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THE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY SELECT COMMITTEE ON CARETAKER CONVENTIONS MET IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, PARLIAMENT HOUSE HOBART ON FRIDAY 14 AUGUST 2026.

The Committee met at 2.00 p.m.

CHAIR (Ms Badger) - Welcome to today's hearing of the House of Assembly Select Committee on Caretaker Conventions and thank you for your attendance. With us here today we've got: myself, Ms Badger as Chair; Mr Winter, Deputy Chair; Mr Vermey; and, online, we also have Mr Garland with us as well. If you could please state your name and the capacity at which you are appearing before the Committee.

Ms HOWLETT - Jane Howlett, Liberal member for Lyons, and I've been called in as a witness.

CHAIR - Thank you. Can I confirm that you've received and read the guide sent to you by the Committee Secretary?

Ms HOWLETT - Yes.

CHAIR - Thank you. You are well aware of parliamentary privilege, but I do just have to let you know that this hearing is covered by parliamentary privilege, allowing individuals to speak with freedom without fear of being sued or questioned in any court or place out of Parliament. This protection is not accorded to you if statements that may be defamatory are repeated or referred to you outside the parliamentary proceedings. This hearing is public; the public and media may be present. Should you wish for aspects of your evidence to be heard in private, you must make this request to the Committee at the time.

Ms Howlett, would you like to make a short opening statement?

Ms HOWLETT - Yes, thank you. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Inquiry today and I'm pleased to assist the Committee in its work. Joining me at the table is Tristan Bick, the current Racing Minister's Chief of Staff. Mr Bick is here in a supporting capacity and will not be responding to any questions.

I'd like to place on the record that much of the subject matter of this Inquiry concerns events that occurred a considerable time ago. I will endeavour to answer the Committee's questions to the best of my ability and recollection. I'm not going to speculate, guess or make assumptions. Rather if I do not know the detail of any questions I'm asked or I cannot accurately recall a matter, I will say so. I'm aware this courtesy has been extended to other witnesses at this Committee.

Chair, in relation to Tasracing's commentary about TasInsure during the caretaker period, the Head of the State Service is responsible for caretaker conventions and is best placed to determine appropriate actions. I understand the Head of the State Service recommended to the Tasracing Board that it considers providing additional professional development to Tasracing employees at the commencement of any election period to support the understanding and compliance with caretaker conventions for state elections. This recommendation has my full support.

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I understand that Tasracing has appeared before this committee and I'll refer you to their evidence. Namely, the Chair has provided you with evidence of that, I quote, 'in no way did Tasracing endorse or recommend the election commitment during the caretaker period'. Further, the Tasracing CEO removed the material after Mr Winter raised this matter. I think it's conclusive that Tasracing has accepted responsibilities for their own communications.

I do want to make it very clear, from my perspective, on the matter of Tasracing's communications to industry in relation to TasInsure, and I believe I have answered every question put to me. I've had multiple different questions asked by Members of the Parliament, during Question Time in the House, in Estimates committees, GBE scrutiny and the media.

Chair, I'm also aware of the comments by a former Ministerial [and] Parliamentary Services (MPS) employee given to this Committee. The ex-MPS staffer made a number of disputed claims concerning her duties regarding her employment with MPS. In response to her evidence to this Committee on 31 July [2026], there are some points I wish to clarify. Ms Minnikin-Smith was employed by Ministerial and Parliamentary Services. I resigned from the Legislative Council on 27 February 2024. At the time of Ms Minnikin-Smith's claims, as I understand them, I was a candidate for Lyons and Ms Minnikin-Smith was working for MPS. To be clear, in regards to her activities in her role at that time, she was not employed by me.

I'm advised, and I'd like to inform the Committee today, that the Premier has asked the Head of the State Service to investigate issues in relation to Ms Minnikin-Smith's evidence to this Committee. It's important that that process is allowed to follow due course and I won't be commenting on anything that may touch on that matter. I'm advised the Premier will await advice from the Head of the State Service before commenting directly on any of those matters, and I will do the same.

CHAIR - Thank you very much for that, Ms Howlett. Just from the start, as you rightfully mentioned in your opening statement, the Committee has heard evidence already from Tasracing, which leads us back, I suppose, to what could be the initial point of the Tasracing-TasInsure messaging. Mr Jenkins provided the Committee evidence that he had spoken to you directly about what the TasInsure policy might be over the phone. Do you recall that conversation and can you talk the Committee through it, please?

Ms HOWLETT - In relation to a call with Mr Jenkins, I don't recall the phone conversation in question. But when I was the Minister for Racing, I did talk to Mr Jenkins many, many times about various matters of racing. I understand that it was confirmed to this Committee that the matter of communication around TasInsure was not discussed and I've got no reason to believe the conversation didn't occur and, in line with my previous evidence, I did not direct any communication to go out. As Mr Jenkins said on *Hansard*, he said:

As I recall, the only direct interaction that I had with the former Minister or the former Minister's Office in relation to the matter was via a telephone call; the former Minister and I were speaking on general racing matters prior to the SMS and so forth being released. During that conversation, as I recall, the former Minister simply confirmed to me that workers compensation insurance would, in fact, be within the scope of the TasInsure portfolio or suite of insurance products. I don't recall that there was any other direct engagement.

Then I have Mr Winter's comments as well in *Hansard* here:

So, the morning of Wednesday 2 July 2025, and there's been an announcement by the Premier on TasInsure and you're on a phone call with the former Minister for Racing about general racing matters. You've said that during that conversation, the workers compensation - that aspects of TasInsure was brought up. Did the former Minister raise the issues of TasInsure or did you?

Mr Jenkins said:

I don't recall, Mr Winter, whether we were having - as I say, we were talking about whatever racing matters, as a normal course of interaction between the then-Minister and I.... can't recall.

CHAIR - Minister, thank you very much for providing that; the Committee has already got this evidence on hand. If you don't recall that actual phone call, we might move on. When was the first time that you recall either speaking with Tasracing about TasInsure or your Office doing so?

Ms HOWLETT - Look, I want to make it very, very clear that I did not tell anyone from Tasracing to send out any communication about TasInsure, nor did I tell anyone on my behalf to do so. I certainly was not part of that communication.

CHAIR - Thank you, Minister. I just want to clarify my question a little bit better. Do you recall at what point you would have had the conversation - your recollection of having the conversation about TasInsure with Tasracing and what it would mean for them, not necessarily directing them to put out any content in case there was some kind of - when that communication may have perhaps been blurred?

Ms HOWLETT -As I said, I spoke to the CEO on a regular basis during my time as Minister and also during caretaker mode. You're still a Minister during caretaker mode, as you would well know, so we had various conversations about matters to do with racing constantly.

Mr WINTER - Minister, continuing on with this, you told the House and, you're right, various committees over time, that you were not aware that there were any communications going out from Tasracing in relation to TasInsure. But it's come to light, both through this Committee and elsewhere, that, in fact, your then-Chief of Staff had received emails from Mr Nick Turner, on behalf of Tasracing, outlining what the communications were and that there were phone calls. Were you aware of the phone calls and emails that were received by your Chief of Staff?

Ms HOWLETT - Look, I can't comment on any communication that I wasn't party to.

Mr WINTER - Were you aware of it, though?

Ms HOWLETT - I was campaigning every single day. I was out working hard, as I'm sure you were doing the same, Honourable Member, so I can't -

Mr WINTER - Were you aware of the email and the phone call?

Ms HOWLETT - I can't recall. As I said, the facts are clear and my former Chief of Staff - I refer you to his stat dec. An employee of a communication company contacted a ministerial adviser with an inquiry the adviser believed was a clarification about whether TasInsure would cover workers compensation. I'm advised that at no point was it clear to the adviser that the intention was to distribute the wording as a general messaging to the industry, and evidence to the Select Committee on Caretaker Conventions on 15 June [2026] confirm that -

Mr WINTER - I just want to pull you up on that because the evidence we've received from Mr Turner - and he was really clear in his evidence and he's provided an email; it's from himself to your former Chief of Staff on 2 July [2025] at 4.52 p.m. and the subject is 'FW: Message to industry' and he says:

Hey mate

See attached for your reference.

And then sends exactly what the communications is going to be. How can you say that he wasn't aware a message was going generally to industry when the subject heading is literally 'Message to industry'?

Ms HOWLETT - Mr Winter, as I've stated before, I can't comment on any communication that I wasn't privy to.

Mr WINTER - Well, you've just told the Committee that your Chief of Staff wasn't aware and you've given evidence previously in committees and elsewhere that no-one in your Office was aware. But yet we've got evidence that says that's false. Do you still contend that this email does not tell your Chief of Staff that there's a message going out to the entire industry about TasInsure?

Ms HOWLETT - I can't comment on any information that I wasn't - I wasn't part of that communication, so I can't comment on that. My ex-Chief of Staff has provided a stat dec and, as I've said to you -

Mr WINTER - Your former Chief of Staff has tabled a statutory declaration. We've received evidence that the Premier's Office was involved in the production of that statutory declaration. Were you aware of - did you assist with the -

Ms HOWLETT - No, I didn't.

Mr WINTER - Were you aware that he was preparing a stat dec?

Ms HOWLETT - I was aware that he was preparing a stat dec, but I had no involvement in that stat dec.

Mr WINTER - The stat dec on 5 March [2026], which followed the one on 4 March [2026], says, and I quote:

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My previous statutory declaration referred to specific communication in response to the ABC story. I can confirm that at no time was I aware of Tasracing's intended plan to issue any public communication about the TasInsure policy on any platform.

But the Committee later received this email that directly contradicts the stat dec from your former Chief of Staff. Are you giving evidence to this Committee that at no stage were you aware of this email going to your Chief of Staff?

Ms HOWLETT - I can't recall, no. I can't comment, as I've said to you before, on any communication that I wasn't party to.

Mr WINTER - Do you see that there's a conflict here between the evidence - the email we've received and the stat dec given by your former Chief of Staff?

Ms HOWLETT - I can't comment on any communication, as I said, I wasn't involved in. I was out campaigning every single day, as I'm sure you were, trying to win a seat.

Mr WINTER - The problem was that Tasracing was also campaigning and that's the reason why we're here, Minister.

Ms HOWLETT - I think that's been addressed and that's been looked into by the Head of the state public service.

CHAIR - Ms Howlett, we've heard - since this has come to light and in trying to figure out a sequence of events and who was involved, we have, multiple times, had to have corrections of the record from the Premier's Office, in relation to who knew what and at what point. What has your involvement been in working with the Premier's Office on those multiple corrections of the record - in terms of has there been any kind of investigation with your Office that you can talk us through, in terms of what this sequence of events has been?

Ms HOWLETT - Well, the Premier asked the Head of the State Service to look into what occurred during caretaker mode in relation to Tasracing and the text message.

CHAIR - And after that, obviously in the House, prior to the winter break, we had to have some corrections on the record about various matters. We've had another correction put on the record to this Committee by the Premier in relation to another correction that he had to make in the House. Have you been involved in those conversations about the correction? I'm just curious, where's this coming from and why it was such a blur for so long?

Ms HOWLETT - Look, as far as what I've been involved in, I corrected the record as soon as I could and took full responsibility of the social media post that was put up during caretaker mode. But that's all that I can recall at the moment.

Mr WINTER - So, you gave evidence, Minister - I think you're referring to that - that you hadn't been aware of the TasInsure communications. Can you tell us when you did become aware of the TasInsure - or how you became aware that Tasracing had sent out the text message and done this communication?

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Ms HOWLETT - As I said, as far as - I corrected the record and removed it as soon as I could and when I was aware. I take full responsibility for it being posted on my social media post and corrected the record, which was the right thing to do.

Mr WINTER - Did you ever have any conversations with the Chair or the CEO of Tasracing about the fact that the communications have been taken down from the website?

Ms HOWLETT - I can't recall.

Mr WINTER - Okay. So, you can't tell us exactly when you found out or how you found out about the communications?

Ms HOWLETT - The communications - yeah, I can't recall. As I said, I was working ridiculously long hours during - I think it was at scrutiny during 2025.

Mr WINTER - That was the first you found out about the communication?

Ms HOWLETT - Mm.

Mr WINTER - So, how did the Facebook post occur some months earlier then?

Ms HOWLETT - Well, as I said, I take full responsibility for what was posted.

Mr WINTER - So, it wasn't you that made the comment or the Facebook post?

Ms HOWLETT - It's my Facebook post and I take full responsibility for my Facebook post. As soon as I was made aware, I took the post down and I corrected the record.

Mr WINTER - Just on that, if you're trying to protect someone else, that's absolutely fine. I'm not going to ask you the question. If it wasn't you, I'm not going to ask you who did it. I just want to know, did you make the Facebook post and the subsequent Facebook comment which linked to the TasInsure 'expected to extend to racing industry workers compensation' webpage of the Tasracing website?

Ms HOWLETT - As I said, I take full responsibility for my social media, regardless of whatever platform that may be on. It's my page, it's got my name on it, I take full responsibility and I corrected the record as soon as I possibly could.

Mr WINTER - Of course. I think that's the right thing to do, Minister. I'm not asking - of course, you're responsible for that, but I just wanted to know, did you make the Facebook posts and comment personally or was it someone else?

Ms HOWLETT - As I said, I take full responsibility for my Facebook site, my Instagram site, my LinkedIn and any other social platforms.

Mr WINTER - Do you understand why this is important? Because I'm trying to get to the bottom of when you found out. You've given evidence here today and previously that the first you found out was during Estimates, but then there's a Facebook post from quite a long time earlier, so I'm just trying to understand. If it wasn't you that made the comment, then that's a pretty easy thing for us to move on from.

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Ms HOWLETT - It's my name on it, my site, I take full responsibility. The post was removed and I corrected the record as soon as I could.

CHAIR - In relation to, as you've pointed out, the Premier did ask the Head of the public service to look into this, as would be the normal course of action in any perceived or potential breach of caretaker conventions. What role did you play in a part of looking into that? Obviously you are the Minister, this has happened in your Office, so surely there would have been some kind of communication at some point as to how a potential breach of caretaker conventions would have happened, given your responsibilities at the time as a Minister, with your staff as well who, notwithstanding, also have their own responsibilities under the conventions.

Ms HOWLETT - Look, as I stated before, the Head of the public service was asked to investigate what occurred in caretaker mode and, as I said in my opening statement, she has requested that Tasracing staff undergo some training for any state election in caretaker mode and she made her recommendations to the Premier. The Head of the State Service is responsible for caretaker conventions and the integrity of their application right across the State Service and is best placed to determine the appropriate action, which I understand she has appeared and given evidence to this Committee.

CHAIR - Thank you. Just for absolute clarity, you did not have any communication with the Head of State Service in relation to this potential breach of caretaker conventions?

Ms HOWLETT - No.

CHAIR - Thank you. I also want to go back to the corrections that we've had on the record from the Premier around the different communication that may or may not have been understood from your Office. Just for the utmost clarity: you had no communication from the Premier or the Premier's Office in relation to any corrections that have been made either in the Parliament prior to the winter break or to this Committee?

Ms HOWLETT - Not that I recall. As I said, and I stated before, I corrected the record myself on as far as the social media post as soon as I could in Parliament, on the floor of the House.

Mr WINTER - Minister, you said that you removed the comments from your Facebook page as soon as you became aware. So, when did you become aware and how did you become aware?

Ms HOWLETT - As soon as I was made aware, I believe it was during Estimates hearing; that's when I was made aware and I'm sure it was then. I removed the post and corrected the record as soon as I was able to.

Mr WINTER - Because the post and the comment are still there, Minister, today.

Ms HOWLETT - I thought I'd removed them. I would have to go through and have a look.

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Mr WINTER - Well, I just did. It's still there, which makes all this even more difficult. In terms of the stat dec as well, when specifically asked whether Mr [Luke] Gaetani was aware that Tasracing intended to communicate the policy publicly, Mr Turner testified to this Committee he was aware that Tasracing intended to issue public communication about the TasInsure policy.

The quote is:

Yeah, we sent that to him in context.

Sorry, I should say that again - it's me that says:

...he was aware that Tasracing intended to issue public communication about the TasInsure policy.

And Mr Turner says:

Yeah, we sent that to him in that context.

So, given Tasracing's communication consultant explicitly testified that the draft was provided to your adviser in the context of an upcoming public release, do you maintain that no-one in your Office had prior knowledge to this communication or do you need to correct the record?

Ms HOWLETT - As I said, I wasn't party to that communication and I can't comment on that. During the election period, I spent very, very little time in my Office. I was out campaigning day and night, seven days a week, to win the seat of Lyons.

Mr WINTER - Yeah, I was campaigning, too, but I can remember the conversations I had about this. Minister, I'll go again -

Ms HOWLETT - Got a better memory than I have, Mr Winter.

Mr WINTER - Seem to have a much better one than you, Minister. When confronted with the previous public assurances, Mr Turner testified. I asked him:

Minister Howlett says:

I can certainly tell you that I, and no-one in my Office, was aware.

And then I asked:

Mr Turner, is that statement from Ms Howlett correct?

And Mr Turner said:

... all I can do is tell you what I did, and what I did was provide a version of what Tasracing was going to say to the Minister's Office. I can't speak to why she said that.

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Minister, Mr Turner refuses to endorse your statement. Did Mr Gaetani fail to inform you that he'd received this public copy or were you aware of it the whole time?

Ms HOWLETT - Look, I refer you to Mr Gaetani's stat dec that he did. It's not a matter for me. As I said, I wasn't privy to any of those communications and I can't comment on them because I wasn't privy to those communications.

Mr WINTER - You've previously, Minister, provided a submission on 8 May [2026] to the hearing and in that you say:

In relation to the Committee's letter of 9 April 2026 inviting Mr ... Gaetani to provide a submission, I note that, as Minister, I am responsible and accountable to the House of Assembly for the actions of my Office, including the advice and assistance provided by my ministerial staff.

Consistent with long-standing practice under our system of responsible government, ministerial staff are accountable through their Minister, rather than directly through the Parliament.

But Minister, I know that member of staff no longer works for you, but given that the staff member in question, Mr Gaetani, has twice provided a statutory declaration, twice been tabled in Parliament by you, and that under the *Oaths Act 2001* the maximum penalty for a false stat dec is 15 years in prison, don't you think it's appropriate that he would appear in front of this Committee?

Ms HOWLETT - That's not a matter for - that's not a decision for me, Mr Winter.

Mr WINTER - Given your failing memory, Minister, and inability to answer these questions, how are we going to get to the bottom of what actually happened?

CHAIR - Mr Winter, that is a question for the individual in question, who, of course, for those listening online, given they have been the subject to a lot of evidence provided in this Committee, as with anyone, is provided an adequate right of reply. Sorry, were you going to add something to that?

Ms HOWLETT - No.

CHAIR - Thank you minister - Ms Howlett. I want to take a step back for the evidence of the Committee, because a part of what we also heard from Mr Turner of Cor Comms, in relation to reaching out to your Office in the context of asking for policy advice and what was going to go out, is something that he describes as regular business, making sure they've got the messaging right. Obviously, this is something that happens not just in caretaker conventions, but at all times. Can you talk us through what, if any, general input you might have to any of the messaging that's going out or oversight that would be happening, generally, as a Minister on a day-to-day basis, or is that responsibility entirely that of your staff?

Ms HOWLETT - No, look, as far as overseeing, Mr Turner - I don't recall that he would have sent out a lot of communication on behalf of Tasracing. I can't recall seeing very many in my couple of years and then previous to that, as being Minister for Racing as well, from

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Mr Turner. But there would have been a few communiqués that he would have sent out on behalf of Tasracing. I mean, he is a client of Tasracing.

CHAIR - So, for clarification, it wouldn't be a regular thing where, on behalf of Tasracing, Mr Turner would be reaching out to your Office for policy clarification?

Ms HOWLETT - No. Certainly not to me.

CHAIR - Or to your Office that you might be aware of?

Ms HOWLETT - I wouldn't imagine there would have been much. Well, as far as interaction with Mr Turner and my Office, I'd have to take that on notice and have a - I'd have to take that on notice.

CHAIR - Yeah, absolutely. I'll confess, I'm not a large consumer of any communiqué that's going out from Tasracing, but I want to kind of clarify that this is a very unique circumstance that they would have put out a communiqué promoting TasInsure, irrespective of that caretaker period - that is unique.

Ms HOWLETT - As I said before, I can't comment on the communication that I wasn't privy to, but there would have been a lot of - there's lots of communication that goes out through various portfolios and lots of calls. But I can't comment on any communication that I wasn't privy to.

Mr WINTER - Back onto the stat dec, Minister, briefly. So, you weren't involved in the preparation of the statutory declaration, is that correct?

Ms HOWLETT - No.

Mr WINTER - Okay. Were you aware that it was being prepared?

Ms HOWLETT - I was aware that Mr Gaetani was preparing a stat dec and he stands by his stat dec, and that's not a matter for me.

Mr WINTER - Can you explain how the stat dec that you tabled is not inconsistent with the evidence that we've received from Mr Turner? Like, what's the defence here?

Ms HOWLETT - Mr Gaetani stands by his stat dec.

Mr WINTER - Are you claiming that the email is false? Because the email clearly shows that he was aware.

Ms HOWLETT - I'm not making any claims, Mr Winter. What I'm saying is Mr Gaetani stands by his stat dec and that's simply not a matter for me.

Mr WINTER - Well, it is a matter for you because he was your Chief of Staff and you tabled the document. So, both of those things mean that it is a matter for you.

Ms HOWLETT - Mr Gaetani stands by his stat dec, Mr Winter.

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Mr WINTER - But can you just explain to the Committee how - what the defence is here? Because on the one hand I've got evidence and an email sent to Mr Gaetani that says 'Message to industry', on the other hand I've got a stat dec from Mr Gaetani saying:

... that at no time was I aware of Tasracing's intended plan to issue any public communication ...

So, what's the defence here?

CHAIR - I'm not sure Ms Howlett can answer that, as much as we'd all like clarification on that. On the email it is pretty clear that it is to industry and if it is the case that - this is quite a unique circumstance where they're going to be seeking policy information from your Office to send out - it's quite understandable that the communication company is trying to get clarification. So, it would have, presumably, been very clear what they were seeking from your Office to be able to be sent out. Are you saying then, as Minister, you have no oversight into what's being put out whatsoever and that that's wholeheartedly done by your staff? Where does the responsibility of a Minister stop in that situation?

Ms HOWLETT - Well, as I said, during that period of time, I was out campaigning seven days, seven nights a week. I had various conversations, as I said, about various racing matters with Mr Jenkins, but I have no oversight of that communication and I simply can't comment on it because I wasn't privy to it.

CHAIR - And no check-in with your staff about what might be going out with that potential -

Ms HOWLETT - Not at that time.

CHAIR - Not at that time?

Ms HOWLETT - No.

Mr WINTER - Minister Howlett, you tabled the statutory declaration; what steps did you take to ensure that the information you were about to table in the House was accurate?

Ms HOWLETT - I have every reason to believe that Mr Gaetani's stat dec is - it's his stat dec and I tabled it on behalf of him.

Mr WINTER - But we've now got evidence it's false. So, what actions do you plan to take?

Ms HOWLETT - That's your opinion, Mr Winter.

Mr WINTER - Apart from just the *Oaths Act*, there's also the Standing Orders of the House. So, Standing Order 2 requires you to be honest and accurate in the House and you've tabled a false document. Are you planning to take any -

Ms HOWLETT - As I said, Mr Gaetani stands by his stat dec, and that is a matter for him. Your statements - I'm not going to -

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Mr WINTER - You're also contending that you also believe the stat dec is still accurate. Is that correct?

Ms HOWLETT - I'm not going to comment on that. It's Mr Gaetani's stat dec; he stands by that, Mr Winter.

Mr WINTER - If you're going to correct the record, I guess I have to assume that you also stand by the stat dec, because, if you didn't, you would have to withdraw it under the Standing Orders of the House of Assembly.

Ms HOWLETT - I'll need to seek some advice on that, Mr Winter.

Mr WINTER - Again, if you're seeking advice, then you're accepting that it's false.

Ms HOWLETT - As I said at the start, Mr Gaetani stands by his stat dec.

Mr WINTER - My question is to you.

Ms HOWLETT - That is a matter for you, Mr Winter. Mr Gaetani stands by his stat dec.

Mr WINTER - But do you?

Ms HOWLETT - Mr Gaetani stands by his stat dec, as I've stated, and there is no evidence that it's false.

Mr WINTER - Minister, do you stand 100 per cent behind your statement that you never communicated in any way to Tasracing to suggest that they should issue communications around the TasInsure policy?

Ms HOWLETT - As I said, I can't recall all the conversations that I had with Mr Jenkins during caretaker mode. We communicated on a regular basis. There's always lots going on, as you well know, in the racing industry. So, we communicated very regularly.

Mr WINTER - So, you can't be sure whether you did or not. Is that what you're saying?

Ms HOWLETT - Whether we spoke about TasInsure, I'm sure we - we spoke about many things.

Mr WINTER - The question is: so you're 100 per cent sure that you never asked them -

Ms HOWLETT - No, I'm not saying I'm 100 per cent sure. I'm saying that we spoke about many things.

Mr WINTER - So, how did Tasracing come to be aware that TasInsure would cover the racing industry?

Ms HOWLETT - I'm sure there were questions that were asked and I'm sure -

Mr WINTER - Outside of this communication, I can't find any evidence that anyone found out in any other way, so I'm just wondering how.

Ms HOWLETT - As you would be well aware, when you were campaigning in your electorate of Franklin, the amount of times that insurance was raised - whether it be people that didn't have insurance because it was too costly, people who were underinsured because they couldn't afford it - insurance was a major, major issue for many businesses around my electorate and I'm sure it was no different in your electorate. We also know that the insurance in the racing industry - the premiums have gone through the roof and you would have heard that as well.

CHAIR - I just had something a little bit further on that. I explicitly asked the question of Mr Jenkins because we had heard from yourself that perhaps Tasracing had found out about the TasInsure policy from the likes of, I think, TasFarmers were named, as was the Small Business Council. Mr Jenkins explicitly said, 'no, it was not from either of those', and I asked him if he could confirm that he had only heard about it from the Minister's Office and he said, 'correct'. Can you confirm that if he's only hearing about it from your Office or yourself, is there any other way that your Office might have communicated that to them, or would it have only been via a phone call, that you cannot recall, to Mr Jenkins?

Ms HOWLETT - As I said, I had various phone calls with Mr Jenkins on a regular basis. I'm sure after it had been announced that we would have discussed the issue, but I can't recall it. But I'm sure that we would have because it was such a prominent issue in the racing industry as well as various businesses across the state.

CHAIR - And explicitly after it was announced?

Ms HOWLETT - I can't recall whether it was before or after, at the moment.

Mr WINTER - I want to move on to the evidence we heard from Sharee Minnikin-Smith some weeks ago. Minister, Ms Minnikin-Smith was formally appointed in November 2023 to the Leader of Government's Office in the Legislative Council under Leonie Hiscutt MLC. Ms Minnikin-Smith has testified to this committee that, despite her formal contract, she worked almost exclusively for you - in fact, she said 100 per cent after 1 January [2024]. Can you explain why a staffer paid via a centralised MPS role was working exclusively for you on your personal electorate and campaign matters?

Ms HOWLETT - As I said, yes, I believe she commenced employment, I think it was, 23 November 2023, and she did not work for myself. As I said, she was employed by Ministerial and Parliamentary Services, and she was also a member of the Party and she performed many duties.

Mr WINTER - So, the question is: can you explain - well, she gave evidence that she worked 100 per cent of the time for you from 1 January, do you agree with that?

Ms HOWLETT - As I said, she didn't work for me at all; she worked for MPS. I've been advised that the ex-staffer, Ms Sharee Minnikin-Smith, was given a range of duties during her time with MPS and these included: supporting the Leader and the Deputy Leader of the House in the Legislative Council with general research, administrative duties, assisting members, develop databases for regional cabinets, various roundtables, meetings, constituent inquiries, meeting with constituents about their matters and following up with their issues across ministerial portfolios, drafting responses and responding to constituent inquiries; and also attending a range of training opportunities including frontline services, trauma-informed

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training, general workplace training. As I stated to you in my opening statement, the head of the public service has been asked to investigate those issues that were raised in the Committee hearing by the Premier.

Mr WINTER - Ms Minnikin-Smith gave the quote to this Committee that she worked, I quote, '100 per cent for Jane Howlett'. Is that incorrect?

Ms HOWLETT - That is incorrect. As I said, she administered members, helped develop databases -

Mr WINTER - She said, Minister - sorry, Ms Howlett - she said that her daily workload, campaign tasks and door-knocking duties were spent, I quote, 'exclusively for Jane Howlett'. Is that correct?

Ms HOWLETT - She didn't work for me. So, you can ask the question -

Mr WINTER - But did she perform those tasks for you, Minister - Ms Howlett?

Ms HOWLETT - as many times as you like.

Mr WINTER - I'm asking a different question now.

Ms HOWLETT - I was a candidate; I was unemployed. I was a candidate during that time just trying to get elected.

Mr WINTER - How often were you communicating with Ms Minnikin-Smith during that period that you were unemployed?

Ms HOWLETT - Regularly.

Mr WINTER - Why were you regularly communicating with her if she wasn't working for you?

Ms HOWLETT - Because Ms Minnikin-Smith, as I said, was a Liberal Party member. She volunteered her services across the Lyons electorate and was Secretary of one of the Branches and worked hard to support members in their role. I know that, and as you know, during election campaigns our members and our volunteers are absolutely critical, and I thank each and every one of them for their tireless efforts that they help.

Mr WINTER - Ms Minnikin-Smith's given evidence that she spent weeks and weeks, hours, assisting you with tasks like door-knocking and other campaign tasks. I know that, technically, she was employed by MPS - that's the whole point. Do you deny the claims that's she's made about the amount of support she was giving to you?

Ms HOWLETT - I really appreciate her support and her advocacy and being a believer in the Liberal Party and certainly helping us win government. As I said, that's a matter the Premier has written to the Head of the State Service to investigate those matters and the Premier will await the outcome of that investigation. I can't comment anymore on that because that's not a matter for me and that matter is being investigated.

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CHAIR - Were you of the understanding that Ms Minnikin-Smith, with the benefit of the doubt, was doing the amount of work that she's said to this Committee that she was, was doing so exclusively as a volunteer and member of the Liberal Party at that time?

Ms HOWLETT - I thank Ms Minnikin-Smith for her work and her work previously in her Member Engagement Officer role at the Party. She did an incredible amount of work for the Party, and I thank her very much for that.

CHAIR - So, was it your understanding during that 2024 caretaker period that the extent of work that she was doing, that was campaigning by nature, that she was undertaking as a volunteer or member of the Liberal Party?

Ms HOWLETT - Look, any campaign work is managed by the Party, and I don't manage volunteers in campaigns and that's certainly not my role. My role at the time was - as I said, I'd resigned from being a member of the Legislative Council and I was out campaigning every single day - seven days, seven nights a week - to get elected into the House of Assembly; not sure whether that's fortunate or not.

Mr WINTER - Are you contending that Ms Minnikin-Smith was doing all of this purely as a volunteer?

Ms HOWLETT - As I said to you, that is a matter that the Premier has written to the Head of the State Service to investigate those matters that were raised and the Premier will await the outcome of the investigation. I can't comment on that as it's not a matter for me.

Mr WINTER - Do you accept that this parliamentary Committee has jurisdiction to inquire into caretaker breaches and that executive review does not excuse you from answering questions here today?

Ms HOWLETT - Look, as I said in my opening statement, the Premier has asked the head of the state public service to investigate those matters.

Mr WINTER - That's fine, but the House - and this was unanimously carried only two days ago - has asked this Committee to extend its Terms of Reference to inquire into these matters.

Ms HOWLETT - Into 2024, I understand that.

Mr WINTER - So, are you refusing to answer these questions anyway?

Ms HOWLETT - I haven't refused to answer any question.

Mr WINTER - You just referred us to -

Ms HOWLETT - What I'm saying is that the Premier has written to the Head of the state public service to investigate those matters that were raised.

CHAIR - You said that that wasn't a matter for you. I understand if you can't - there's an investigation ongoing, I understand that, Ms Howlett.

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Ms HOWLETT - Correct.

CHAIR - But can you confirm to the Committee that you are a part of that investigation, given your role in it?

Ms HOWLETT - I would assume so.

CHAIR - I'd hope so.

Ms HOWLETT - I don't know. I would assume so.

CHAIR - Okay. I just want to clarify it, because when you said it wasn't anything to do with you, we want to make sure it's not external because obviously we've got a separate issue here in relation to caretaker breaches in the 2025 relation. It's hard to understand when we've got a Premier making multiple corrections on the record that that didn't have anything - you had no involvement in helping sort out what that timeframe was.

Mr WINTER - Since you said you are happy to answer questions, was Ms Minnikin-Smith contributing to your campaign as a volunteer only?

Ms HOWLETT - Yes, she did do volunteer for the Party, for myself and for other members across Lyons as well.

Mr WINTER - Are you aware of her using public resources in order to support your campaign?

Ms HOWLETT - As I said, the campaign is managed by the Party and I don't manage - it's not my role to manage volunteers in campaigns; it's a matter for the Party.

Mr WINTER - Was she ever referred to as your Campaign Manager?

CHAIR - I don't know.

Mr WINTER - So, you never told her she was the Campaign Manager? She never acted in that role at campaign meetings?

Ms HOWLETT - I had many people assisting with my campaign.

Mr WINTER - Was she your Campaign Manager?

Ms HOWLETT - I had someone else assisting as well. I had various people managing my campaign.

Mr WINTER - Did she use any public resources to support your campaign in that role?

Ms HOWLETT - As I said, that is a matter that the Premier has written to the Head of the State Service to investigate and I won't be commenting.

Mr WINTER - That's fine, but it doesn't stop you from answering the question.

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Ms HOWLETT - I won't be commenting anymore on that matter.

Mr VERMEY - Chair, can we just sort of be careful of putting the words -

CHAIR - If you want to raise a point reflecting on the Chair, there's a different way to do that, Mr Vermeij. Otherwise, no, Mr Winter's question is still in order, notwithstanding if Ms Howlett wants to explain to us why she can't clarify that in respect to this investigation, which is a little bit curious, why you wouldn't be able to answer that explicitly, I would think. If you want to ask just the question again without the preamble, Mr Winter, that's fine.

Mr WINTER - Was there any use of public resources by Ms Minnikin-Smith to support your campaign that you're aware of?

CHAIR - That you're aware of.

Ms HOWLETT - As I said, that is a matter that's being investigated and I'm not going to say or do anything that may impend that.

Mr WINTER - You're right. It is being investigated by this Committee because the House of Assembly asked us to on Wednesday [12 August 2026]. So, can you answer the question, please?

Ms HOWLETT - The Premier has asked the Head of the State Service, has written to her, to investigate those matters that were raised.

Mr WINTER - The Parliament has asked this Committee to do this job and ask you these questions right now. Can you answer it, please?

Ms HOWLETT - As I said, Ms Minnikin-Smith was a member of the Party and a believer of our great Party, and she did do volunteer work.

Mr WINTER - Did she use public resources to support your campaign?

CHAIR - To your knowledge.

Ms HOWLETT - I don't know if she used public resources or not. I was out campaigning every day, seven days a week, seven nights.

Mr WINTER - Are you aware of -

Ms HOWLETT - The campaign was managed by the Party.

Mr WINTER - Are you aware of the email that she sent on Friday 22 March 2024 at 9.03 p.m. titled 'A Strong Plan for the Tasman'?

Ms HOWLETT - Yes, I'm advised that an email was sent.

Mr WINTER - Is that a use of public resources, Minister - Ms Howlett?

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Ms HOWLETT - What actually occurred, as far as the email that was sent, I had a message the following day saying that she inadvertently sent an email using her Parliament email instead of her Liberal Party email, and at the time she apologised for doing so. The email was sent at 9.03 at night, not during the day. The following day, Ms Minnkin-Smith sent me a text message that said, and I quote:

I have done the Tasman and it has gone from my Parliament email. How do I change it?

So, to me, that indicates she made an error, like many people do when using IT, et cetera, and she apologised for it.

Mr WINTER - What was your response to that?

Ms HOWLETT - I don't recall responding to the text message.

Mr WINTER - Do you have that - you mentioned you had - do you have that text message there as well as evidence?

Ms HOWLETT - I don't have the text message, but I'm sure I can take that on notice and provide that to you.

Mr WINTER - So, you can state that you didn't ask Ms Minnkin-Smith to send it from her Parliament email?

Ms HOWLETT - Not from her Parliament email, no.

Mr WINTER - Did you ask her to send it from any email?

Ms HOWLETT - Ms Minnkin-Smith had a Liberal Party email -

Mr WINTER - Did you ask her to send the email?

Ms HOWLETT - I'm sure I would have - I'm not sure what it was in reference to - what we'd done in the Tasman Peninsula - it was in relation to that. As I said, the email was sent at 9.03 p.m., not during the day, and she sent me a text message the next day saying, I quote:

I've done Tasman and it's gone from my Parliament email. How do I change it?

And, to me, that indicates she's obviously made an error, which many, many people do. We all have, and she apologised for it.

CHAIR - Just going to double check there's no questions online from Mr Garland.

Mr GARLAND - No, nothing from me.

Mr WINTER - In terms of the email that was sent out, you've referenced some text messages and you've pointed out it was late at night, which is true, we can see that in the email correspondence, did you ever ask her to do work during business hours?

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Ms HOWLETT - There was work done, I'm sure, during - there was some stuff done during the day, weekends, night times. During that time, as I said, I certainly wasn't her - she didn't work for me; Ms Minnkin-Smith worked for the MPS and, as I said, she was a wonderful member of the Party and did a lot of volunteer work, not just for me.

CHAIR - Anything else from you?

Mr WINTER - No, a lot of questions still.

CHAIR - Thank you very much, Ms Howlett, for coming in. I do just have to read you the statement after evidence. What you have said to us here today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Once you leave the table, you need to be aware that privilege does not attach to comments you may make to anyone, including the media, even if you're just repeating what you said to us. Do you understand that?

Ms HOWLETT - Yes.

CHAIR - Thank you very much.

The witness withdrew.

The Committee adjourned at 2.58 p.m.