read out, Chair, out of the 24 or 25 complaints that we have had, we only had one that had to proceed.

Mr McDONALD: What do you think should happen to the OIA?

Ms Hill: I think in this day and age we need a level of oversight.

CHAIR: I think we already have the answer to that, but I appreciate the question.

Ms Hill: I said that at the beginning. I think it is better than the CCC, to be honest. It is not perfect but nothing ever is. Can we adjust it and make it a bit better? I think we can.

Mr HART: I think it is important that we have that for the record too, even though we have a clear idea.

CHAIR: Absolutely.

Mr SMITH: Mayor, this is a bit of a subjective question. The separation of powers aside, how do you perceive the difference between elected members of parliament and elected councillors, whether it is a cultural difference or are there any perceived differences that you see politically as well?

Ms Hill: Even though I have a group that may not have run with me, I try to encourage them to be part of the team because strategically—and it is under the act—our role is to benefit the whole of the Townsville city, even though they are in divisions. We have a strategic role to play in terms of the economic and social benefit to the community. I ask them time and time again to sometimes think above that as part of their role. That is the first difference. One would say that the state parliament is somewhat more combative on that.

Apart from our local laws, we do not have much—and our planning scheme. Legislation for us is not an issue. Our issue is about the delivery of services as well to the community based around our corporate plan. That is what we have to strive towards. We have to balance our budgets, which we try to do, and meet every councillor's expectation, again which we try to do.

I would say that it is a slightly different operating model compared to parliament. With that, we do not have the same freedoms in the chamber. We cannot besmirch anyone otherwise we are sued for defamation or can be sued for defamation. We have to conduct ourselves at, dare I say, a higher level than some of our parliamentary colleagues in Canberra and elsewhere and I like to think we do. To be honest, because we are a creature of state government, you place legislative boundaries on us and a level of investigation that means we must maintain a level of integrity throughout our whole processes. By and large, I think local government does.

Mr SMITH: Following on from that, do you believe that extends to a greater extent with councillors in the community? Whereas members of parliament in the chamber obviously are subjected to the rules of the chamber, outside they may have a greater sense of political freedom as there is not a code of conduct for their political expression. Do you feel as though there is that—not pressure, but extra set of rules for councillors that may cause some difficulty, especially for first-term councillors?

Ms Hill: There is, but it is like everything: you have to learn the rules, whether you play a sport or you are in public life. It is hard for some of the first-term councillors to understand that they could be at a restaurant and could be judged by what they say or do if someone comes up to them. It is another level of compliance that maybe other members of government do not have. It is the sort of scenario training I like to put the councillors through. We try to do that to ensure that they understand what their role and responsibilities are, even in the community. What you say and how you act is how you are judged. It is not just that you can be judged by the community; someone could make a complaint about you.

Mr SMITH: With the Townsville City Council, if a councillor wishes to go through corporate media channels, so the TV, newspapers or so forth, do they need to seek permission from the council CEO before being allowed to make a media statement?

Ms Hill: No, because under the act you can make a statement in your opinion. But once a decision of council is taken, you must support that decision. There is a fine line around that.

Mr HART: We have heard from other presenters, the LGAQ and some others, that they think that the system has become overly legalistic. Would you agree with that?

Ms Hill: Whether we like it or not, everything becomes legalistic. Anything that is brought down as part of the legislative process will have a legal implication. The problem is that we live in such a litigious society. The fear is that if you do not tick every box someone will take you to this court or that court. I have had that happen to us at council where a simple planning decision has wound up in the High Court. Yes, it may be legalistic, but is there another option? I am interested if there is another way around it.

Mr HART: Do you think that since the legislation has changed the system has got better or worse? Council used to deal with these issues directly themselves. Was that a better way of dealing with these sorts of things, especially around vexatious complaints?

Ms Hill: I do not know whether council had the opportunity to call on complainants for vexatious complaints. I would argue in the past few years, especially with new social media channels, it has become more out there and open. We have seen organisations that are anti local government talk about reviews and things like that. It tends to feed the beast. People think we are smart and we do this and there is a conspiracy theory. I believe more in the Army thing: keep it simple, stupid. Most things are simple things that are not actually conspiracies. Those sort of things have fed and fed. Places like the OIA is often where those complaints wind up.

Mr HART: Does that lead you to believe that the OIA has been used as a political weapon?

Ms Hill: What does not get used as a political weapon?

Mr HART: That is a good answer. When we heard from the OIA, she told us basically that to lock a decision down she needed to have a legal precedent set, either by the tribunal or some form of court, especially around the area of freedom of political expression. As a state member I can say whatever I like, but it appears to me that councillors cannot at the moment, which I think is a problem. Are you finding that if one of your councillors says something that could be classed as a 'political expression' that they are taken to task on it?

Ms Hill: You can attack if you use the right language. You should have heard me on the 7 o'clock news on Friday night. I had a go. The reality is that that issue around Sean Dillon should not have happened. I supported Sean to the hilt. I think he had every right to say what he said. The issue is that it is about weaponising the OIA. I think that is what that complainant tried to do. I do not know who it was but they attempted to weaponise the OIA. That is not what it is there for.

Legislation can change. As I said, things can change in the act to make the OIA an organisation that is to conduct investigations in the way it was envisaged. It should not be weaponised. It should not be weaponised to stop a mayor complaining about a government department that he felt was not doing its job. Can I tell you: we did a lot of work with our health department to help them during the COVID crisis. We did that through our Local Disaster Management Group rather than doing it the way that Sean did. But it does not preclude him from having the right to say that because there were some problems out there. We all knew it.

Mr HART: As I said, the OIA indicated that they needed to have a legal precedent set that would allow Councillor Dillon to have that freedom of expression, but interestingly it does not appear as though the OIA went down that path. They just dismissed the case.

Ms Hill: They dismissed it and so they should. I was under a similar cloud. We used a decision from the High Court to back what I had said about a parliamentarian and they dismissed it. There is case law to support freedom of expression. That is why that should have been dismissed against Sean, for the same reason mine was dismissed, but it should have been done earlier.

Mr SMITH: Mayor, I guess this is probably coming towards political expression as well. Say a councillor makes a comment as a person or gives a view that is not that of the council. They do that on TV and the little tagline down the bottom says 'John Smith' instead of 'Councillor John Smith' so they make the personal comment as John Smith. However, if the tagline says 'Councillor John Smith', in your mind are you then required to go to the OIA and put in a report of potential inappropriate conduct?

Ms Hill: It depends what they have said verbally. They can always say, 'In my view, I do not agree with the decision of council.' 'In my view' is the key. However, they are required under the act to uphold the decision. That is the way it has been explained to me legally. Some councillors in other parts of the state may not do it that way, but some of them also have political coverage such as Brisbane City Council. In Townsville we do not have that.

Mr SMITH: I might jump to your recommendation of a definition for 'vexatious complaint'. Do you want a definition put in there to protect people against vexatious complaints or for those who are looking to put in complaints? Probably realistically, the only people who are going to read the act are councillors or legally minded people. Are you wishing for a definition to be put in there for any councillors who may want to 'weaponise' the OIA? What is the intended purpose of the definition?

Ms Hill: The idea of that is to stop people from putting in minor complaints that, by and large, are not really going to go anywhere. How can I put it? I guess you have to be in local government to understand. We are the government closest to the community. Some councils function well; other councils do not. With some of those councils that do not, councillors and members of the community have been known to just to put in complaint after complaint, sometimes because they cannot be bothered reading either their code of conduct or their meeting procedure. I have had councillors in the past who have even failed to read their reports properly. Some of them are lazy and they take an easy way out.

Mr SMITH: I can understand where councils might want to call for a greater increase in the penalty, but in terms of the definition—

Ms Hill: But it is also about the definition. This is to assist the OIA in understanding what should be termed a 'vexatious complainant'. I would argue: do any of you know how many people have been named a vexatious complainant by the OIA? How many?

CHAIR: We have been briefed confidentially on a number of issues.

Mr SMITH: You would like it more stipulated so that the OIA know what they are working with around that word 'vexatious'?

Ms Hill: I believe the OIA need boundaries to understand what they can or cannot call a vexatious complainant, because at the moment I do not think there are too many who have been.

Ms LEAHY: I might just touch on the complaints and then I have another question in relation to cost. Prior to this legislation coming into place, there was capacity under the Local Government Act to declare a vexatious ratepayer. My understanding is that the councillors would have known the identity of that particular ratepayer.

Ms Hill: We are still able to do that.

Ms LEAHY: Does that happen at all?

Ms Hill: Yes. We have a list. I would say there is about, out of a population of 200,000, under 20 who are on that list.

Ms LEAHY: I suppose the problem is that the OIA does not know who is on that list and does not know who the complainants are to the OIA. Is there benefit in the legislation being changed so that complainants' identities are at least known to the OIA?

Ms Hill: I think that would be a much better way to go. We would always make our list of vexatious complainants which sits with our legal services available to the OIA. You must remember, though, that even as a ratepayer, they still have a right to put in issues and complaints. If they are not dealt with by the council, they then go straight to legal to be dealt with.

Ms LEAHY: My next question is in relation to cost, and it is in your role at the LGAQ. Putting the Logan situation to one side, has there been an increasing impact on the directors' insurance costs to councillors from these sorts of things that are coming through? Is there any trend in that?

Ms Hill: I will have to take that question on notice to provide you with that information.

Ms LEAHY: That would be appreciated.

Mr McDONALD: I am seeking some clarification, Mayor Hill, regarding this change in legislation. As I said at the opening, the department have informed us that the legislation is sufficient; it is about the interpretation. How do you think the changes that you have recommended will change the outcomes?

Ms Hill: I am hopeful that it gives the OIA an understanding of boundaries, so that rather than having to take all complaints, that it actually gives them the ability to deem people as being vexatious.

Mr McDONALD: The scenarios that you talked about in terms of the training, is that something Townsville has developed or has that been done—

Ms Hill: As I said, department office training. We also use the LGAQ's elected members' update. But the big thing obviously for us comes around—let me go back to your previous question. It is not just about the vexatious complainants, it is also about the register. If you looked at council's register, there would only be one on there, not 24.

Mr HART: I have a real worry about tagging someone as vexatious because they may actually come forward with a complaint that has some merit. Is that not the job of the OIA to start with an assessor, to assess something that is vexatious and just dismiss it outright if they make that choice?

Ms Hill: They could, but then they would continue to have to go back to council to find out. An example might be a complaint has come in about me over the conduct of a council meeting. It goes to the OIA claiming that I did not conduct the meeting properly. The OIA may go back to the CEO and say, 'Did she follow the council's modelled principles of meeting procedure and her code of conduct?' He might say, 'Yes,' and prove it with video footage because now most councils live stream their council meetings. Then it goes back and forth, and the OIA might say, 'Look, there is nothing here. Go away,' but there are still some things that the OIA would need to do.

CHAIR: The time allocated for this session has now expired. Thank you all very much for your time. I know in your city here you have a fair bit to do, so I appreciate the time you have been able to give to us.

Ms Hill: Thank you, Chair, and thank you committee members.

CHAIR: It has been a pleasure. We will be in contact with you about those questions on notice. If you could provide the answers to those by Monday, 14 March.

McLAUGHLIN, Ms Lynette, Mayor Burdekin Shire Council

CHAIR: Good morning. Thank you once again for appearing before the committee today. As you have just seen, I invite you to make an opening statement after which we will have some questions for you.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you very much. I really wanted to present to all of you about my own experience because I think it highlights how the OIA overstepped and that the legislation does need to be amended. I put a submission in, in January, to the Electoral and Other Legislation Amendment Bill which was, of course, not received.

My own experience is that in January 2019, I received a letter on 8 January from the Office of Independent Assessor saying that I had not completed my register of interest correctly. I had omitted to put that I was a director of a family company in Cairns. I did have income from that company listed in my income. I had identified that I did receive a small amount of money from there, even though you do not say how much. I will tell you shortly. I said straightaway, 'Yes, that is correct. It was not put in.'

I would like to point out that I only became a director because my brother had died suddenly from a heart attack, and my sister and sister-in-law said, 'You go onto the board because you like meetings.' It was run by two families. You could not sell shares. You could not buy shares. It was an arrangement whereby when I went to my first meeting, my uncle, who was the chair, said, 'Lynette, we have never voted on one motion.' I said, 'I've got the message.' That was 30 years they had operated successfully as a family unit. I straightaway answered. I went and got legal advice and said, 'That is true. I did not put it down. It was an omission, inadvertently.' I did not try to deceive anyone or do anything. It had absolutely no relationship whatsoever with Burdekin Shire Council. It is in Cairns. I owned 4.04 per cent shares in the company.

What really hit me the most was that if I was still on the board, I could have just amended my document and included it, but because within the family all the senior members were ageing, they decided to sell it, I was then charged with misconduct.

While they were doing the investigation, they also found that I was a director of the Palm Island Corporation which happened when I was not mayor, between 2012 and 2016, and I note that I never received a meeting notice. We had never convened. There were no minutes. Nothing happened. I was over there doing some work with their review of the alcohol to the island, and they were meeting and asked me would I be interested in helping and I said, 'Yes, I would,' and that was my full involvement with the Palm Island Corporation. I had resigned off that as well and they said that I could have amended it if I was still on it.

I firstly admitted that, yes, I had had omitted to do it, inadvertently. There was absolutely no impact whatsoever on my job or on Burdekin Shire Council. My submission details that there was no intention to deceive, no intention to mislead, no risk, no financial cost, no benefit to our company, no political gain—it just went on and on. I think I had about 15 reasons there was absolutely no risk at all.

I think that the Independent Assessor could have made that decision with all the information because when you research what the misconduct was, there were things like 'a financial benefit to a councillor or their family members'. There was no money exchanged at all, there was no risk to council, there was no detrimental media post and no confidentiality breaches which were all the other charges.

I am in my 20th year—I will get emotional now. I am in my 20th year with local government and to have a misconduct allegation against me for an error is just morally wrong. I then put a submission in saying that there needed to be another category inserted into that for a person's human mistake.

When it came back, I was only asked to reimburse council. I know there is a cost. The Councillor Conduct Tribunal's findings said that it was an inadvertent error. I was just trying to find the writing of what they actually said on my matter. It said—

Councillor McLaughlin did not intentionally fail to record the particulars of her interest, the subject of the allegations, in her register of interest. The omissions were inadvertent.

So, absolutely at no stage was there any intention. I believe it should not have gone to where it did, but the legislation said that was misconduct. It cost me personally almost \$11,000. My charge was \$250, but I did not want the council to bear the costs, so I paid the full council costs and paid an extra \$1,550. I think it is just wrong what happened to me.

CHAIR: Thank you, Councillor McLaughlin. We appreciate you appearing before us today. Listening to your story, there were two companies, one where you went on in place of your brother, correct?

Ms McLaughlin: Yes, that is the family company.

CHAIR: It is farmland?

Ms McLaughlin: It was a building, the first high-rise in Cairns. I come from Gordonvale. My father had been on Mulgrave shire for 23 years, so I was well versed in right and wrong and what to do. You could not sell or buy shares. There were two families who were friends who ran a company for over 30 years without one disagreement or argument.

CHAIR: It was a commercial building?

Ms McLaughlin: Yes.

CHAIR: The second one, the Palm Island—

Ms McLaughlin: Yes, I had forgotten I was on it because in those four years I was not on council, I had never had any correspondence; nothing had ever happened. They had never met. It was inactive.

CHAIR: Was that a family company as well?

Ms McLaughlin: No, that was the Palm Island Aboriginal corporation. They had formed a company, aside from the council, which was looking at doing some projects, but I had never ever met with anyone or received anything. I had agreed to do it on a visit there.

CHAIR: That was during that time when you were not on council?

Ms McLaughlin: I was not on council between 2012 and 2016.

CHAIR: When it was brought to your attention by whichever body, did they give you that chance to say, 'Hey, you better update your register or you need to correct that'?

Ms McLaughlin: Yes, I was told that. If I was still involved with the companies, I could have just fixed up my paperwork. The family had sold the building—like I said, everyone was ageing and the other family were just the wife and the son; the father had died—so I could not do anything. The family had sold it. I had only been involved since my brother died in 2014. I never used to go to all the meetings because I lived in the Burdekin. The Palm Island corporation never met. Once I found out about Palm Island I resigned, but I had nothing to resign from because they had never, ever met.

CHAIR: Did you have the chance to simply update the register?

Ms McLaughlin: No, I could not because I was no longer involved with the companies. It had happened in the past.

CHAIR: You had legal fees of almost \$11,000. What was the process? What made you decide to go down the track of getting legal advice? We are interested in the legalisation of this process. I am keen to hear what your thoughts were and what your plan was and how you went about getting legal representation.

Ms McLaughlin: As soon as I received the letter, I immediately acknowledged that it was not on the register. I was aware of that. I had only put it in that section. I went to King & Co., which is the LGAQ solicitor—people who are well versed in legislation for local government. This was a serious allegation of misconduct after I had been on local government for that many years. I did not sleep for a week.

CHAIR: I was going to ask what happened when the issue was brought to your attention, but you have described that and you have given a personal response about how you felt and I think you have covered that pretty well.

Ms McLaughlin: I have. Even though it was reported anonymously, we have a fair indication of who it may have been in the sense that in the town there was a shop window full of comments about me, photos and articles out of the paper. I went to the police and had a stalking charge. It was not upheld. They did not find them, but it had got to that. I grew up on a farm and I have never been scared, but my whole life has changed because of this. We live on a couple of acres now. If I go outside I make sure the whole house is locked and everything is closed up.

When COVID happened and they had closed the public showers, a car pulled up at our place because the person who we assume reported this directed them to our place to have a shower. The council closed the public showers and the person who I am convinced did this directed them to our place. We had travellers turn up during COVID to our house looking to use a shower and toilet.

CHAIR: Thank you for that.

Mr McDONALD: Thank you, Mayor McLaughlin, for being here and for putting a human face to the outcomes and personal cost of this process. You mentioned in your submission—and I appreciate that—the cost to yourself for that one matter. Could you explain to the committee perhaps the cost of the other matters that the Burdekin shire has had to deal with in terms of legal costs, staff and personal costs?

Ms McLaughlin: There have been no others. If you look at our website, there have been no others. I do know that another councillor is going through this for not filling out paperwork correctly, but that is between him and the OIA. I am aware of that because they told me.

Mr McDONALD: There are five complaints involving Burdekin—not all went to the CCT.

Ms McLaughlin: I am not even aware of five. They have probably just gone through the administration.

CHAIR: I think it is on your council's register.

Ms McLaughlin: On mine?

CHAIR: No, on the council complaint register. We get that information.

Ms McLaughlin: There are my two.

Mr McDONALD: Do you want me to withdraw that?

CHAIR: No. That is fine. That information is on the register.

Ms McLaughlin: I would be happy to know. I will make sure I look when I go home. You said there were five?

Mr McDONALD: It is on the register.

CHAIR: Some of them—

Ms McLaughlin: For the present council?

Mr McDONALD: I do not know.

Ms McLaughlin: Over time.

CHAIR: We will clarify that later.

Mr McDONALD: I am just interested in terms of the cost to ratepayers, apart from the human cost that you have articulated today.

Ms McLaughlin: I apologise. I am not aware.

Mr McDONALD: That is fine. Councillor McLaughlin, you have had 20 years in local government—and you articulated your feelings well of having adverse findings against you. Could you explain more about the definition of another category that you are talking about?

Ms McLaughlin: Yes, I can. I am happy to provide a copy. On 6 December I sent a submission to the Economics and Governance Committee. Sorry, I sent it on 8 January. It was in relation to chapter 5 amendments relating to dishonest conduct of councillors and other local government matters. It was around the definition of 'misconduct'. I suggested that there needed to be a category for human error when it was not misconduct. I am not saying there could not be some repercussions. Perhaps there could be just a fine for human error. My suggestion was for the committee to look at that because I think there is a huge difference between human error and someone who gains a financial benefit. I am aware of one man who has allegedly written false statements and a business is profiting from that. When you compare that to a mistake, it just does not make sense.

Mr McDONALD: With regard to that submission to the Economics and Governance Committee, perhaps we can table it or get the reference from *Hansard* for inclusion.

Ms McLaughlin: I am happy to leave a copy.

CHAIR: I think your submission that you gave to us was basically the same submission that you gave to the Economics and Governance Committee.

Ms McLaughlin: Did I attach it? No, I did not. I am happy to provide that. A lot of those reasons are the same. The only difference is that this suggests having a different category for a mistake, for human error, rather than misconduct.

Mr McDONALD: Mayor, I understand your explanation to the chair's question before that the company had sold the building, so at that point in time you could not update the register. Was there any opportunity given for you to update the register historically to say that you were a member of that company?

Ms McLaughlin: No.

Mr McDONALD: Was that opportunity not given?

Ms McLaughlin: No.

Mr McDONALD: There was no legal advice around that?

Ms McLaughlin: No. I think it was very clear that the Office of the Independent Assessor said that because I was no longer involved in either of those companies I could not update the register.

Mr McDONALD: Really.

CHAIR: Did they give that to you in writing?

Ms McLaughlin: Yes, I do have it in writing.

CHAIR: That would be good to have.

Ms McLaughlin: I will just make a note.

Mr McDONALD: That would be great to receive that as well. I am a little confused. There is always a historical register. People buy and sell shares, houses and businesses. At a point in time there was an ownership.

Ms McLaughlin: I will not look for it now because I want to listen, but I will find it.

CHAIR: If we can get a copy of that and lodge it as a document, we can do that afterwards.

Mr SMITH: Mayor, I can appreciate that there is some sensitivity around this. It is obviously still taking an emotional toll. I will take you through a line of questioning but with some sensitivity. The OIA, I assume, wrote to you and said, 'Here are some presumed charges of misconduct.' You went to King & Co. At what point were you aware of what the maximum penalty could be if the CCT found that you had committed those two counts of misconduct?

Ms McLaughlin: Right from the beginning we were aware that it was included under misconduct. I knew that from the beginning. There was only the one. It was only reported about our family company and not about Palm Island. I still did not click about Palm Island until they researched and found that. They would have gone through the company directors, I am assuming. I was aware of that, but when you research all the other misconducts and then look at this, it is just not in the same category.

Mr SMITH: Was there a point in time when you became aware of the maximum penalty that could be applied to this before going to the CCT? Did you go to the CCT knowing that if you were found to have committed misconduct the maximum penalty or fine would be X?

Ms McLaughlin: No. I was never aware of the maximum fine or penalty—never. I did not know whether I would have to make a public disclosure like they do at meetings. I did not know what the maximum penalty would be. However, I was aware that it would be misconduct. I was going to fly down to attend the Councillor Conduct Tribunal. My legal advice explained to me that they were in a position where there was not really much of a decision to make.

Mr SMITH: So your solicitors never provided any advice in regard to what a likely outcome or what a maximum outcome would be?

Ms McLaughlin: No. They definitely said that it would go through under the legislation. I think I was the first one. That is why I always say the Independent Assessor found it to be an 'easy win'. When I researched the number of complaints—and I acknowledge that they may have been under-resourced at the beginning—against the number of decisions, the percentage was so low. This was seen as an 'easy win'—another number, a necessity to keep the office running.

Mr SMITH: Mayor, would it be fair to say though that the OIA did not make a decision of misconduct, rather they made an assessment of a complaint and referred that to the CCT to then make a decision? Would that be a fair comment?

Ms McLaughlin: I think that they made the decision by allowing it to go with the evidence that they had. They could have not pursued it because it is just not misconduct as was previously defined. I acknowledge that it is in the act as that. I just do not think it was common sense or realistic. It had no effect whatsoever at the next election. I was re-elected after that went through. The community did not see it as me trying to deceive or anything like that.

Mr SMITH: Mayor, I appreciate that. In the CCT summary it goes on to mention that from day dot you were always willing to work with the OIA, that the CCT did not believe that this had any adverse effect or that it affected the council or your role in council. However, under the legislation that the OIA has to work in, was it fair that they took it to the CCT? Under the legislation, it cannot be argued that they did not do their job correctly. They did, didn't they?

Ms McLaughlin: If you want to take it to the letter of the law, I say yes. If we remove all human thinking and all reality from any legislation, we are going down the wrong track. Therefore, I put in the submission that I do not want anyone else to go through what I went through.

Mr SMITH: I appreciate it in terms of what we think might pass the pub test. However, the OIA is a legal body. It has a legal framework. Do you believe this is an overreach of the OIA or are you more concerned with the CCT finding against you?

Ms McLaughlin: No. My concern is with the OIA. Firstly, how much did it cost the public purse to pursue me? How many resources did the OIA receive? There is numerous correspondence backwards and forwards. Every time I sent something in they needed to answer that. There was a huge cost to the community at large, to taxpayers, to try to pursue that which any reasonable person would have seen as a human error.

Mr SMITH: Is it not fair that the OIA use their resources to assess the matter to assure that you did not deliberately deceive, because if they get in this complaint and they do not know any of the grounds or they do not have the opportunity to speak to you, is not the use of those resources to widen their assessment necessary so you can put forward your statement that has been upheld by the CCT that there was no deliberate wrongdoing?

Ms McLaughlin: I am not questioning the role of the OIA. Let us be very clear about that. I think there is a need for that because we do see where some local government members may not use their position correctly, but on assessing that after the beginning, someone needs to stand up and say this is not right, we need to make a call here. I believe that the Independent Assessor could have been in a position, and I understand what you are saying about legislation, to say there is no wrongdoing here by the community, by the council—there is absolutely no impact whatsoever.

Mr SMITH: Would you rather see a relaxation or an amendment to the legislation to allow the OIA to do that because currently they cannot do that?

Ms McLaughlin: I even suggested that if there was an error like mine I am happy to pay a fine. If I have broken a traffic rule, I pay a fine. If I broke the rule here I just need to pay a fine. I have not done anything to deceive anybody. When I sent in my submission it was about saying there needs to be another category for human error. If there is anyone in any parliament in any country in the whole world who has never made a human error I would like to meet them.

Mr SMITH: I appreciate that, but I suppose to then pay a fine it still needs to go through the OIA process and then to the CCT. You would not seek legal advice if a fine came your way?

Ms McLaughlin: I would have still sought legal advice because I would want to make sure that I presented the right information, but once that decision was made, yes, I did not complete that paperwork correctly, that relates to this section, like a traffic fine you are fined this amount of money. The Councillor Conduct Tribunal would not have had to meet so there would have been another saving, plus all of the people who assist them. This is the document I received back from the tribunal. I have seen the same writing in every single document. I just think it is a waste of resources and it is just not morally right.

Mr HART: I think the member for Bundaberg is on the right track there. Maybe I can assist a little bit. Councillor, at any stage did anybody in the system give you any advice on how to rectify the issue once you became aware that you had broken the rules, as such?

Ms McLaughlin: The Office of the Independent Assessor said I could not rectify it.

Mr HART: It was straight through to basically finding you guilty in the CCT and some form of sentence?

Ms McLaughlin: Yes. I would hope that at one of those stages someone would have used some common sense.

Mr HART: But no-one anywhere has tried to give you any advice from the government side of things as to how to fix the mistake that you made that you were not aware that you had made?

Ms McLaughlin: They said that I could not fix it. The Office of the Independent Assessor said right from the beginning that because I was not on either of those boards I could not amend my register.

Mr HART: I do not want to upset you in any way, but can you give us a sense of how this makes you feel with regard to the future of being a councillor and a mayor if this sort of thing is going to continually happen?

Ms McLaughlin: I think my desire to serve the community and what I have provided over the last 20 years is far stronger than one error that I may have made and some department that thinks that that is misconduct. I am not going to change who I am or what I do. I might be a little bit more afraid personally for my own safety, but my public role has not diminished or changed at all, and I will continue to serve the very best I can, devoting most of my time to it.

Mr KATTER: Welcome, Mayor McLaughlin. My first question is doubling back on something you mentioned earlier. Where you felt the system could improve is that they would be more discerning at the front end to cut stuff off and make judgement calls to say, 'This looks like human error, let us cut it off now so we are not wasting more resources and time.' Is that your recommendation?

Ms McLaughlin: Exactly right. When I sent my submission in to say I owned 4.04 per cent and I was only there because my brother had dropped dead and there was absolutely no connection, no connected one bit to our council, there was absolutely no risk to reputation, financial risk, nothing, there needed to be some ability to say this is not misconduct.

Mr KATTER: I do not want to say anything derogatory about the council, but I assume there is a level of dysfunctionality that follows something like this. We hear back that council officers have to gather information and do work so it buries some of their time. Would you say that the council was hamstrung in its performance for that period of time?

Ms McLaughlin: Probably not our council because we have a very good council. That is why I paid the difference of what the cost to council was and definitely someone needs to go and research the information, what training I had done and what my history was previously. Someone needs to do that. It is unnecessary work.

Mr KATTER: I feel like I have known you for a long time and I have observed you. You have served through different governments and you seem to have had good relationships with government through that time. What I am trying to say is there is no fear or favour with who is in charge. Just as background, you have all that experience. Building on the member for Burleigh's question, not so much about mayors going forward, but how do you feel about new councillors coming into this environment with this set of rules? You have all that experience and can still get caught up in this. How do you see this impacting new councillors coming in who have to navigate this space and be aware of it to the level that you were supposed to be aware of it, because it sounds pretty tough where they run the ruler over you. What would be your opinion on the complexity for new councillors trying to navigate this space?

Ms McLaughlin: I just recalled one of those complaints that came through that they were talking about, the five. My deputy mayor had a complaint last year around her job. She was ready to walk out and resign. She is such a good councillor. She was going to resign. I did everything I could to say, 'That is one person. You do not have a result yet. You cannot just resign.' There are 16,999 other residents who have not said that. Here was a well educated high schoolteacher in her second term of council prepared to walk away because she felt she should not have to put up with this. What it has done is that in all of our training we always use my example, always, and I am happy to use it with the councillors—we had four new councillors and they are all younger councillors—just to make them aware of how important what they say is and their paperwork. I would never want to see anyone go through what I went through.

Ms LEAHY: Councillor McLaughlin, I know this is a very traumatic experience. We have had a few tears on the shoulder in the past about this. The Office of the Independent Assessor and the Integrity Commissioner were providing training to councils and I think it was highly regarded and that is referenced in the Integrity Commissioner's submission to this inquiry. Has your council or this region had access to any of that sort of training?

Ms McLaughlin: Yes, we have. The Integrity Commissioner visited our council twice and we had an open relationship, open discussions. We had a visit from the Independent Assessor who spoke about the role and what the function of the office was, but that was only the once, and not since the 2020 elections. From 2016 we did have the Independent Assessor arrive, but we also get the updates from the Independent Assessor, which I read with a fine toothcomb.

Ms LEAHY: Do you think that training, and I am thinking of new councillors coming in doing their interest registers, should happen very early for people or even prior to being elected to council?

Ms McLaughlin: I know the department has started that training prior to an election which everyone has to complete, even if you are already experienced or on council. I think that is very good. Perhaps that area could be increased a bit about the responsibilities, but I think we need to find a balance where we do not frighten people from wanting to serve the community. Most of the people

who get into local government are people who have served their community on sporting committees, church committees, cultural committees. People already have a desire to make their community a better place through other avenues as well, and that is the best grounding they can have, and see this as the next step.

In terms of training at the beginning, you are all aware that you can suggest and recommend to adults this is what you should do, but the level of that training goes back to the individuals. You can attend it, but that does not mean that you have recorded everything or recalled everything that has happened. My whole focus as mayor when we have a new team is to make sure we become a team as in are respectful, listen, speak our own mind, and everyone needs to have their own ideas, but it is all about respect and abiding by how meetings are run and what happens. I think that some of the training could be increased prior to elections but also straight after elections. Like I said, we are lucky, our senior staff are very experienced and take us through all of that. Whenever there is any updated legislation our workshop focuses on that. We have our CEO and director of community and corporate who go through details on what needs to happen, and I am always the example.

Ms LEAHY: Can I come back to that. You said your senior staff are doing that advice in relation to interest registers. Should that really be the Integrity Commissioner and the Office of the Independent Assessor in that very early stage?

Ms McLaughlin: It should be with the Integrity Commissioner and the Office of the Independent Assessor and then the CEO and director, they just update whenever there is an update coming out or change or something happening.

Ms LEAHY: You have not seen any training from the Integrity Commissioner for quite some time?

Ms McLaughlin: No, or from the Independent Assessor, who we have not had in this term at all.

Ms LEAHY: There are also the EMU dates from the LGAQ.

Ms McLaughlin: Yes, and also from the department of local government. We get it out of the Townsville office—the regional office.

Ms LEAHY: Does the departmental office do training on any changes?

Ms McLaughlin: Yes, they do, but as always not all the councillors can attend. I make sure that I am at all of them and whichever councillors can come come and then the officers do the update for the rest of the councillors—for all of us together.

CHAIR: Have you adopted or are you looking to adopt that continual rolling training of your councillors? You talk about the training that councillors get pre election and people have come and visited, including the department, to give that training. Have you thought about adopting rolling and ongoing professional development for your councillors, including training on these issues of code, behaviour, register, conduct?

Ms McLaughlin: We do that internally through our CEO, who is very experienced, and our Director of Corporate and Community Services. We have an open, good council; it is excellent and respectful. If someone hears or sees something, we have an opportunity for that discussion to occur at a workshop. I would have to say we do not have a formal training program as such instigated. When we have looked to undertake some of them, the cost has been prohibitive. We are a small council and the cost would be prohibitive if we were to do a course, even through the LGAQ, on various aspects.

Mr HART: You used to be able to go to the Integrity Commissioner's office and seek advice and if you followed that advice, it could be used as a legal defence. That has now ceased due to a lack of resources in the integrity office. Are you aware of any other process—and this goes back to my previous question—whereby you can seek advice from anyone so that, if followed, it could then be used as a legal defence?

CHAIR: I am unsure about the comment 'lack of resources'. I take issue with that comment. We will discuss it later.

Mr HART: That was evidence given to us by the Integrity Commissioner—

CHAIR: I do not entirely agree with what you are saying, but I will let that one pass.

Mr HART:—so I will stick with that, thanks.

CHAIR: I know you will. Sorry, Councillor?

Ms McLaughlin: What is the question?

Mr HART: The Integrity Commissioner used to be able to provide advice that you could use as a legal defence if you followed that advice. Where else would you go for that advice now in the form of a legal defence?

Ms McLaughlin: I would not go anywhere unless I went to someone I trusted. My first point of call—and I do not think you can use it as legal advice—is the CEO and then I would go to King & Company.

Mr HART: If you go to your CEO and get advice and you follow that advice, that is not a legal defence, is it?

Ms McLaughlin: No.

Mr HART: Whereas the Integrity Commissioner was.

Ms McLaughlin: I am not disagreeing; I am not arguing about any of that. All I am saying is that even if I had gone to the Integrity Commissioner I did not know I had left that off my paper. When there is a submission to the Independent Assessor, people have not intentionally done something wrong. Oftentimes the first time you will see it is when you get notice that you have been reported. If you are a councillor who is trying to deceive everyone, then you might. Otherwise, if that one person had not said that, I probably would never have known that I left it off. I do not think that even if I went to the Integrity Commissioner afterwards she would have been able to give me any legal advice or anything to go from.

Mr SMITH: I was reading that outside of your work as a councillor you are also a primary school teacher.

Ms McLaughlin: Yes.

Mr SMITH: I am a former teacher as well. We can probably appreciate the difference between teaching and learning.

Ms McLaughlin: Yes.

Mr SMITH: I think you mentioned that before. During the training that was done through the OIA and the Integrity Commissioner, was there a function of some form of assessment, being summative or formative assessment, along the way or did it very much feel as though it was bureaucrats talking to councillors and they go away saying, 'We have taught it; learning has occurred'?

Ms McLaughlin: You are exactly right; when I was first elected mayor I said, 'Put your hands up if you want to talk.' That was a long time ago. No, and I am very conscious of that because of my experience as a teacher, so it is always interactive. I will ask questions on purpose. We did have an assessment to do and even with our officers I always make sure we never assume that any of us—councillors or the public—understand what we know because the language we use may not be relevant to newly elected councillors or to the public. I am very conscious and being a primary school teacher, probably even more so—and the deputy mayor is a high school teacher. I am very, very conscious. That is why I read every media release, because I keep saying, 'If I do not understand it, no-one is going to understand it.'

Mr SMITH: With the training expenses you have had, is there any feedback or comment you can make from a teaching perspective of what you think could be improved or was it sufficient?

Ms McLaughlin: I put it on mine all the time that I think there needs to be more scenarios; it needs to be a bit more interactive. I do not know if they like coming to Burdekin because I ask a thousand questions on purpose, even if I know the answer, just to try to have a discussion to make people think about if this happened or if that happened.

CHAIR: The time allocated for this public session has now expired. Thank you very much again, Councillor, for appearing. We do not have any questions on notice. We ask if we can have a copy of that correspondence from the OIA regarding the register. We will get that in a moment from you.

Ms McLaughlin: I will send it, but I am happy to leave with you now the submission I made in January. I can email it as well, so you have it electronically. Can I say a sincere thankyou to all of you? If you are ever travelling in the north and want to visit somewhere nice, Burdekin is the place to stop.

Ms LEAHY: Dale Last reminds us regularly.

CHAIR: Thank you very much.

The committee adjourned at 10.33 am.