

**REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE**

**PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 7 - PLANNING AND  
ENVIRONMENT**

**ALLEGATIONS OF IMPROPRIETY AGAINST AGENTS OF THE  
HILLS SHIRE COUNCIL AND PROPERTY DEVELOPERS IN THE  
REGION**

**UNCORRECTED**

**At Gallery Room, Ground Floor, Mitchell Building, State Library of NSW, Sydney on  
Thursday 2 March 2023**

**The Committee met at 11:00.**

**PRESENT**

Ms Sue Higginson (Chair)

The Hon. John Graham

The Hon. Penny Sharpe

**PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE**

The Hon. Scott Barrett



**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the final hearing of the inquiry into allegations of impropriety against agents of The Hills Shire Council and property developers in the region. The inquiry, which was sparked by serious matters raised in a speech to Parliament by the member for Castle Hill on 23 June 2022, is examining the integrity of processes, employees and elected officials of The Hills Shire Council, and the role and influence of developers and their interactions with councillors and members of Parliament in the region. I acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today.

Before we start this morning, I would like to make a few important comments. Several individuals who were invited and later issued with a summons to attend our hearing today have questioned the ability of this Committee to continue its work after the prorogation and the application of parliamentary privilege to any evidence they provide. The position of the Legislative Council is that prorogation does not affect the operation of committees. Committees are only unable to operate following the expiration or dissolution of the Legislative Assembly, which will be on 3 March 2023. This was affirmed in a legal opinion provided by Mr Brett Walker, SC, in 2011 and has been demonstrated by the fact that committees have continued to operate during prorogation over the past decade. Based on this position, witnesses are protected by parliamentary privilege, and the Committee rejects any view otherwise.

With that important statement made, I would like to make some brief comments about the procedures for today's hearing. Today's hearing is being broadcast live via the Parliament's website. A transcript of today's hearing will be placed on the Committee's website when it becomes available. In accordance with the broadcasting guidelines, the House has authorised the filming, broadcasting and photography of committee proceedings by representatives of media organisations from any position in the room and by any member of the public from any position in the audience. Any person filming or photographing proceedings must take responsibility for the proper use of that material. This is detailed in the broadcasting resolution, a copy of which is available from the secretariat.

While parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses giving evidence today, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside of their evidence at the hearing. I therefore urge witnesses to be careful about comments they may make to the media or to others after they complete their evidence. Committee hearings are not intended to provide a forum for people to make adverse reflections about others under the protection of parliamentary privilege. In that regard, it is important that witnesses focus on the issues raised by the inquiry terms of reference and avoid naming individuals unnecessarily. All witnesses have the right to procedural fairness, according to the procedural fairness resolution adopted by the House in 2018. If witnesses wish to hand up documents, they should do so through the committee staff. In terms of the audibility of today's hearing, I remind committee members to please speak into the microphones. Finally, could everyone please turn their mobile phones to silent for the duration of the hearing.

**Ms SHIRLEE BURGE**, Private Citizen, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** I now welcome our witness, Ms Shirlee Burge. Would you like to start by making a short statement?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Yes, if that's okay. I've lived in Deniliquin for about 45 years. I became an Edward River councillor in January 2022. I've also been an advocate for health over the last 10 years in this area. I'm also a financial member of the Deniliquin branch of the Liberal Party. I declared this affiliation with the party when I ran for Edward River Council, but I did not run as a part of a group or as a Liberal Party member; I ran on a ticket for better health services in our area.

When I joined the Liberal Party 15 years ago, we had 21 members here. That dropped to about 11 in 2019. In 2020-21, when we were in COVID recess, we began to see an unusual influx of new members. We were not holding meetings so these applicants received automatic membership, as per party rules, so they weren't vetted or voted on. One of the members was a known Liberal Party agitator who had posted on social media photographs of the sitting Liberal member for Farrer with a rope around her neck and had also thrown an effigy of Minister Littleproud off the Tocomwal Bridge during a demonstration.

Some of our genuine members contacted the State office and told them we felt we were being branch-stacked. Around this time I was phoned by Christian Ellis, and he asked to meet with me. We met for a coffee, where he informed me he had political aspirations and wished to be the next Federal member for Farrer. I suggested he contact the current member and follow them around for 12 months, learning the ropes and getting to know the electorate. He refused and said, and I quote, "I want it now; I'm not waiting." In the same conversation he assured me he could arrange funding for a new hospital in our area, stating it would be a St Vincent's Private Hospital with a public section. He knew I'd been lobbying for a new hospital for quite a while. He mentioned he was connected to the then Treasurer's brother and could achieve this via that avenue.

In 2021 Christian Ellis then applied for membership of our local branch. He was rejected on the first two occasions, mainly due to the history that he had been removed from the party for a 10-year period prior to rejoining. He was invited to appear before the branch and to speak for himself, which he declined to do. However, in March 2022, on his third attempt, he was able to join the party. At that time our branch had grown to more than 30 members, and the new members had the numbers to vote him in.

The branch currently has 45 members, most of whom I do not know nor have ever seen attend meetings. I have managed the polling booths in Deniliquin for the last five Federal elections, and so I have a good assessment of certain people and how they vote, et cetera. It is my belief that most of these new members are what are known as water warriors, or they belong to a certain religious order. At our last AGM, last year, the long-term members were voted out of office by the new members. What we call the Ellis faction took over our branch and now holds all executive positions. We're now no longer able to access the emails of all current members. When voting on issues, the executives in the room are not transparent in displaying who is online, so I can't verify or substantiate voting members. They're in attendance online only and are verified by the secretary or the president but are not visible to other attendees. None of these members assisted in last year's Federal election.

Once Christian and his faction took over the party, they then called for the expulsion of seven of our long-term members. These included two past presidents, two founding members, an 80-year-old retired nurse, the chair of the MCMA, and an ex-aide to John Howard and her husband. They were publicly disgraced, and we did not have the numbers to save them. Letters were sent to State headquarters requesting intervention, unfortunately without a response.

We had several branch meetings that were organised in unusual places that people couldn't get to. One was held in a public RSL club during a Christmas raffle with the keno person screaming numbers over the microphone. We couldn't understand what we were voting on. The meeting dissolved into a public yelling match, and the motion to expel the members, which was due to occur at a January meeting, was withdrawn but not rescinded so I believe that motion still stands. After the meeting I emailed the State President asking for the removal of the President, Secretary and Christian Ellis. I've not been responded to and I do believe, in fairness, that's in relation to the fact that we're now in election mode and he's obviously very busy. However, one person who was allowed to vote at that meeting had only been in the party for two months. The ability to vote in the Liberal Party comes after six months.

On 7 January Virginia Ellis appeared in Deniliquin at a meeting to form the Farrer SEC. I attended this meeting as a spectator and wasn't able to vote. I'm uncertain of what Mrs Ellis' role was at this meeting and I was disturbed by the fact that she was not a member of any Farrer party branch that I knew of. Another member with only a few months membership was also allowed to vote at this meeting. Last Friday I had quite an intimidating

call from the secretary of our branch and I was threatened with expulsion from the party. She'd seen a photograph of me on social media standing next to a picture of the Independent member for Murray, Helen Dalton. I told her I would not renew my membership this year because of the types of persons running the party; otherwise, I believe I would have been removed from the branch, just leaving them in total control with their mystery members. I think the only reason they originally left me alone was my status as an Edward River councillor. Some of these new members are now no longer currently financial and I would say they never will be again, if in fact they were actual genuine residents at all. One such member, when I questioned her about her membership, she looked vague and told me she had no idea how much it cost.

Christian Ellis moved into our area flashing a bit of cash and purchasing properties. He lives at , which borders onto the Barmah-Millewa Forest. I am familiar with the terrain and with the local farming community there. He has alienated farmers with his inability to care for his stock and by overstocking the small property. He leaves the farm unattended for weeks at a time. The stock break through fences to neighbouring farms because they're starved and have lacked water. He has been reported to authorities because of the animal welfare issues. The general feeling is that he moved into the area to take control of the branch, promising those dissatisfied groups, like irrigators and health advocates, he can make change. However, over the last few weeks I do believe his credibility may have waned a bit. I believe he has been hiding out in the forest, as there've been sightings of him driving a vehicle known to be his, but wearing a mask. There's also been unusual activity in the forest behind his property. I've not seen him for several weeks, but I'm certain he's about. I have met him on several occasions and he is quite pleasant and I couldn't believe that he would abandon his young wife and baby. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. We've just got a few questions, if that's okay?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Sure.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Great. Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Ms Burge, for that opening statement. Thank you for giving evidence to the Committee. As you know, we've struggled with some witnesses—to get them to appear and tell us the facts—so we're really grateful for your appearance today. You've given us quite a lot of material and I'll work through some of those issues, but at the heart of your concerns, listening to you, it sounds like you're really concerned about branch stacking, political activity—the sort of activity that's been seen in the Hills shire now coming down to your local area and being imposed on your local political operations. Is that really at the heart of these concerns?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Yes, it is, and it has been for probably nearly two years, yes.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Yes, and you come to this as a councillor, a public official, also a long-time member of the Liberal Party for 15 years. That's correct?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** That's correct, yes.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Yes, and you've been involved and happily supported the Liberal Party over that time, perhaps campaigned at elections on booths?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Yes. I've done the last five elections in this area around Deniliquin for the Federal election.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Yes, and I presume you'd have a good relationship as a key Liberal Party member with the local Federal member, as an example.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Yes, that's correct.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** But you're describing a situation which has obviously been quite distressing. Give us some sense of how you feel, how the local branch members feel, given what's happened.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Look, I do know they were shocked and outraged at, you know, the motion to remove them from the party. They'd been loyal long-term members. They felt a little bit betrayed because they didn't appear to have help from further up the Liberal Party, whether that was because they are very busy—this incident occurred only in the last six months. I think they felt a bit betrayed. They're all still members but, as I said, the motion to remove them was never rescinded.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Yes. Let's deal firstly with that expulsion. You've detailed some of the people—past presidents, founding members of the branch, I think a retired nurse, an aide to John Howard, and her husband. These also are long-term Liberal members, I presume—faithful members of the party, who would have flown the flag over many years.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Yes. Most of them were members prior to me joining and have been members of, if not this branch, other branches, yes.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** When did this expulsion resolution originally occur?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** I'm not certain of which month. I think it was possibly November of last year. I would have to check that.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Yes, great, but that gives us quite a reasonable time. These are loyal party members, one an ex-aide to respected former Prime Minister John Howard. What was the reason for their expulsion?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** That they had brought the party into disrepute. There was no further explanation of that. I guess that was to come to the fore once that meeting—it was originally noted for early January—but there was a Christmas meeting held in early December where there was arguing regarding that motion and they actually removed the motion. They didn't rescind it, but they withdrew it, which meant that it was still on a notice that it could appear later. So those members were not happy that it was left in that situation.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Understood. So that charge against these long-term faithful Liberal members—bringing the party into disrepute—did you feel that these members had brought the party into disrepute?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Absolutely not, no. No, never. They were hardworking party people. No, never.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** In your view, had they done anything wrong?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Absolutely not. It was my opinion at the time that they had voted against Christian Ellis joining the party, which I did on one occasion; and then, on subsequent occasions, I was of the feeling that new young members were vital to the party, so I did vote for him on the subsequent—the second and third—attempts. So maybe I was left alone, I feel, because of that and also because I was, maybe, a councillor.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** When you first met him, I think you were describing you did find him an engaging individual. There weren't alarm bells at first. Is that correct?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** No. He is the same age as one of my sons and I thought he was a little bit cocky, but not an unpleasant person to meet and he was ambitious. I was a bit perturbed when I said, "Follow the local member for 12 months. I'll introduce you." He was adamant that he didn't want that. He wanted to be the Federal member straightaway. I did also ask him why he didn't run for State politics, and he just said, "No, I'm not interested."

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** When you say he wanted to be the Federal member straightaway, how could that have happened? He was looking to mount a challenge immediately to Sussan Ley—is that how you understood it?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** I didn't then, at that first meeting, but when he subsequently joined the party and then had the numbers to perhaps—it did not just happen in our branch. There were other branches around the Farrer electorate that had quite an influx of new and unusual members. So I believe he probably had the numbers to defeat the sitting member.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** And that then became a matter of some public controversy in the preselection process that followed—that's correct, isn't it? That then led to other discussions about that preselection process, perhaps more centrally.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** That's correct, yes.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** I'll turn back to what you've told us about Virginia Ellis. She appears at at least one of these meetings, I think you've just told us. What meeting was that?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** That was the meeting for executives only. They were the only people able to vote and another spectator had to ask permission to attend, and they very kindly allowed us to. She was at that meeting also with another member that I'd never seen. I don't recall whether Mrs Ellis voted, but she was introduced to the meeting. And I can't honestly say whether she voted on anything. I just found it very strange that his mother was there. I had no idea at the time that she was a councillor on any other shire. I just met her as Christian Ellis' mother.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** And have you seen her then at other meetings or is this the only meeting you've seen her at?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** No, that was the only meeting I've ever seen her at.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** And that meeting was when?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** It was on the seventh—a Saturday. I think it was 7 January and it was to form the executive for the newly formed SEC in Farrer.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** So Virginia Ellis was participating in the meeting. Was the impression given at any point that she was locally engaged or lived locally or had local connections?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Well, it was never mentioned. But for people to be on that committee and to be voting, they would have to have been local, yes. They would have to be in Farrer. But, as I said, I cannot confirm whether she voted. I didn't take particular interest. I was really just a spectator.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** I think you've been quite clear there that you can't recall whether that claim was made, but it struck you as strange that this person who would have to be local to participate in the meeting you've subsequently found out is not local at all.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** That's correct.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** In fact, it's more than that they're not local; they live hundreds of kilometres away, virtually in the other end of the State.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** That's correct. I really don't know why she was there. I can't recall. I've had a fairly busy time since January. I'm sure there were minutes, and they would express as to whether she took a position or whether she voted.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** And not only does she live hundreds of kilometres away in Sydney, but she's a public official on The Hills Shire Council. Knowing that now, does it strike you as strange that she was in that meeting?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Yes, it does. But I'd had no knowledge of that at the time. Christian had several other family members and there were several other members of his wife's family that had been admitted to our branch as members. I can't recall if Mrs Ellis is one of those. We would have to check the party record. I don't have access to that.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Understood. Were you confident that the other members who had joined lived locally?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Yes, I was. I knew them.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** So it's really just Virginia Ellis who sparked a concern in your mind that perhaps this person you subsequently found out was a councillor in the Hills shire, and worked full-time in the Hawkesbury, was appearing in your local branch. That's the only concern you had.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Yes, that would be correct.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** You talked to us about that first meeting with Christian Ellis where he talked to you about health care. I want to firstly just get you to explain to us: You had been a health advocate for quite some time.

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Point of order: We're straying a long way away from The Hills Shire Council here and the terms of reference.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** To the point of order: I respect the point of order. Chair, we are examining at the moment the methods used in The Hills Shire Council and whether they're used elsewhere, and the individuals in The Hills Shire Council and whether they're active elsewhere. And I'm shortly going to pursue another matter and that's whether money from The Hills Shire Council has been used in another part of the State. So for those reasons I believe this is in the terms of reference.

**The CHAIR:** Did you want to respond to that, Mr Barrett?

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** It's obviously a long bow. I think we're a long way away from the terms of reference of matters pertaining to The Hills Shire Council. The Liberal branch structure in southern New South Wales is a long way away from that.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Barrett. I think at the moment, though, the only long part is the geographic miles. At the moment there seems to be a very clear connection, and I think we'll just let Mr Graham carry on with the line of inquiry. Thank you to the witness for cooperating.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Councillor Burge, tell us your background as a health advocate. Why was this important to you? What were you trying to do?



**SHIRLEE BURGE:** We had been underfunded in our health district for a very long time. Only about \$7 million was spent on our hospital since the 1970s. We are the third largest hospital in the Murrumbidgee district. I had been advocating with the New South Wales health Minister and, with other groups, we formed an advocacy committee. That's why I ran for council as well. We had been attempting to get funding for our hospital, and he knew that when he contacted me. I was surprised. I'd never heard of him before. I didn't know who he was. But he was very aware that I had been lobbying for better health facilities.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** This was the first time you met Christian Ellis. Where and when did you meet him?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** He phoned me. I don't know how he got my number. We met at a cafe in Deniliquin and had a cup of coffee together. It was a very amicable conversation. I left thinking he was quite a nice young man. I was bit sceptical because, as I said, I'd been lobbying for nearly 10 years, or advocating for better health services. We'd tried every avenue and we weren't able to achieve what we were after, so I was fairly sceptical but also interested because of what he said.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** I'll come to that in a minute. How far back was this? When did this occur, to the best of your recollection?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** It would have been in 2021 or late 2020, I think.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** That's useful. As you said, as a health advocate arguing for this and running on council on this issue, you knew there were no easy answers. Just describe again the proposition that Christian Ellis put to you about how this issue that you were so concerned about might be resolved.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** He was very confident, and he said his connections could achieve a private hospital in Deniliquin—he mentioned St Vincent's—with a public area as well, because that was my concern: that we need to look after everybody in this area. We talked about the fact that during COVID the borders closed and our people had extreme difficulty because our pathway is into Victoria because of this situation—where we are in New South Wales. He was very learned about the health set-up in this area and told me he was moving here or he had been living here, renting a place or had purchased, and he had a young baby. He was very aware of the failures in the health system. From all accounts, he wanted to help, so I listened and he went away. We were very friendly, and I've seen him around and met with him several times since.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** It would have been a very welcome offer, I presume—assistance on this key issue that you've been pursuing. You suggested that he might deliver this through his connections. Just take us to what you thought he meant by that or what he said about that. What were his connections?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** His connection was to the then Treasurer of New South Wales. He did. He said that he knew his brother.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Which brother? Do you recall which brother he was referring to?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** No, he wasn't named. He just said, "I know his brother and I have connections. I'm in the Liberal Party la la la."

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Yes, and he stated quite explicitly, or perhaps implied, those connections might be used to deliver the thing you had not been able to deliver with years of campaigning—a significant health upgrade for Deniliquin. Is that correct?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** That is correct, but as I said, I was sceptical. Daryl Maguire said the same thing to me several years ago, so once bitten, twice shy. I took it on board, but I wasn't confident anything would happen.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Given you knew how difficult this might be.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Yes.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Thank you, Ms Burge, for appearing today. I was concerned to hear in your opening statement that you'd received what I think you described as a threatening phone call in relation to these matters from—was it the secretary of the Deniliquin branch of the Liberal Party?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** That's correct.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** And that secretary is someone who replaced the members who've been forced out/threatened with expulsion.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Yes, that's correct.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** And that person is aligned with Mr Christian Ellis.



**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Yes, correct.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Are you able just to share with the Committee a bit more detail about the nature of that interaction and what, basically, was put to you?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** I was in a hurry because we had a council formal function happening at six o'clock that evening, and I think she phoned me about five. She wanted to talk about the social media picture. She expressed concern that that was a sackable offence from the Liberal Party. I think I retorted to her, "Go ahead. I'm not renewing my membership." The end of the conversation was that because I was not going to renew in the end of June, early July—whenever it's due—that she would leave it at that. I did make some disparaging remarks regarding the fact that they wanted to sack me over that, but it was okay to maybe stay in the party if you had allegedly taken money for other things. It was a rather acrimonious call, and I have not spoken to her since.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** When you were referring to taking money for other things, what did you mean by that?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** I meant what is in the papers, that there are allegations of \$50,000 corruption bribes. So I said that quite openly to her, that I couldn't see that it was fair that some people could remain in the party allegedly having done that. She said to me, "Don't believe everything you see on social media." And I then retorted, "Well, wasn't the picture of me on social media?" I've always respected this lady. She was a very good party member a long time ago, but she did walk out two weeks prior to the 2019 Federal election, which left me in the lurch. She was president of our party then, and then she returned in 2021, I think. She renewed her membership along the same time that these other people entered our party.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Councillor Burge, I might just return to that issue about the type of people who are joining the party. You've described some of them as water warriors. Can I just get you to explain what you meant by that? What was the local view about who those people might be?

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Point of order: Who is or isn't in the Liberal Party branch in Deniliquin is not at all relevant to the terms of reference of this inquiry.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** To the point of order: I think this is absolutely pertinent because the issue that we're examining here is the use of particular individuals who've refused to come before this inquiry to answer any questions, who are involved in very overt stacking practices in relation to the Liberal Party. Who they're recruiting and the way that they're recruiting has been material given all of the material that has come before the Committee. I do believe that this is absolutely in order.

**The CHAIR:** We've had very clear evidence about particular individuals behaving in a particular manner that goes directly to the point of our terms of reference. I think this line of inquiry right now is, on balance, more helpful than unhelpful. I think it does come within our terms of reference, and I think it does so quite clearly at this point. In the interests of transparency and us furthering our obligations to inquire under the terms of reference, I think that it's in the best interest to continue. Thank you, Mr Graham.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Thank you, Chair. Councillor Burge, I'll return to that question. I was really just hoping you might explain that term and what was understood locally when you say this was one of the networks that was joining.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** I don't think it's a secret that we've had a rather aggressive approach towards politicians because of the Water Act in this area. It was quite harmful to our area, to the financial stability of it, the water buybacks et cetera. It has been a long-term issue. I believe people have finally maybe come to terms with it, but then again it's back in the news this week or in the last fortnight. They were people who had rallied, had formed part of the Canberra rally. They were known agitators. I actually interviewed one that was applying for membership. This is the one that had thrown the effigy off the bridge and had the social media post. He assured me that he had grown up and he was now realising that the way to make change was through political ways. I took him on that comment and allowed him into the party. They're people who have been very unhappy with the Water Act, and the Federal member in our area was blamed for that by this group of people.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Thank you. I think that's a helpful description. The other suggestion you made was that people of a certain religious persuasion might have been one of the other networks. Obviously, people of faith are welcome to join any political party. I think you would agree with that general statement.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Yes.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** But you're saying one of the networks used here—and this was the case, I think, in the Hills—was a certain religious network being tapped for people to join the branches. Tell us something about that.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** I believe that's correct. The current executive are, I believe, all of the same religious belief, and I don't have an issue with that. I commend them on their religious belief. Whether that has a detrimental aspect, I don't know. We would have to wait and see. But it's rather unusual.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Yes, I think that's important to state for the record—that often people of faith will be joining political parties as believers. Politics tends to attract people who believe in things. But, as was the case in The Hills Shire Council, you're saying that these specific religious networks were in play in your area as well. Is that correct?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Yes, I believe so.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** What local institutions were used to be able to find these people?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** I'm sorry, I don't quite understand that question.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Where were these people being recruited from? Perhaps from schools or local churches?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** The new members?

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Yes.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** They were from disgruntled groups. I recall sitting in front of one at a Liberal Party branch meeting when the president at the time referred to our local member as working hard for us, and one of them yelled a swearword behind me, saying that was virtual rubbish. I found that rather disconcerting in that why be in a party if you want to abuse the member that you're supposedly supporting. I saw that on several occasions. They didn't hand out for the Federal election last year. One of them did—one executive did. But no other new member of our party assisted.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Ms Burge, did you see aggressive behaviour towards the Federal member on more than one occasion?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** She attended two meetings that some of these new people were at. One of them was rather an aggressive meeting. In particular, one member was rather unprofessional in his comments. There was shouting and yelling, and I was embarrassed for the member. Most of the older party people at that meeting were distressed that we'd sort of resorted to that kind of level. To her credit, she has turned up to meetings again and been very professional, knowing that it's going to be rather acrimonious, I'd say. It is distressing, and it is what leads me to believe that they're not true Liberal supporters.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Usually local members, particularly in rural seats where they travel a long way and their time is very challenged, given the distances they have to cover—had you experienced that level of behaviour towards a sitting member previously?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Not through our party, no—not through the Liberal Party branch. They'd always been very welcoming. No, I'd never seen that before.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** What was the nature of the issues that they were raising with the local member?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Just that she hadn't done her job—little comments like that. They wanted Christian Ellis as the new member. That was quite clear. They wanted him to replace her.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Were they very overt about that or was it more a destabilising activity towards the local member? How would you describe it? Were they overt about saying, "We don't want you to be our local member anymore"?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** I think that was made quite clear, and the fact that they didn't assist during elections; they went missing. It was well known in the branch that Christian Ellis probably had the numbers, yes, and possibly still does.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Obviously you made several complaints—you've referred to them today—to the Liberal Party head office in relation to what was happening. I think that you said that you've never received any reply. Are you able to confirm whether any of the matters that you've raised have been dealt with in any way?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Unfortunately, I have to say that is the case. But I do believe that that's because they are heading towards an election. Most of the complaints—several other members wrote that email, they've made phone calls, and there has been empathy for the problems but there has been no follow-up to investigate or

to assess. I do believe that is because of the coming election. It's difficult to find resources to be following this avenue until after the election, possibly.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** You've been a member for a while. In the past has there been a delay in relation to dealing with—have you ever raised matters before, or have you not needed to?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** We haven't really needed to. No, I don't think there's been—we did send information regarding health that may have been ignored. But on the whole we have not had a lot to complain about. We have been just like a small country branch meeting, just getting on with our business.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Councillor Burge, I want to return to that question about the people who were joining the branch. In The Hills Shire Council, one suggestion to the Committee is that it was the Opus Dei network, in particular, who was being asked to join. When you say that people of a certain religious persuasion might have been joining, is that what you meant, or did you mean something more general?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** I can't verify what religious order people belong to. It has been speculated here early that it was Opus Dei; then it has been speculated that it's a Reformer section. I can't validate that, but I do believe that several members are of a particular—whether it's a Catholic order or a Protestant, I don't know. It could be anything, but they do appear to belong to the same religious group.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** You have made reference to the Reformers—again, something to which reference has been made in The Hills Shire Council. What did you understand by this term "the Reformers" or "the Reformers group" inside the Liberal Party?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** For several years I've been aware that there has been—and this is only my opinion and from speculation, so I can't verify this—

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Yes, understood.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** —a takeover of a particular group, and I would put that group into the category of the far right. That is what I always assumed it was. They seemed to have the numbers. I can't really speculate on who they belong to, but it seems to be that far right side of the party.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** You're not holding yourself out as an expert in the area.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** No.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** But the local speculation was that what you were seeing locally was part of the same Reformers group potentially.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** That is correct.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** That might have been one of the explanations.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Well, that is the opinion of the group of us that, perhaps and maybe unfairly, wanted the party to remain the same. That has been speculated on by seven or eight of the members, yes.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** I am going to turn to a couple of other matters. I do want to turn to the issue about whether you had concerns—we have talked about the techniques and we have talked about the people, the networks. I want to turn to the money that was allegedly being used in The Hills Shire Council inside the Liberal Party. The Committee has received evidence of one meeting where \$50,000 was sought for a call centre operation to change the Federal Liberal member in the Hills area or the Hills region—probably the best way to do it. You have reported that you were seeing a similar attempt to change the Federal member in your area, the sitting member Sussan Ley. Do you have concerns, given what you've heard, that the same money that was being sought for the Hills was perhaps being used in your area?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** I can't honestly say that because I've not seen things like that happening. I would rather speculate that a certain faction have taken over the Farrer electorate branches and that they have the numbers. How they got there or who is funding them, I don't know. But I can't honestly say that I would know anything about money changing hands—other than the time we asked a new member how much she paid and she just insinuated she had no idea, which set off an alarm bell. That's the only financial implication I can think of.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** The alarm bell that set off was that, in not knowing the cost at all, she probably didn't pay for her membership. Is that the conclusion you drew?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** I would assume that. I mean, I pay my membership each year and I know how much I pay. So, especially for someone who has just joined, they should know whether they paid \$30 or \$300. I am uncertain as to why she made that comment, but I thought it was rather unusual.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** You have been quite specific about that incident. Did you have broader concerns that people's memberships might have been paid?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Yes, but that would be speculation on my behalf; it's not something I have proof of. I felt the whole thing was untoward, not normal. It just appeared to me to be what I would call branch stacking and how that goes about. I believe it happens in all parties—that's my opinion—and how people are paid to join, I don't know, and it would be extremely hard to prove that. There are incidences where people—one of our members, she is elderly, and I paid her membership by credit card. I was phoned by the Liberal Party and asked why I did that, so there is transparency in some of those things, yes, but I am sceptical about email addresses and about the members. We have always had an openness in our party so that everyone can contact the others. I do not have a list of all our members or their emails, so I find that rather unusual.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** That email list access that used to be more open has now become much more centralised. Is that what you are describing?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Absolutely. The only people who can access that are executives via the Liberal portal. It is not open to me. As I said, when I was secretary I would send the email out with everyone's email address clearly visible for the other members. That does not happen now in our branch, so I can't contact the other members.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Understood. I just want to return to that evidence on membership. I think you've given a clear idea here that you didn't yourself have evidence, other than that one incident, that memberships might have been paid, but it was a concern, it was something that weighed on your mind. Is that a fair summary?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Being honest, yes. It's an assumption or conclusion that I have come to but without evidence.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** You've talked about the property on which Christian Ellis lives. There have been some suggestions to the Committee that he owned a number of properties in the local area. What can you tell us about that?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** The property was marketed and I believe it sold—it's a known fact—for \$2.4 million. There was another property that he allegedly bought closer to town, which I think was about \$900,000. As I said, I have a son his age and he certainly doesn't have the money to do that, but I don't know Christian's family background. That is a personal thing for him. But there were several properties. I think he said he owned one in Mathoura and family or someone had one in Finley. He couldn't appear at one of our meetings because he was helping them move onto the other property close to town. It just appeared through things he said that he was quite a wealthy young man and could afford to do this. How, I don't know. I never really looked into that.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** You've described there three or four properties—this is separate to any of the properties or interests in Sydney, closer to The Hills Shire—one of them costing perhaps \$2.4 million. Did it strike you as odd that someone of this age, who had just moved to town, would have so many property interests in such a short time?

**The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT:** Point of order: Surely the property portfolios of different people are irrelevant to this and are breaching on exposing privacy issues that we don't want to go near.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Chair, I am going to put some very specific evidence to the witness in a short moment.

**The CHAIR:** Alright, but on the basis that we are getting somewhere. Just remember that this is about moneys received, possibly improperly, to do things, including influence decision-making capacity through our government processes. Also, remembering in no uncertain terms that this particular person we are speaking about has been offered so many invitations to come and give evidence about allegations that have been made very squarely and unquestionably—that he has asked for money from a particular person to undertake precisely these kinds of activities. I think we are getting there, but I would say, Mr Graham, that if we could get where we are going I think that would be helpful. Thank you.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Excellent. Councillor Burge, I will first give you the chance to answer that question. So three or four properties are acquired around the local area in a relatively short amount of time, one of them for \$2.4 million. Was this of concern either to you or to locals? Was this a point of concern, a point of discussion?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Look, I guess so. My interpretation, which is entirely personal, was that I believed he wanted to be the member for Farrer. I figured he was buying a smaller farmlet and that he would be able to have his visitors from Sydney—politicians et cetera. It was a beautiful farm, beautiful showplace, and that is how I took that purchase: that that would be his role with his Sydney counterparts, as the Riverina grazier. That is entirely my interpretation of why he opted for that. I don't believe he had a background in farming, and that has sort of been exposed with his absences. Stock can't get water themselves unless it is available, and that has resulted in them breaking through the fences to neighbouring properties. Look, originally I just felt, "There's a young man. He's well off and he's doing this, that and the other"—a lot of properties, or a lot of money perhaps, and that's in the public arena. Those prices are for anyone to see. I really can't speculate on that. I don't know his family background.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Yes, I think that's a reasonable position. Does it increase your concern, though, if I tell you one view that has been put to me from a local source, which is that that transaction for that key property was mortgage-free?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Look, again, that is maybe his family history, and I probably wouldn't like someone looking into my family history or speculating. In fairness, yes, it does. Given what I know now in the media, it does raise my eyebrows, but I am not in a position to have investigated Christian Ellis. I am just going on my own gut feelings.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** It is really useful. Does it increase your concern, knowing what you know now: that at the same time Christian Ellis was working as a lobbyist for Jean Nassif, the developer who is at the centre of these allegations?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** I had concerns early, in that he originally had a lobbying company. He was named as a director of a lobbying company in Sydney. I can't think of the name. My original thought was that he had met people from this area because of that lobbying format. I believe he is quite adept at that kind of thing but, yes, I can't really—look, I guess, knowing what I know now, and the fact that I'm sitting before this inquiry, then speculation could go rampant, but I think that we have to probably be factual about it because he is a young man with a family and I guess he deserves his day before you. I have suggested to the secretary of the party, who I believe is in contact with him, that if he has nothing to hide he needs to come forward and clear his name, simply because of the fact that in a small community like this the mud sticks. If he was in Northern Beaches, no-one's going to know, but here it's a difficult situation.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** That's a very strong point. You may not be able to see this, Councillor Burge, but other Committee members are nodding along as you're speaking to that. I think the Committee would certainly like to speak to Christian Ellis to clear up some of these issues. Just to give you some sense, he was first invited to make a submission to this inquiry on 14 December 2022. I can tell you that there's been many efforts made by the Committee secretariat, by the Committee or by others to contact Christian Ellis to offer him exactly the invitation—the suggestion you've just made—that he should turn up, tell the truth, clear the air and explain what's gone on here. That hasn't been the case. We haven't been able to find him. Can you tell us, given your local knowledge, where is Christian Ellis? Where has he been?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** I'd like to comment there that I believe he is being very unfair to Premier Perrottet and the Coalition in not appearing, because it then has repercussions. The location of his property, , backs onto, as I said, the beautiful red gum forest of the Barmah-Millewa. My children grew up on the edge of that forest. It's a large area. People could disappear in there forever, if they wanted to. I believe he is actually there. Also, his property leads from the back towards Tocumwal or towards Mathoura. As I've stated, he is a very proud father, and I don't believe he would be very far away from his wife at this stage.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** You said there's been some unusual activity around there; that's one of the reasons why you think that might be the case.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Yes, I do.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** That's come from discussions with neighbours who have also been concerned, as the call has gone out, "Where is this witness?" Is that one of the reasons you've drawn that conclusion?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Yes, although his neighbours are quite protective of him. They're a bit disappointed. But there have been sightings of vehicles going into the forest, and those that understand country roads—it's a dirt road. Dust hovers in there. Once a vehicle goes through, you've got to sit back behind them. And, in a few instances, vehicles have disappeared halfway through the forest. I just think it is speculation, but it stands to reason that at night-time out there anyone could do what they like. They are not noticed. I believe he has probably been at his property all along, or around that area, yes.



**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** And, on one occasion, you mentioned a possible sighting wearing a ski mask.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Yes.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Driving past wearing a ski mask—that was one sighting over this period.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Yes, that's correct. Alone in his vehicle, but with a black full-face mask, yes.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** As the Committee sought the cooperation of Christian Ellis over approximately a month, since 30 January—invited to give a submission earlier in December, but since 30 January, really—your evidence is that he's been hiding out on his rural property.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** I would believe so. I feel quite perturbed about that, and I would encourage him to come forward. I feel concern for his wife, who has a young baby and a toddler. I feel concern for his own mental welfare, that this is probably quite a stressful time for him, but I would encourage him to get representation and come forward, just to put an end to it. It would certainly clarify. The further it has gone, and knowing myself that we're going into a caretaker mode within sort of 24 hours or 48 hours, I'm disappointed that he has not come forward. And I guess the consensus there is that he won't have to appear if there's a change of government or—well, that's a layperson's version. I don't know exactly what happens there. Yes, I'm a bit disappointed he hasn't come forward.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** You're putting your view there, but I presume that's the local view as well: that others in the town—I mean, Deniliquin is a beautiful town, but a small town—would have a similar view, as this has unfolded in your community.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Rural people are generally fairly forthcoming and honest. They don't like furtive behaviour. I think it would do him a lot of damage if he doesn't come forward at all, yes.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Finally, I just want to ask you about one of those concerns about the cattle on the property. You said that there had been reports previously, but active concerns now, over this period.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Yes, I believe the secretary of the party and her husband went out to try and tend to the cattle. I believe I had a text yesterday saying his cattle were over the road—maybe a bit of a misguided text, because it's not the Edward River Council area. It is the Murray shire area that Christian lives in, so any complaints about the animals I have directed towards the Murray shire—suggested people contact them. In fairness to him, he was not a farmer, and often I have seen people wanting a tree change take up rural holdings and make a mess of things, so he's not on his own in that department. But there are welfare issues with the animals which are quite distressing, and that's not going to—I just think he's a naive person when it comes to farming practices, that's all.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Councillor Burge, I'm going to hand to my colleagues to see if they've got other questions, but I just wanted to thank you for your evidence today. It has been quite helpful. Even though you're coming to us from hundreds of kilometres away from The Hills Shire Council, you've helped us understand some of the issues that we've seen there. I want to thank you for the evidence you've given us, but also the manner in which you have given it. You've been really very clear in doing so. I just want to return to that question about what your goal here is, or why you've given evidence today. You have said you're a long-term Liberal member. You've said you won't be renewing your membership. That's really more out of frustration, as I've listened to you, though. You'd happily continue along except for what's happened in your local area. Is that a fair summary of where you've got to after this set of incidents?

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** That's correct. I don't feel inclined to renew if our current branch stays in the same hands. I am an avid Coalition supporter but, yes, I'm unhappy. Yes, absolutely.

**The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM:** Thank you for your evidence today.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for attending this hearing. We appreciate, very much, that you have made the time. I, as Chair, reiterate the comments of Mr Graham. Thank you very much for coming forward and assisting us to the degree you have with the inquiry. There were no questions taken on notice. That concludes the hearing.

**SHIRLEE BURGE:** Thank you, Chair.

**(The witness withdrew.)**

**The Committee adjourned at 12:09.**