



**Cowell Electric  
2 December 1997**

**Mrs PENFOLD (Flinders):** One of the joys that I have experienced in Government has been the renewed importance given to rural regions, with the consequent upsurge of vitality and confidence as a result of the upgrade and renewal of hospitals, schools and roads across rural electorates. Those who live in rural South Australia have always known of their importance to the State, but there are few examples of business confidence in rural South Australia as outstanding as the success of the Cowell Electric company. It won the most outstanding regional small business award in 1996 and its operations extend into Adelaide, Northern Territory and Western Australia, while the company has also completed contracts in New South Wales. Yet Cowell Electric maintains its head office in Cowell, which is in my electorate of Flinders on Eyre Peninsula. The head office and workshop remain in Cowell with all field staff based at Cowell but working away for periods of three to four weeks before coming home for a well-needed break.

Today Cowell Electric employs 55 people, of whom 26 are employed from Cowell. The company is greatly committed to the regional development of rural and remote South Australia. The company was established in 1928 by 15 shareholders of vision, who were described thus by Mrs Chase, the Managing Director:

*They had stout hearts, strong backs and weak heads, little money but tons of determination, as befitted those who ventured into the bush.*

It is hard to believe now, but initially electricity was supplied from half a hour before sunset to midnight and, as a special occasion, until 2 a.m. on boat night when the boat from Adelaide came in, and for public entertainment. A second generator saw the operation extended to Mondays and Tuesdays for washing and ironing and later came the luxury of 24-hour electricity. This supply was DC—direct current. In 1959, we saw the change over from direct current to alternating current, which meant that people now had 240 volt electricity instead of the 32 volt equipment. In 1966, we saw single wire earth return or SWER reticulation to Lucky Bay and rural communities surrounding Cowell, finally enabling farmers to have the comfort of 24-hour power and 240 volt equipment. Power was also extended to Cleve and Arno Bay. Today life virtually stops when there is a power blackout. It is no longer a luxury but a necessity.

In 1971, Cowell was connected to the Electricity Trust of South Australia grid, resulting in the subsequent closure of the power station at Cowell. Many businesses would simply have closed down. However, Cowell Electric saw this as the beginning of a new era—an opportunity. The company diversified into the survey, design and construction of powerlines for the rural electrification of Eyre Peninsula, the Flinders Ranges and Peterborough districts.

In 1977, Cowell Electric took over management of the Cooper Pedy Electricity Undertaking at the request of ETSA. This involved relocating the power station from the centre of town, upgrading powerlines and operating and maintaining the diesel power station on an on-going basis. Part of the role of being the Electricity Supply Authority unfortunately was disconnecting consumers for non-payment of accounts. This practice in Cooper Pedy resulted in several deaths threats and threats to blow up the power station. Meter reading added further excitement because of the number of dogs which were sometimes as ferocious as their owners.

Cowell Electric's experience at Cooper Pedy led the company to managing other small diesel generating stations in isolated communities. The company now manages power stations at Kingoonya, Glendambo, Marla, Maree, Nundroo, Oodnadatta, Mannahill and Parachilna, in addition to the Cockburn distribution system. Recently ETSA took

over the supply of electricity to Penong following extension of the ETSA grid from Ceduna. Cowell Electric operates electricity supplies to Iron Knob and Iron Baron.

In 1986, ETSA acquired from Cowell Electric the distribution system within the District Council of Franklin Harbor boundaries, requiring further diversification in order to survive. This saw the end of activities of consequence in the Cowell area as all work then emanated from outback areas. In 1990, Cowell Electric bought the machinery and plant of an Adelaide company going out of business. Cowell Electric formed a new company—CBM Industrial Radiators—to manufacture industrial radiators for power stations, locomotives, mining equipment and heavy haulage vehicles. Cowell Electric's plans for the future include exporting products and services to the Asia- Pacific region, particularly in relation to village power supplies and essential services.