

PROOF

Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Wednesday 4 February 2026

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Wednesday 4 February 2026

The PRESIDENT (Shaun Leane) took the chair at 9:32 am, read the prayer and made an Acknowledgement of Country.

*Papers***Papers****Tabled by Clerk:**

Emergency Management Act 1986 – Report to Parliament on the Declaration of the State of Disaster, under section 23(7) of the Act.

*Committees***Environment and Planning Committee***Inquiry into Climate Resilience*

The Clerk: I have received the following paper for presentation to the house pursuant to standing orders: government response to the Environment and Planning Committee's inquiry into climate resilience.

*Business of the house***Notices**

Notices of motion given.

*Members statements***Lunar New Year**

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (09:43): I was delighted to attend the Lunar New Year festival held on Sunday at Victoria Street, Richmond, along with my cabinet colleague and good friend of the Vietnamese community Natalie Suleyman. I also note that a number of members in this chamber were there – Mr Mulholland and Mr Trung Luu – and local councillors such as Sarah McKenzie. Victoria Street was alive with colour, culture and energy as families, local businesses and community members came together to welcome the Year of the Horse.

Community events like this do more than just mark a moment on the calendar; they strengthen community bonds, showcase culture and support local traders. The Vietnamese community has made an extraordinary contribution to Victoria's social, cultural and economic life. Last year we marked 50 years since the resettlement of the first Vietnamese refugees in Australia, and since that time the community has become one of the most vibrant and resilient in our state. The fact that most would count a banh mi as a fixture in Melbourne's culinary scene is a testament to how they have enriched our state. The contribution of the Vietnamese community will be immortalised through Victoria's Vietnamese Museum Australia, backed by \$8.7 million in funding from the Albanese Labor government and over \$9 million from the Albanese Labor government. I thank the Victoria Street Business Association for such a memorable event. As we welcome the Year of the Horse I wish everyone strength, courage and prosperity. Chúc mừng năm mới. Happy new year, everybody.

Economic policy

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (09:44): Over the last few weeks I have been very, very privileged to meet with some of the most impressive men that I have ever met. They are all very, very successful business owners – Glynn in real estate; Alex, Claudio and Patrick in construction; and Mario in plumbing. They have all got migrant backgrounds. They are all extraordinarily successful, up there at the top of their fields. They have built up success over time, and what was really

disheartening to hear from them all – especially from Alex, who is not a spring chicken anymore – was how sad they are that due to the oppressive tax regime in Victoria they are all considering leaving the state. I just want to say thank you to them for being willing to give it one last year to see how it goes, and I just want to say thank you for everything that they have done for Victoria. We all know that all taxes come from the private economy and from people like them.

First Nations

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (09:45): 26 January is not a celebration. It marks the arrival of the settlers, the colonisers, into this land, land that they claimed was terra nullius. If only the real truth was taught in schools, maybe we would be having a different conversation. Instead our children come home only learning about the First Fleet while the real history is erased – the violence, dispossession and resistance of First Nations peoples being rubbed out. This year I stood with thousands of Victorians outside this building in Naarm and with communities around the country to peacefully rally in honour of First Nations strength and courage and acknowledge their grief, survival and pain. But what we saw in Boorloo, in Perth, last month, with a homemade bomb being thrown into a crowd of elders, communities and allies, was disgusting and horrifying, an act of terrorism driven by racism, hate and evil. We know that violence against First Nations people is foundational to this country. Look at the stolen kids, deaths in custody, overincarceration. After last year's attack on Camp Sovereignty it is clear far-right violence is escalating and Indigenous people are paying the price. Where is the outrage and action to back First Nations justice, security and safety? We talk about unity and solidarity in this place, but where is that for First Nations people? It is nothing more than just hollow words and performative allyship.

Southern Metropolitan Region

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (09:47): We are stepping into 2026 with plenty of enthusiasm and optimism about what is to come, particularly in the Southern Metropolitan Region. In education we eagerly anticipate that the new teaching buildings at Glen Eira College will soon be completed, allowing for an additional 250 local students to attend the school. Works are about to get underway at Hampton, Caulfield South and Gardenvale primary schools, where builders have just been appointed to provide new classrooms and new gymnasiums. Demolitions are underway of old blocks F, G and H at Sandy college to allow for new landscaping to improve the grounds and also provide for future needs. We have got a new primary school just opened in Fishermans Bend, one of 100 new schools that Labor have built since 2019. In the Sandringham harbour the brand new Hampton Pier is open and welcoming visitors to enjoy summer. There are a range of on-water activities like kayaking and paddleboarding. In Hampton East and Port Melbourne the new social housing sites are powering ahead, scheduled for completion this year, with an uplift of 16 per cent on Bluff Road and 43 per cent in social housing at the Barak Beacon site. Rail passengers on the Frankston line are already going back through the city loop, and those on the Cranbourne–Pakenham line are taking advantage of the Metro Tunnel. Public transport is free for kids under the age of 18 every day of the week and for seniors on the weekend. There are upgrades to sporting facilities at Peterson Street Reserve. I am running out of time. There is so much going on this year in the Southern Metropolitan Region. It is going to be a great year.

Royal Women's Hospital

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (09:49): Over the summer break we welcomed Lilah Poppy Purcell into the world. The past few weeks getting to know our little girl have been a dream for Josh and me. They say it takes a village to raise a child, and we have one of the best. But today in particular I want to acknowledge the incredible team at the Royal Women's Hospital, who made sure my pregnancy was as seamless as possible. I have an autoimmune disease called Sjögren's, which categorised me as a high-risk patient. This meant I was monitored weekly by the maternal fetal medicine clinic to ensure that everything was okay and that Lilah's little heart was operating the way it should. I fear I will run out of time to truly acknowledge everyone, but I want to give a few shout-outs. To my

midwife Jesmen, thank you. To our obstetrician Ini, thank you for making sure you could accommodate the chaotic schedules of two MPs in two different parliaments. To the sonographers, especially Hayden, for the reassurance you provided by ensuring little Lilah's heart was tracking well, and to the surgery staff, particularly my surgeon Anthony, who all calmed my nerves and made me feel safe, thank you. Finally, to the nurses and midwives on the ward, including Hadas, Caitlyn and Kate: I am forever grateful for your care. We hear a lot when things go wrong in the public health system, but it is important to acknowledge when things go right. I could not be more grateful to have received the compassionate care throughout, from my first appointment to my final check-in and birth.

Life Saving Victoria

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (09:50): I rise today to thank our state's dedicated surf lifesavers, who are working tirelessly this summer to keep Victorians safe. You will recall that yesterday we heard heartfelt reflections from across the political spectrum on the antisemitic terrorist attack on Bondi in December of last year. In the face of true evil we saw true acts of heroism by Australians from all walks of life, including off-duty surf lifesaving volunteers from the Bondi Surf Bathers Life Saving Club and North Bondi Surf Life Saving Club. These volunteers jumped straight into action, using surfboards as stretchers, providing first aid to victims and sheltering hundreds of people inside their clubs. This is to be expected from our brave and dedicated volunteer surf lifesavers. Here in Victoria, since November of last year Life Saving Victoria has performed over 400 rescues and 800 first aid interventions, keeping Victorians safe whilst they participate in the great Australian pastime of spending summer at the beach. Despite surf lifesavers' dedication, this summer in particular remains a most challenging time for water-based fatalities, with Victorians from multicultural backgrounds especially at risk. That is why the Allan Labor government is also investing in schools and community water safety education in targeted programs and campaigns for migrants and multicultural communities, because enjoying Victoria's world-class beaches or even going for a swim in the pool should be for all Victorians.

Bills

Electoral Amendment (Group Voting and Vote Counting) Bill 2026

Statement of compatibility

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:52): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006.

In accordance with section 28 of the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (the Charter), I make this statement of compatibility with respect to the Electoral Amendment (Group Voting and Vote Counting) Bill 2026.

In my opinion, the bill, as introduced to the Legislative Council, is compatible with the human rights protected by the Charter. I base my opinion on the reasons outlined in this statement.

The purpose of the Electoral Amendment (Group Voting and Vote Counting) Bill 2026 is to abolish the use of group voting tickets in Council elections and change the way surplus votes are counted in Council elections.

Both of these aims are intended to more accurately represent the will of Victorian voters in Council elections. Therefore, this Bill strengthens section 18, 'Taking Part in Public Life', which stipulates that every person in Victoria has the right to participate in the conduct of public affairs, and to vote in periodic elections that guarantee the free expression of the will of the electors.

In conclusion, the Electoral Amendment (Group Voting and Vote Counting) Bill 2026 is not only compatible with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities, it actively strengthens its provisions.

Second reading

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:52): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

I am pleased to introduce the Electoral Amendment (Group Voting and Vote Counting) Bill 2026 into the Victorian Parliament.

This is a bill to abolish the use of group voting tickets in the election for the upper house and improve how surplus votes are counted. In short, it will make the Victorian Legislative Council more democratic and representative of the wishes of Victorian voters.

At the moment, Victoria is the last state in the country where politicians are allowed to decide where your preferences go.

Group voting tickets allow political candidates to buy a seat in the Legislative Council simply by engaging the services of a so-called ‘preference whisperer’. These ‘preference whisperers’ make their money manipulating voters’ preferences behind the scenes to install their clients as upper house MPs in the state Parliament.

For the low, low price of \$55,000, and with as little as 1 per cent of the primary vote, you can purchase a plush red velvet chair in this place – a chair that should have rightly gone to a candidate who received many times that number of primary votes.

Victorian voters will go to the polls in just over nine months, and when they do, they’ll rightly expect that the way they vote will determine who represents them. That’s the way our democracy works, isn’t it? One person, one vote, all tallied up fairly by the VEC in a preferential system we can all be proud of.

Unfortunately, under the current system this is not the case. For the 90 per cent of voters who cast their upper house vote above the line, once they mark their first preference they lose any control over how their vote is distributed from that point on.

Instead, to paraphrase our national icon Antony Green, their vote embarks on a preferential magical mystery tour across the ballot paper, predetermined in backroom deals between the preference whisperers and a hodgepodge of micro-parties with esoteric names. By the time that’s done, Victorians might be surprised to learn that their vote above the line for their preferred minor party has somehow resulted in the election of a taxi industry advocate from the Transport Matters Party who received just 0.63 per cent of primary votes, as was the case in 2018.

2018, in fact, was the year that at least eight MPs, or 20 per cent of this chamber, won seats as a result of backroom group voting deals.

So it is clear that shady group voting ticket backroom deals, lubricated by cash, are helping fringe micro-parties accumulate preference votes at the expense of other parties with a much higher primary vote. In short, group voting tickets are distorting democracy in this state.

I want to be clear here that there is nothing wrong with being elected on second or subsequent preferences and nothing undemocratic about a candidate overtaking another with a higher primary vote by accumulating preferences – if that reflects voters’ preferences.

But when voters have no control over where their preferences flow, as is still the case in the Victorian upper house, that cannot be called democratic.

Instead of this unrepresentative mess, can we try some simple democracy instead?

And this is what this bill sets out to do. It amends the Electoral Act 2002 (Vic) to abolish group voting tickets, bringing us in line with the rest of Australia – except, curiously, City of Melbourne council elections, but that’s a conversation for another day. The Commonwealth and other states are way ahead of us on this: most recently, the Labor government in WA abolished group voting tickets after a candidate with the Daylight Savings Party was famously elected on just 98 votes, and even he was so surprised he had to move back from his established life in America to take the seat.

The Greens are by no means the lone voice in the wilderness calling for this necessary change.

In July 2024, the Victorian Electoral Matters Committee recommended in no uncertain terms that Victoria should scrap group voting tickets without delay. Naturally, Labor then proceeded to delay,

insisting that now wasn't the time, that we needed to wait another year and a half for another committee report in December 2025 to know what to do.

That report is now out, and guess what it says? Once again, it recommends in no uncertain terms that Victoria should scrap group voting tickets without delay. To their credit, this time many Labor figures seem more willing to listen. Committee chair Dylan Wight, state member for Tarneit, wrote in his chair's foreword that 'group voting tickets have had their day,' and should be abolished as the first step in reforming Victoria's upper house electoral system. Dylan, I couldn't agree more.

And perhaps when the member for Tarneit made this statement of support he was thinking of Labor candidates who would have been rightfully elected by the people but for the manifestly undemocratic group voting ticket system. psephologist Kevin Bonham estimates that both Labor and the coalition would have each won one more seat in the 2022 state election had Victorian voters been allowed to direct their preferences above the line.

With nine months to go before the next state election, we need to jump on this quickly to allow the VEC time to update their processes to facilitate a smooth and more democratic election.

Additionally, we need to firmly shut the door to the possibility of far-right extremist and neo-Nazi micro-parties abusing the group voting system to infiltrate their way into this place. This chamber must not become a platform for their extreme and unrepresentative views and racist ideologies.

This is a real possibility. In 2018, the then Liberal Democrats got in on 0.84 per cent and Transport Matters on 0.63 per cent, just ahead of the Australian Liberty Alliance, which got a primary vote of 0.56 per cent. They were a far-right outfit who would have been right at home marching in that anti-immigration rally last week on Invasion Day.

Not only does our bill amend the Electoral Act 2002 (Vic) to abolish group voting tickets, but it also adopts the weighted inclusive Gregory method of vote counting, another one of the committee's recommendations.

Previously, when there were no computers to assist with complex vote counts, the current inclusive Gregory system was designed to keep things simple enough for us mere mortals to deal with. Under this unweighted system, when a candidate gains enough votes to reach quota and is therefore elected, all of their votes surplus to that quota are distributed to other candidates at a reduced fraction of their value, using a simple blanket calculation that was designed to keep things manageable back in the days of manual counts. This simple calculation of vote transfer values leads to an over-representation of the surplus votes of candidates who have already won seats. For those interested, the aforementioned Antony Green has written in his blog about how this has impacted election outcomes in a few cases.

But in our new, modern digital era, we can do better. Weighted inclusive Gregory applies weighting to these vote transfer calculations to count votes more equitably as they move through successive counting rounds. Initially, this method is the same as the original inclusive Gregory method, but as surplus votes move through further counting rounds, their value is multiplied by new transfer values to ensure that the surplus votes of already-elected candidates do not retain a disproportionate level of power.

As Antony Green writes:

The Weighted Inclusive Gregory Method removes the bias built into the Inclusive Gregory Method that favours the vote of parties whose votes have already elected members.

And the Electoral Matters Committee agrees, writing in their December 2025 final report that:

The Committee considers the weighted inclusive Gregory method to be straightforward, as this would be a fairer system for counting the votes no matter what structure is put in place. There is no reason to delay this until a further process is completed.

It's long past time to give the people control of their vote. Western Australia agrees. The rest of this country agrees. The Electoral Matters Committee agrees. Let's make our elections better and fairer now, in time for November.

I commend the bill to the house.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:01): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for two weeks.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for two weeks.

Production of documents

Country Fire Authority

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (10:01): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes the Country Fire Authority (CFA) board statement published on 12 January 2026;
- (2) in accordance with standing order 10.01, requires the Leader of the Government to table in the Council, within three weeks of the house agreeing to this resolution, the following documents held by the CFA, the Minister for Emergency Services, and/or the Department of Justice and Community Safety:
 - (a) all draft versions of the CFA board statement published on 12 January 2026;
 - (b) all emails, messages, memoranda, briefing notes, talking points and background material relating to the need for, content of, or approval of that statement;
 - (c) all minutes and agendas of CFA board meetings held between 1 July 2024 and 4 January 2026;
 - (d) in relation to the CFA 2024–25 report:
 - (i) all correspondence, including emails, letters, and text messages between any of the parties referred to in paragraph (2);
 - (ii) all draft versions of the report, including the final printer's proof identified by the Victorian Auditor-General's Office on 14 January 2026 as containing 'material inconsistencies';
 - (iii) all correspondence to or from the Victorian Auditor-General's Office;
 - (e) all correspondence relating to:
 - (i) the additional \$11.6 million in supplementary funding for strategic bulk water supply and a statewide community engagement and awareness campaign;
 - (ii) funding requests for the 2025–26 financial year;
 - (iii) fleet replacement;
 - (iv) the fair value of services received or provided free of charge; and
 - (f) all internal budget submissions, bids and budget impact statements made by the CFA.

My motion requires the tabling of internal CFA and government documents relating to the CFA board statement of 12 January 2026, the 2024–25 annual report and a range of funding, budget and fleet replacement matters. It requires production of the emails, drafts, minutes and briefings that will show who knew what, when they knew it and what this government is trying to hide.

It is sad that this motion needs to be brought at all, but the fact is this government has forfeited the right to be trusted on CFA funding as on so many other issues. The Premier has had the nerve to claim and then repeat that CFA funding has increased year on year. We know by any reasonable use of language that this is simply not true. The CFA's own annual reports show that funding fell each and every year from 2021–22 onwards, only rising again in the year before an election. That is not sustainable investment; that is political management. And even that selective funding story does not tell the full truth. Page 74 of the CFA's last annual report shows a \$50.5 million operating deficit, on top of a \$74.5 million deficit in 2023–24. That is a \$125 million loss in just two years – completely unsustainable for any emergency service, let alone one charged with protecting rural and regional Victoria from bushfire.

That deficit is being driven largely by depreciation, the slow collapse of an ageing fleet that the government refuses to properly fund. Around 800 CFA tankers are now past their intended service life, with more than 230 over 31 years old. They are not for display in museums; they remain frontline firefighting vehicles, still being sent into the most dangerous firegrounds in this country. In a major fire an ageing tanker means more breakdowns, slower response times and less water on the fireground when crews need it most. It also means volunteer firefighters are being sent into extreme, life-threatening conditions in vehicles that lack modern safety systems, reliability and crew protection, sometimes even functioning without air conditioning. That increases the risk not just to the volunteers on the tanker but to the families, farms and towns they are trying to protect.

The government talks endlessly about extra funding, but if CFA fleet replacement requests were actually being met, they would have nothing to fear from releasing the correspondence. If the money is flowing, the emails and budget bills will show it. If they are not, Victorians deserve to know. This is why we need these documents – because we cannot trust the government’s word. Nowhere was that clearer than in the Premier’s disgraceful attempt to smear the Auditor-General over this matter. When the CFA’s 2024–25 annual report was delayed, the Premier told reporters:

The advice I have is some of that delay was the result of Auditor-General processes.

That was not a slip – it was a calculated attempt to shift blame. The Victorian Auditor-General’s Office was then, shockingly, forced to issue a detailed point-by-point public rebuttal to ‘correct the public record and maintain confidence in the timeliness of financial audits’. VAGO confirmed it had completed its work in November, signed off the audit opinion on 31 October and cleared the final printed report on 11 November, in line with the timetable requested by the CFA. It is extraordinary that the independent Auditor-General’s office felt compelled to publicly correct the Premier and defend its integrity. VAGO does not issue point-by-point rebuttals lightly, but it was forced to do so because the Premier sought to shift blame for the government’s failure to table the CFA annual report.

Members interjecting.

Bev McARTHUR: Hang on, hang on. When an independent integrity body has to come out publicly to defend itself, it is a serious indictment on the government’s willingness to mislead. This is a government lying its way to survival, holding on by its fingertips, one crisis at a time. That is why this house must insist on transparency. Yesterday we saw an utterly shameful series of responses to previous documents orders. Almost every one was refused, not on the basis of public interest, immunity or executive privilege but simply because departments said they had not had time – after a two-month parliamentary break and on orders that in many cases were already months old. This is a contempt of Parliament. It is contemptuous of accountability, and it cannot continue. We will not allow it to continue. We owe that transparency to every CFA volunteer – *(Time expired)*

The PRESIDENT: I remind members that there are lots of rulings that interjections are unruly, and there is kind of a weird thing where there are rulings that you have to interject from your place.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (10:08): Yesterday we heard heartfelt contributions from all sides of this house on the devastation caused by this summer’s bushfires, on the loss of homes, farms, livestock, animals and sadly, one life, that of Max Hobson. My heart again goes out to Mr Hobson’s family and his community and indeed anybody that has been impacted by these vicious fires. I would like to take the time again to thank the bushfire-affected councils who took the time to meet with me, particularly to discuss the true devastation of these fires and their impact on their local communities and to reinforce that our government is standing with them and their communities every step of the way, with more support for those who have lost their homes and farmers that have lost livestock and, crucially, more mental health support for our communities.

The unfortunate reality is that seasons like this will only become worse as the impacts of climate change continue to set in. But, as stated time and time again by the Premier, this government stands with the CFA not just with words but with increases to their funding year on year. The CFA’s latest

annual report backs this up. The report outlines the \$26 million increase to total income to \$477 million, and it also outlines a \$21 million increase in grant income to over \$361 million. That is more trucks, better stations and our fires equipped to face some really unpredictable conditions.

These numbers do not account for the whole scale of the government's investment in the CFA. That is worth noting and having very publicly put here on the record. The government has in fact doubled funding to the volunteer emergency services equipment program, which now includes \$22 million in funding this year alone – that is VESEP, as it is known locally. I have been lucky enough to see firsthand the difference this substantial increase in VESEP funding has made to CFAs across the state. Over the last couple of years I have had the good fortune of visiting a number of CFAs to see the impact of their VESEP grants and understand what it is that those particular brigades are looking for when it comes to government investment.

Recently this summer I visited Balnarring CFA, who will receive a new medium tanker, one that will make responding to fires easier in diverse environments but also prioritise the comfort of the dedicated fires from that brigade, and I thank them for hosting me recently. Much more in my memory is the time a couple of weeks ago when I had the privilege of visiting the Inverloch CFA, who also received their new field command vehicle through VESEP late last year before the bushfire season commenced. This new vehicle will assist their brigade in a range of functions, from volunteer training to incident response, across the growing Bass Coast. They also took the time to explain just how many people are now calling Bass Coast home and what that means for that brigade as well as all the new volunteers that are seeking to join the local brigades down there, so thank you to them for hosting us. Delivering new equipment and upgrades to our local brigades through VESEP is just one part of this government's commitment to the CFA.

I will just say that there is an increase in funding. It is really hard to see, in the wake of such visceral tragedies, the ease with which those opposite have been willing to engage in misinformation. Communities are hurting – really hurting – and have been affected by more than 200 bushfires. Anyone who had that app going knows how regularly it was pinging off over the last six weeks. At a time when Victorians are losing their homes and losing their livelihoods, we are at the same time seeing the very best of Victorians – truly brave and courageous CFAs from across the state, many who have packed up to help out in places that they have never been to to help out communities that they do not know. It is truly a testament to them and their skills. It is moments like these when the courage of these communities deserves true leadership, not fearmongering and not undermining their communities. The amount of time spent over summer correcting misinformation and lies was actually extraordinary. It is worth noting, and I will reaffirm again, that the Allan Labor government will always stand with our CFA. They deserve not just words but action. They deserve to be safe when protecting Victorians and they deserve to be prepared to fight fires with the best equipment. We are seeing that through the increases in funding right across the state. They deserve leadership that does not play politics with their work.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (10:13): I rise to fully support motion 1229 standing in my colleague Mrs McArthur's name, and I do so wholeheartedly. Just in the context of the discussion we had yesterday – the condolence motion – and on the points I have just heard from the government speaker, this state deserves transparency. Our regional people deserve safety, and we need the best equipped and the best supported CFA that any state can offer. It is actually quite extraordinary that the board of the CFA would come out on 12 January, last month, and make such a statement. I find it is as though somehow the government has reached into the CFA board and been able to change the modus operandi of what the CFA board as a statutory board is all about. It is set up to govern the CFA, and under the act it is set up for strategic direction. It is set up to approve budgets, yes, and it manages risk and oversight and compliance, but it is also set up to strengthen the CFA volunteer base and operational model. It is there to serve not only Victoria but also the volunteers, and what we see is this significant divergence between what is being said by the board and what should be happening on the ground. I will speak to some of the divergent positions because both the CFA board and Volunteer

Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) – somebody who we on this side, the Liberals and Nationals, trust and value – have raised issues in public statements.

The CFA board says that the CFA funding has not been cut, the CFA budget has increased. It is following the Premier hook, line and sinker. It is also saying that the board –

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

Melina BATH: You get to have your say in a moment, so you can enjoy that, but this is my turn, and I am standing up for the volunteers and reality and truth. Let me –

David Davis interjected.

The PRESIDENT: I think I know what the point of order is. I call the house to order. Ms Bath to continue without any interjections.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much. The VFBV's position – a public document – says:

[QUOTES AWAITING VERIFICATION]

funding is not keeping pace. CFA is receiving a shrinking share of the tax revenue.

The VFBV's position is the fleet is far below need, an ageing fleet and in crisis. The VFBV position is that government is avoiding stating base CFA budget and it lacks transparency. The VFBV position is that the levy is misleading. The tax is burdening every single property owner. Victorians who own property, rent or the like are being targeted with this, and it is misleading. The CFA receives a small and declining proportion of this tax. The VFBV says they are the worst ever survey results, with deep dissatisfaction of funding and support. That is what this organisation, based on its volunteers, states.

The Auditor-General came out last month and had to itemise a process step by step to contradict the Premier, who was happy to throw the Auditor-General under a bus and is happy to throw volunteers under a bus, and it is an ageing bus. I turned up at my local CFA the other day, and they had a vehicle that was over 30 years old beside their one that is about 15 years old – 30 years old. It has no outdoor seating. They were trying to equip it. They were testing it: filling it with petrol and filling it full of water in order to protect our region – over 30 years old.

This government wants to go lockstep however it is happening in the background. That is exactly what these documents seek to define – the transparency, however it is happening. Why has this board deviated so far from its position to support and strengthen the CFA volunteer base and operational mode? This government has cut the CFA budget. It is clear as day – over \$50 million in the last few years if you consider inflation. This is not right. Victorians deserve transparency, and I fully support this motion. We need to see what is going on behind closed doors.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (10:18): I am pleased to rise to speak on Mrs McArthur's short-form documents motion, which is seeking a range of matters from the CFA. As all speakers so far have done, I think it is important at the start to acknowledge the exceptional work that the volunteers from the CFA and across the state have done in what has been an exceptionally challenging fire season. The homes that they have saved, the buildings they have saved and the lives they have saved are something that we as a state and we as members of Parliament should express our enduring gratitude for.

What we have had accompanying the efforts that our volunteers have made on the firegrounds, supported by a range of career firefighters, is unfortunately some seeking to make political disruption and disruption for political gain by spreading misinformation within the community about the funding that the CFA receives. Because of the sessional orders the Liberal Party introduced, we do not have time to properly debate this in detail here, so I will just take a small opportunity to outline what some of the facts are about funding of the CFA.

Obviously the latest annual report shows that grant income to the CFA rose by over \$21 million to over \$361 million, while total income increased by \$26 million to \$477 million. I think what is important is that those figures do not include other funding provided to the CFA, such as capital funding for new fleet or for new stations. We know the government has a significant program of capital allocation for new fleet and other facilities for the CFA, in addition to the doubling of the volunteer emergency services and equipment program, which is seeing the CFA get \$22 million this year alone for new equipment.

What this documents motion will not uncover are the cuts that the Liberal Party are planning to make to this additional funding that has been provided to the CFA, because what they have committed to is to scrap the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund, and part of this additional funding is being funded by the ESVF. We know that if they scrap the tax, which is what the Liberals want to do, what the Nationals want to do – they want to scrap the tax – they have got to cut the funding. The only things that are coming this year for the CFA if the Liberals and Nationals are elected are funding cuts to the CFA.

Motion agreed to.

Energy policy

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (10:21): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes the Allan Labor government's decision announced in August 2025 to strip compressed natural gas (CNG) currently delivered by Solstice Energy from 10 regional Victorian towns, including Robinvale, Swan Hill, Kerang, Nathalia, Marong, Maldon, Heathcote, Terang, Lakes Entrance and Orbost;
- (2) further notes that the 20-year contract to deliver CNG to the 10 towns with Solstice Energy has been allowed to not be enforced after just 10 years;
- (3) in accordance with standing order 10.01, requires the Leader of the Government to table in the Council, within three weeks of the house agreeing to this resolution, the following documents relating to this decision:
 - (a) briefs to the Minister for Regional Development;
 - (b) communications to Solstice Energy and from Solstice Energy to the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions (DJSIR) concerning the decision;
 - (c) details of any consultation undertaken by DJSIR;
 - (d) any consultancy or internal advice received or created by the relevant section of DJSIR to the minister or to senior officials in the department; and
 - (e) any assessment of the impact on country towns and communications to and from the Essential Services Commission regarding the decision.

Motion 1230 states:

That this house:

- (1) notes the Allan Labor government's decision announced in August 2025 to strip compressed natural gas (CNG) currently delivered by Solstice Energy from 10 regional Victorian towns, including Robinvale, Swan Hill, Kerang, Nathalia, Marong, Maldon, Heathcote, Terang, Lakes Entrance and Orbost –

Jaclyn Symes interjected.

David DAVIS: Well, I am going to ask you for a bit more than that departmental stuff. Also:

- (2) further notes that the 20-year contract to deliver CNG to the 10 towns with Solstice Energy has been allowed to not be enforced after just 10 years;
- (3) in accordance with standing order 10.01, requires the Leader of the Government to table in the Council, within three weeks of the house agreeing to this resolution, the following documents relating to this decision:
 - (b) briefs to the Minister for Regional Development –

Jaclyn Symes: They are compelling – embarrassing for your side.

David DAVIS: Well, let us see them. I will tell you who they are embarrassing to – to the poor people in the towns who are not getting their gas and should be getting their gas. Your government signed the arrangements actually. Also:

communications to Solstice Energy and from Solstice Energy to the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions ... concerning the decision;
details of any consultation undertaken by DJSIR ...

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

David DAVIS: There was, as far as I can see, no consultation with the towns or the users. They just got chopped – ‘The boom is coming down’. Also:

any consultancy or internal advice received or created by the relevant section of DJSIR to the minister or to senior officials in the department; and
any assessment of the impact on country towns and communications to and from the Essential Services Commission regarding the decision.

This is an important motion, because these 10 towns have been left high and dry by the government’s decision – an outrageous decision to truncate the contract by 10 years, to strip compressed natural gas out of those towns and to deny choice to people. They have talked about it. I mean, I have had quite a number in my office, and others who have got regions that overlap with these towns, and some are in the Eastern –

Jaclyn Symes interjected.

David DAVIS: Yours is one of them, but it is also Eastern Victoria and so forth. They are very significant impacts. The people are unhappy. They are quite furious about what your government is doing and the decision to truncate the contract. It was a 20-year contract. Why have you let them off? The community deserves to see on what assessment, on what basis, on what advice you just let Solstice Energy out – ‘Oh, you can get the 10 years off early.’ Well, I do not agree with that decision, and I think that the decision has been the wrong decision by –

John Berger interjected.

David DAVIS: Well, yes, you might live near one of those regions. But you do not – you live in the city even though you represent Eastern Victoria. Yes, that is right. You do not have to struggle with the compressed natural gas, because you have got natural gas in the city.

Tom McIntosh: Are you actually using your 5 minutes, or are you talking to me sitting over here on my side?

David DAVIS: Well, you made a couple of comments, and I responded to those interjections.

Tom McIntosh: I never said a word.

David DAVIS: You did; you muttered. You both did, actually. Neither of you live in your electorates. Sorry, there you are.

Tom McIntosh interjected.

David DAVIS: Well, you may think it is funny that you live in the city. This case shows exactly why you should live in your electorates, or near to them at least.

John Berger interjected.

David DAVIS: I do. I do quite a lot. I am always at –

John Berger: No, you’re not.

David DAVIS: I am. On Australia Day I was at Port Phillip and all of that. Anyway, I think we are diverting. I am coming back to the point of the motion. This is important for the community to see. It is in the public interest that these documents are available. And I have to say, those who have met with me, Ms Lovell and others are very angry that the government has left these towns without the support that they need, and they are confronted with very difficult decisions. People who have spent significant money to put in appliances are now to be told they are going to have to turn off the gas and they have to put electric appliances in there, often at tens and tens of thousands of dollars in cost.

Jaclyn Symes: Because that is the option you left them with.

David DAVIS: That is the option you left them with. You left them with your option – it is your option. It is your decision that has happened here. It is the Allan Labor government's decision here, the minister's decision to close off gas in these 10 towns. And let it just be seen: you have been in power now since 2014 and you are in your 12th year now and you want to blame others. But actually the truth is it is your fault, your responsibility. It was Labor's decision to take these people's gas and not find another solution, and the community are very angry about this. Ms Lovell and I met with a number of people just recently in her office, and it is clear that there is developing fury.

Jaclyn Symes interjected.

David DAVIS: President, through you I am saying to the minister and the government: you have failed with this policy. You have failed those communities, failed those towns. The decision is your decision to let Solstice Energy off 10 years early, to let Solstice go free when they should have had the contract enforced and in fact people should still have gas in their towns.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (10:27): Well, if Victorians want a window into the chaos that Victoria would find itself in if the Liberals were in charge of this state, they only have to listen to the last 5 minutes. That was an absolute rabble of chaos. There was nothing put on the table for Victorians to look at, to comprehend. And I thank the Liberals for highlighting to this place and to Victorians another failed Liberal project. The fact that you are coming here and raising this for us to talk about – I mean, talk about a half-volley. It is just incredible. So, thank you.

The private sector cannot make this work. I quote the Solstice CEO, who said that this is not about gas networks, energy policy or the energy transition; it is about shutting down a very expensive network. Shutting it down is the best option. But you cannot seem to get your head around that, Mr Davis, and nor can the Liberals, because you are obsessed with ideology in so many areas of politics, and energy is just an absolute case in point. You have spent the last two to three years talking about nuclear power plants. You have not been worried about what Victorians want. You have not been acknowledging the fact that one in three Victorians have solar on their roof and that Victorians are taking up batteries at an incredible rate. When we had one of the hottest days on record only about a week ago and we had surplus electricity in the grid, about 12 gigawatts, and we had a peak demand of over 10 gigawatts, where was Mr Davis? Where were the Liberals saying congratulations to everybody who has worked on our electricity grid over the last decade to ensure that the supply is there, to everyone who has put solar on their homes, to everyone who has put batteries in, to everyone who is working in the valley, to those that are generating power at all the touchpoints along our electricity network to supply power? You cannot, because you are ideologically driven and you are so incredibly lazy.

Do you know who you want to pay for your laziness and your reaction and your lack of policies? You want taxpayers to pay. When there are new homes and new towns going in, you would rather run out a network that is far more expensive and does not give Victorian consumers energy security and energy independence. Mr Davis, in the 1800s whale oil was the number one form of energy in Victoria. If you had your way, you would be out there harpooning whales and dragging them in and pulling the oil out, because that is what we used to do. You are a conservative – you love looking in the rear-view mirror, you do not like looking forward. But Victorians are leading the way.

David Davis interjected.

Tom McINTOSH: You may laugh, Mr Davis, but Victorians are very, very happy to be able to provide themselves with their own electricity. I have got a newsflash for you: it is going to keep coming and it is going to keep happening. The uptake of energy independence continues because people want cheap energy they can produce for themselves, and it is the same with the consumers that have been on these networks. They are making the move across and they are being supported to do so.

Members interjecting.

Tom McINTOSH: You are an absolute rabble. You know you have got One Nation coming after you. The Liberals and the Nationals are completely torn apart. All this probably would not have happened if you had spent the last 10 years thinking about a few policies, having something you can actually take to punters rather than just saying no and coming in here and shrieking about a policy that you put forward that has left rural Victorians in a position where a private operator that you advocated for to provide energy into their homes is walking away, and you will not take any responsibility for it. You are trying to use it as a cheap political opportunity, but you bring absolutely nothing for Victorians. You laugh at every new form of electricity. I know you hate electric vehicles, but you know what? Vehicle-to-grid is going to be here next year and the year after, and it is just another opportunity for people to plug batteries in. There are going to be more solar panels on roofs, there is going to be more electricity generation in people's own homes and they are going to be energy independent. We know you would love to be shipping fuel in from the other side of the world; we know you would love the \$40 billion deficit it puts on the national budget. But we are supporting Victorians to get the electricity they want generated on their own roofs – energy independence and energy security.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (10:33): I find extraordinary the debate that we are having in this chamber right now. What we are hearing from the government is, 'It's not our fault. It was your policy.' Let me read to you from a media release put out under Daniel Andrews, the Wednesday 4 March 2015 statement on the Energy for the Regions program:

The Andrews Labor Government will proceed with the Energy for the Regions program.

A report in The Weekly Times today that the Labor Government is poised to axe the Energy for the Regions program is incorrect.

It goes on to say that:

... the program will go ahead under the Labor Government.

If you would like to take responsibility, please do, because that is what you committed to doing. It was a shared public-private partnership, a 20-year contract that has been cut short 10 years early. Mr McIntosh says, 'You guys want the taxpayers to pay.' Maybe you are not across the facts of this case, because what is happening here is the government is saying, 'We're washing our hands of this and we are putting the cost onto taxpayers.' I have spoken to families and I have spoken to businesses who are absolutely shocked at what is happening in this situation. They have built brand new homes in these areas like Marong, believing that there was a service there, this compressed natural gas, with not a word that it would be cut off within 12 months. It is unbelievable that we have this situation now. What is more, the cost on consumers is not minor. We are talking about a resident that spent \$30,000 out of their super fund to try and afford the appliances and the transition. It also requires things like switchboard upgrades. It is additional costs; it is not just the appliances. Let me say this: the government say, 'Oh well, we're offering rebates.' It is quite extraordinary, because the rebates vary. They are market-driven prices, so some of the rebates are actually lower now than what they were last year.

Just to read from an ad for one of the suppliers that is in the papers – this is what residents are having to look for for advice on this – it says, 'With over dozens of rebates freely available to home owners and landlords, few are aware that the rebates available change in value on a weekly basis.' This is something most customers are unaware of, and it explains the vast variation in the out-of-pocket

expense that householders need to contribute to access their rebates. To further complicate the process, the rebates are shared with different government departments, which only the customer is allowed to access. There are people meeting at the local clubs, having chats with their neighbours: ‘You know what? Is it really being cut off? Are you sure?’ They have not found out much at all about it, and they are being left to navigate their own way. Some people find it a struggle, and this is not just anything: this is your heating, your hot water, your cooking. These are essential services that people are relying on, and yet under this government there were incentive payments for businesses to change. They were on the compressed natural gas, they changed to LPG, and now they are being told they have got to change back. Please take responsibility.

Why are residents being left out of pocket? It should be the government that is paying, not the consumers, because some of them do not have any capacity to afford these costs. Some of them are facing \$10,000, some \$12,000 bills. When you have a mortgage and you are just struggling to pay your bills right now, you cannot find the funds to do this. But Solstice have put out advice, and it is very clear: if a customer in Marong takes no action, their property will cease to have a natural gas supply after 2 August 2026. Here we are. This is what this government is doing to residents across northern Victoria. I have got communities, as I said – Robinvale, Swan Hill, Kerang, Nathalia, Marong, Maldon and Heathcote – this is not just a few houses; this is hundreds and hundreds of homes that are being impacted right now when they cannot afford it under this government, and you need to take responsibility and make sure that they are not out of pocket. We need these documents to show all the lack of communication and the lack of transparency under this government.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (10:38): I might begin by saying that any chance to get up here and talk about energy and talk about our strong action in the transition to renewable energy in our state is something that I am very happy to take up, particularly when the motion demands ‘decisive action’ of this government to reduce our state’s reliance on gas. We are also doing a suite of measures to slash power bills and cut our state’s emissions. That is what I want to talk about today, because what I do know –

Members interjecting.

Tom McIntosh: On a point of order, Acting President, there are comments coming from the other side.

David Davis: Further to the point of order, Acting President, Ms Watt is heading into a broad energy discussion. This is a documents motion about documents that relate to energy in –

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): That is not further to the point of order. I have not ruled on the first point of order. I will ask members to allow Ms Watt to continue so that we can all hear what she is talking about.

Sheena WATT: Particularly when it comes to our wideranging action on energy, I want to talk about compressed natural gas –

David Davis interjected.

Sheena WATT: You returned to your seat? Thank you – which is directly related to motion before us. What we know is that in our communities affected by this decision – a decision that was made on a commercial basis by Solstice Energy – there are actions that are being taken by consumers. As Mr McIntosh said, 65 per cent of customers in these affected communities have already taken action. They have taken action and engaged with Solstice regarding suitable transition arrangements and what their options are. Many – in fact two-thirds – of customers have already taken steps to get off this very expensive energy provider.

Can I just say that further to that there are a suite of available options to support consumers, and one-third of customers have in fact received conversion payments and their transitions are well underway. Can I take the time to thank the office of the Minister for Regional Development, who I know have

been very strong on this in the past, as well as with the support of the Minister for Energy and Resources. What we do know is that many communities are wanting to transition off CNG networks. They have said that it is an expensive form of energy. They are realising the benefits of the transition to renewable energy, whether that be uptakes of batteries, which in the communities is absolutely taking off –

David Davis: Have you visited one of these communities to talk about this?

Sheena WATT: Yes, I have.

David Davis: Which one?

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): Through the Chair, please, Mr Davis.

Sheena WATT: I have visited communities to talk about it. In fact I have a regional renewable energy network meeting scheduled in Gippsland next week. Let me just say that if Victorians in regional communities or indeed any Victorians want to make the switch to electrification, as so many do, there is support here from the Labor government to ensure that the help is available to slash energy bills, reduce your emissions and live in a much healthier home. There are millions of dollars available out there – \$590 million worth of discounts went back into the pockets of Victorians in 2024 and 2025. There is so much that I could talk about. I could talk about Solar Homes. I have got 4 seconds to go, but I will just say that blatant misinformation about gas supply does not help Victorians with their needs.

Motion agreed to.

Motions

Ambulance services

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (10:42): I rise to move:

That this house condemns the Allan Labor government for the ongoing chaos and mismanagement within Ambulance Victoria and notes that:

- (1) Ambulance Victoria's statement of priorities determines its responsibility to deliver high-quality and safe care, and timely access to care;
- (2) the latest publicly available data from the Victorian Agency for Health Information shows a continued failure to meet ambulance response targets;
- (3) ambulances, including mobile intensive care units, were not staffed during recent heatwave conditions due to budget shortfalls;
- (4) according to the Ambulance Union, from Friday 23 January to Thursday 29 January 2026, stations with unstaffed ambulances included:
 - (a) Box Hill, Hampton Park, Werribee, Wyndham Vale, Gowanbrae, Nunawading, Epping, Rosanna, Broadmeadows and Watsonia for the day shift;
 - (b) Black Rock, Devon Meadows, Endeavour Hills, Garfield, Jacksons Creek, Bellfield and South Morang for the afternoon shift;
 - (c) Beaconsfield, Belgrave, Big Hill, Caulfield, Doncaster, Mount Martha, Mulgrave, Rosebud, Sorrento, Waverley, Mernda, Colac and Inglewood for the night shift;
- (5) many more ambulances only had a single crew member and were unable to transport patients; and
- (6) the priorities of the Allan Labor government are all wrong when ambulance shifts cannot be filled due to budget constraints, yet the government wastes hundreds of millions of Victorian taxpayer dollars on cancelling the Commonwealth Games, millions of dollars on machete bins, hundreds of thousands of dollars on leased pot plants for the Suburban Rail Loop Authority, and has wasted in excess of \$50 billion on project blowouts.

This motion is around a very important issue that I have great concern about and I know many, many Victorians have great concern about. I do believe that the government has failed Victorians on a number of fronts. My motion says:

That this house condemns the Allan Labor government for the ongoing chaos and mismanagement within Ambulance Victoria and notes that:

- (1) Ambulance Victoria's statement of priorities determines its responsibility to deliver high-quality and safe care, and timely access to care;
- (2) the latest publicly available data from the Victorian Agency for Health Information shows a continued failure to meet ambulance response targets;
- (3) ambulances, including mobile intensive care units, were not staffed during recent heatwave conditions due to budget shortfalls;
- (4) according to the Ambulance Union, from Friday 23 January to Thursday 29 January 2026, stations with unstaffed ambulances included:
 - (a) Box Hill, Hampton Park, Werribee, Wyndham Vale, Gowanbrae, Nunawading, Epping, Rosanna, Broadmeadows and Watsonia for the day shift;
 - (b) Black Rock, Devon Meadows, Endeavour Hills, Garfield, Jacksons Creek, Bellfield and South Morang for the afternoon shift;
 - (c) Beaconsfield, Belgrave, Big Hill, Caulfield, Doncaster, Mount Martha, Mulgrave, Rosebud, Sorrento, Waverley, Mernda, Colac and Inglewood and for the night shift ...

There were a lot of unstaffed ambulance stations throughout the days, and it was very, very concerning over that period of time. The motion goes on to say:

- (5) many more ambulances only had a single crew member and were unable to transport patients ...

The issue I think is really where more and more Victorians are understanding what this government is about. They are taking Victoria in the wrong direction and their priorities are wrong. My motion states:

- (6) the priorities of the Allan Labor government are all wrong when ambulance shifts cannot be filled due to budget constraints, yet the government wastes hundreds of millions of Victorian taxpayer dollars on cancelling the Commonwealth Games –

that they promised –

... millions of dollars on machete bins ...

I mean, what a farcical policy that was. We see the crime. We see what happened. Only last night –

Members interjecting.

Georgie CROZIER: Labor members interject, but these machete attacks are still happening and Victorians' lives are being put at risk. It was a farcical policy: \$13 million for 40 machete bins – goodness me. It continues:

... hundreds of thousands of dollars on leased pot plants for the Suburban Rail Loop Authority ...

It is a disgrace that this Suburban Rail Loop Authority can think that they can go and waste \$200,000 on pot plants, for heaven's sake, when we cannot fill ambulance shifts because of budget constraints. And of course there are the massive waste and mismanagement in the government's infrastructure program – \$50 billion and rising. With the interest rate hike that happened with the RBA only yesterday – what is that going to do to Victoria's bottom line and the \$20 million of interest repayments we have to pay before anything else is paid on the borrowings and debt of this government? They think they are financial gurus. They are the worst the state has ever seen. That is going to put more pressure on the Victorian taxpayer because of the over \$1 million in interest repayments that we are paying now every hour – just imagine, \$1 million every hour in interest repayments. It is a staggering figure, yet it just seems to brush over those opposite. That is why I and many, many others are concerned about the budget constraints with Ambulance Victoria.

The government will say they have invested more, but they forget to understand exactly what they are investing in and how it should be applied. I want to go to the statement of priorities, because I think it is telling. In the statement of priorities to the minister, under ‘Background’ it says:

The annual agreements support the delivery of, or substantial progress towards, the key shared objectives of quality and safety, good governance and leadership, access and timeliness, and financial sustainability.

...

High standards of governance, transparency and accountability are essential.

We do not get any of that, and I think it is absolutely telling, given the inquiry into Ambulance Victoria, which you were on, Acting President Galea. We conducted that inquiry together, an excellent inquiry, and it showed just what was going on in Ambulance Victoria. – the toxic nature of a toxic culture which continued to thrive, marked by bullying, harassment, nepotism and reprisals against those who challenged authority.

Ambulance ramping continues to undermine patient outcomes, and we see that continually. The government has changed a policy direction on that, and I want to come back to that because it has impacted on the quality of emergency services and the delivery of care, where people have been substantially mismanaged. We have got failures in the system where ambulances do not turn up. Tragically, Victorians have died waiting for an ambulance. I see Mr McGowan nodding over there because it happened in his electorate not so long ago, and in Mr Welch’s electorate too. A former nurse who, sadly, called for an ambulance not once but twice after having a fall and bleeding waited 5 hours and died. That should not happen. When it happened, in 2025, it should not have happened. There lies the problem around what we are grappling with. I understand there are issues within the system and there are things that occur that cannot always be avoided. I understand that. I am a former clinician. I understand how things can overtake and a variety of issues might arise. However, these issues are not one-offs; they are continual and they are increasing.

The inquiry also showed that excessive paramedic workloads placed undue pressure on employees, leading to burnout, stress and resignations – hence again we have got these shifts that are unmanned. The report highlighted the failures at Ambulance Victoria that have really been allowed to grow and fester under Labor over the last 11 or 12 years. It really is time for a change because of where this government is going.

I want to just go back to ambulance response times because the statement of priorities is really farcical around transparency and accountability and timely access to care. Every quarter we have reporting on ambulance response times. The last known data, which was for the July-August-September quarter and which came out 16 days late, showed that 36 per cent of ambulances did not arrive within the expected timeframe of their 15-minute response. That is more than one in three Victorians waiting in excess of that 15 minutes. That is a very dangerous situation if you are needing an emergency response. Every second counts if you require an emergency response for an ambulance. Those response times are continuing to just be static. They are not improving. The response is not what the government promised it would be – the government’s own targets.

There were 101,632 code 1 call-outs in that last reported quarter that I am referring to. From those statistics 36 per cent means that 36,485 Victorians did not get their ambulance within that code 1 15-minute response time. That has an enormous flow-on impact around the quality of care and the ability to deliver care and have a better patient outcome, let alone a better patient experience.

I have been watching. Where is the latest Victorian Agency for Health Information data for October, November and December, which was due out on 31 January – days ago? It is still not there. I asked my office to check before I got to stand. No, it is still not there. The government will be waiting for something or spinning some rubbish about their failures. We know that there are tens of thousands of Victorians waiting for surgery, waiting in pain. Their lives are on hold, they are deteriorating. They are relying on opioid drug therapy to get them through the pain. These things are having a real impact

on the quality of life and the ability for people to go about their daily lives, go to work, be able to function, and this government has failed them. They continue to fail them. It is no wonder there are so many people requiring an emergency response when there are so many people with their health deteriorating.

That goes to the point of the second part of my motion. I want to now go to the issue around MICA units not being staffed during the recent hot spell we had. We are in summer, and I admit that it was very, very hot, and it has been extremely hot particularly in the northern parts of Victoria. There were many challenges around the bushfires, and I want to pay tribute to all of those that were in that emergency response, including the paramedics, although they were not stationed on the ground in the fire areas, even where fires were under control. I was getting feedback from CFAs going, 'No, there's no ambulance stationed here.' I am hoping that all this will be teased out through various questions and inquiries. Nevertheless, I want to go to the point around MICA units. The government promised that they would deliver 40 paramedics in 2023–24 for a cost of around \$15.8 million. But an FOI response that I recently received – it has taken me a year – shows that Ambulance Victoria told the government, 'With that funding you've provided, we can't deliver you 40 MICA paramedics.' It said:

As previously communicated to the Department of Health by AV, this funding envelope is insufficient to train and deliver 40 mobile intensive care ambulance ... paramedics. Based on the total cost ... supporting and deploying fully credentialled MICA interns ... the funding will deliver approximately 22 new MICA interns.

They did not even do that. There was a media release last year – I have got it somewhere here – and government trying to spin again. They put on 14 new interns. This is a promise the government made. They continue to spruik what they are doing, but they are failing to deliver on their promises. I think Victorians are seeing through this. They can see the failures, they can see the gaps and they certainly are experiencing those failures on the ground. As the Leader of the Opposition Jess Wilson says, if you cannot get the little things right, how on earth do you expect to fix the big things like this? When you are wasting money on pot plants that are leased, for God's sake – \$200,000 – and blowing \$600 million on a Commonwealth Games promise that was just a furphy, it is quite disgraceful.

That is why I and many, many others – and I speak to paramedics – know they have every right to be concerned about where it is all heading, given the financial situation the state is in. They understand that the terrible financial position Labor has put Victoria in is really hurting the ability to deliver services such as ambulance services – to be able to fund these shifts that I am talking about. When you look at these Friday-to-Thursday shifts, the six days from just a couple of weeks ago, and I will not read in the stations where they are understaffed – this is not coming from me; it is coming from the ambulance union, who are expressing their concern – there are big gaps. That means that Victorians have every right to question it – 'What happens if I need an ambulance? Do I trust the system? Can I get an ambulance when I need one?' I have heard terrible stories in the last couple of days around what is happening when people ring for an ambulance. They are being questioned about the validity of their symptoms. Family members are distraught, because they are going, 'We need an ambulance. Why is this not happening? I've paid my taxes, I've paid my ambulance membership fee, and I can't get an ambulance when a family member needs one.'

I think this needs a great big overview, a review of the whole thing. I can tell you should we be successful in November – and by God I hope we are, for the sake of Victoria – I will be looking into these very issues, because something is not going right with the triage, the dispatch and the ability of Victorians to get an ambulance when they need one. It is appalling. There are far too many stories that I hear and my colleagues hear. Far too many are crying out and saying, 'For goodness sake, just fix it. Stop wasting money. Get your priorities right.' That is what we say: the priorities are all wrong from this government when we cannot get these things fixed.

The other point of my motion is to go again to the shortfalls. Many more ambulances only had a single crew member and were unable to transport patients. They could not actually activate what they needed to do. It is incredibly frustrating for those paramedics to not have the support and the ability to go out

and do the work that they want to do to support the community in their time of need, so there is immense frustration amongst a whole range of people, who are just going, ‘This is wrong. We should be able to be supporting the community. We should be able to be manning our ambulance crews properly, whether it is in a heatwave or whether it is on a freezing cold winter’s day in a high flu season.’ We have got an ageing population and we have got a growing population. We have got a population that has increasing chronic diseases, whether that is diabetes, obesity, mental health, drugs and alcohol or cancer.

It is the very reason why I say we should not abolish VicHealth. But Labor is abolishing VicHealth. They are sucking it into their black hole. That preventative health measure and the early intervention keep people out of an ambulance. It keeps people out of the acute system. That is what we should be looking at. This government has lost sight of what it is responsible for. If you read that statement of priorities, which all sounds very good on paper, they are not doing it. They are failing to deliver the statement of priorities and what the minister signs off on. I will not accept the government’s lines about what they are doing, because it is in black and white through FOI documents that we have finally received. It is there in the data with the response times that continue to fail way too many Victorians.

There is an increased demand for ambulances. We know that. We have known that since the pandemic – a 14 per cent increase in demand. During COVID, many of you were not in the Parliament at the time, but if you had been you would have heard me stand up here and say, ‘When you shut down surgery, when you stop screening, people are going to get sicker, and we are going to see this following the pandemic.’ Guess what? That is happening. That has happened. There is greater demand. The community has complex health needs in a whole range of areas, and they do expect to have an ambulance. I know that there are frivolous calls, but that is no excuse for the many, many, many delays, especially for the elderly, who deserve to have better care than they are receiving. I also note in the statement of priorities regarding this that it says around the elderly:

Supporting services for **older Victorians**:

12. A reformed health system that responds to the needs of older people to receive the right care in the right place ...

That is not happening. We saw it through the example of Lois Casboulton and whatever the decisions that were made through the virtual ED that did not assess her properly and what was going on in terms of her physical symptoms and what she was doing. I will not accept that that woman, who had a shocking fall, needed to be transported by private car. She might have said, ‘I don’t want to go.’ Of course she would have said that. Most elderly patients say that, ‘I don’t want to go. I don’t want to go.’ I have experienced that myself with my own family. That is not the point. Paramedics and those within the health system should be absolutely saying, ‘In your best interests, we need to get you to hospital.’ And when the family did, she was rushed. She was found to have a broken pelvis and bleeding on her brain, and she was in a very bad way. I urge all members to support this motion so that it gives the recognition to Victorians about the improvements and about the problems that continue to occur.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (11:02): I rise to speak on motion 1228 moved by member for Southern Metropolitan Ms Crozier. I want to start by saying something that I think everyone in this place agrees on: our paramedics do an extraordinary job. They work long hours under intense pressure and with a level of professionalism and care for Victorian communities that deserves our respect. Our paramedics are under enormous pressure. We saw just last week what added pressure does to the system during a heatwave: ramping and ballooned-out response times. The cracks in the system have become impossible to ignore. But to be clear, this is not a failure of paramedics.

Ambulance Victoria’s own strategic plan sets out an ambitious goal that by 2028, it will be a world-leading ambulance service in terms of patient outcomes, people’s experiences and their connection to the broader healthcare system. Today Ambulance Victoria is already responsible for delivering out-of-hospital, mobile and emergency health care to more than 6.6 million Victorians across over 227,000 square kilometres. Australian Bureau of Statistics projections show Victoria’s population will

continue to grow, reaching between 9 and 13 million by 2071. Of course we will need a resilient, robust and well-resourced healthcare system, and a major player in the whole ecosystem is Ambulance Victoria.

While we share the concerns that underpin this motion before us, it does not offer any solutions that would see a real impact for Ambulance Victoria. For that reason, we will not be supporting this motion. The Legal and Social Issues Committee, a committee I sat on with many colleagues, including the mover of this motion, Ms Crozier, recently published the inquiry into Ambulance Victoria report. This inquiry is done and has already delivered a set of recommendations that speak to the real problems with Ambulance Victoria and the broader health system – problems like pressures on the organisation, its culture, staffing and adequate resourcing. Paramedics, Ambulance Victoria leadership, unions and experts engaged with that process in good faith. But still we wait for the government to provide any kind of response, let alone begin to implement the recommendations. Secondly, the government continues to desperately underfund the parts of the health system that would take pressure off ambulances and paramedics. A struggling ambulance service cannot be fixed by tweaking around the edges. It is not an isolated problem, it is the result of a struggling and stretched health system. When hospitals are full, ambulances cannot offload patients. When ambulances cannot offload, paramedics cannot respond to new call-outs, and when paramedics are stuck – ramped – it is the community that suffers.

One of the biggest missed opportunities here is preventative health. If we genuinely want fewer people ending up in emergency departments, we need to invest in keeping people healthy in the first place. That is why the government's decision to abolish VicHealth is so deeply disappointing. VicHealth has played a critical role in reducing chronic disease, improving mental health and addressing the social drivers of poor health. Cutting preventative health does not save money, it just pushes costs further down the line, where they land squarely on hospitals and ambulance services.

End-of-life care is another critical pressure point in the health system. Too many people are stuck in hospital beds not because they need acute medical care but because it is the only place they can get support at all. Productivity Commission data shows older Australians are now waiting an average of 245 days, and in some cases up to 380 days, to receive approved home care. Many die before that care ever arrives. This rationing of aged care has left around 3000 older Australians occupying hospital beds simply because there is no help available at home. That blocks beds and places yet more strain on ambulances and paramedics. It is not dignified end-of-life care, and it is a clear example of how failures elsewhere in the system flow directly into our emergency services. Ambulance Victoria needs a government that invests in prevention and treats the ambulance system as part of the broader health ecosystem, not an afterthought. Until we do that right, paramedics and the people in their care will keep paying the price for decisions made in this place.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (11:07): I am pleased to rise to speak on Ms Crozier's motion relating to Ambulance Victoria, noting, as the two previous speakers were, that I was a member of the Legal and Social Issues Committee which last year undertook a fairly comprehensive inquiry into Ambulance Victoria. The report that we tabled goes some way to understanding some of the challenges that exist in Victoria's paramedic workforce. As a member of the committee, and certainly in the additional comments that as one of the government members we made to that report, I think the majority report, whilst rightly uncovering some serious concerns with some organisational and cultural practices at Ambulance Victoria – which I will get to in a moment in this contribution, I think, as this motion does, and as the contributions also have – does not acknowledge the significant additional resources that have been placed into Ambulance Victoria in terms of providing additional staffing but also providing additional support to that staffing and in providing additional equipment, capital and other service upgrades. I will get to all of those.

I will state at the outset that the work that our paramedics do every day and every night saves lives right across the state. It helps people, some in their moments of greatest need, providing them with the care and support that can certainly alleviate pain and injury and suffering but can also save lives. The

work that our paramedics do each and every day and each and every night is something that we always support. Labor has consistently delivered additional resources for our paramedics. We have supported those paramedics themselves to become better trained and better equipped to do the dangerous and challenging job that they have to do. They will always have that support from us.

There are several issues countenanced in the motion, and I will try and go through some of them, each in turn. At its core a strong Ambulance Victoria requires a commitment from government to have the resources that it needs. We have as a government invested in the on-road workforce at Ambulance Victoria. It has grown by more than 50 per cent under our government, and we have invested a record \$2 billion in ambulance services. Since 2015, in the last decade, Labor has invested \$279 million to deliver 48 new ambulance stations across the state, and there are two more in planning. One of those additional stations is in Bentleigh, and the last time I went through and spoke to the paramedics who are likely to be stationed there, they spoke of just how critical those new stations are to improving service and responses to local communities. I am glad that so many communities across our state have benefited from those investments in stations and facilities in the last decade.

The questions in the motion relating to how Ambulance Victoria undertakes its rostering arrangements, including things such as overtime, are matters that should rightly rest with operational decision-making at Ambulance Victoria. I do not think it is in anyone's interest, let alone the people of Victoria's interest, to have politicians setting rosters for the ambulance service, and I think that we should be making sure that those sorts of operational decisions are made by the people who run the ambulance system. What we can do is make sure that management has the support that it needs – additional staffing, additional stations and additional training – which is what we are delivering and have delivered to make sure that the management of Ambulance Victoria can think about how to make sure that its workforce has the dynamic operational set-up to meet the evolving and changing paramedicine needs of the Victorian community.

Of course Ambulance Victoria need to respond to a community today that is different to how it was in the past, and some of the changes that Ambulance Victoria say that they are making are about making sure that paramedics are rostered when they are needed the most, including improving paramedic coverage across night shifts. Better night shift resourcing does reduce reliance on single responders, which in turn promotes the occupational safety of the paramedic workforce, and improving night shift coverage also improves response times and ensures patients can get care quicker. The consequential changes that are made to rostering to achieve these goals need to be made as well, and their workforce strategy and their rostering strategy do just that. But those are decisions best made by Ambulance Victoria.

What the government can do and what it is important to do is twofold. One thing is to make sure that the rest of the healthcare system is supported so that ambulance operators, paramedics, can deliver patients to hospitals quickly and safely so that we can ensure there is adequate resourcing and the triaging through our emergency departments happens in a way that means that patients can move from ambulances through ED and to appropriate further care as efficiently as possible. More work needs to happen there; we saw that very clearly in the course of our inquiry last year. But it is also about providing those who require assistance with more convenient and better opportunities to get that health care than just simply ringing 000, ringing for an ambulance. That is why the investments that we are making in expanding the Victorian Virtual Emergency Department are so critical, with around 79 per cent of ambulance cases referred by an in-field paramedic providing access to emergency health care without being transported to an ED. It is another tool in the toolkit that our paramedics have when they go to help – that they can refer these patients on to places like the virtual emergency department, something we have here in Victoria. There was investment in the most recent budget of \$58 million, including more short-stay beds to improve patient flow through our emergency departments. We are trying to improve primary health care through things like the urgent care clinics so that people can get the care they need in the community without necessarily needing to call paramedics.

We are also investing in the paramedic workforce and supporting Victoria to have the most highly qualified paramedic workforce in the nation. We have invested \$20 million to train and deploy Australia's first ever paramedic practitioners, and we want to have 25 of them on the road this year. The training is well underway, and that is something that we heard a lot about in our inquiry last year. What it does do is enable better care in community, and it enables the paramedics to deliver a more sophisticated and wider suite of treatments to those who are in need of assistance.

We have got our first centre of paramedicine in partnership with Victoria University in the west of Melbourne, and \$10 million has gone in from the state government to support the improvements to training, innovation and skills in education and ensuring that our paramedics have the support to deliver operational care that is informed by contemporary best practice and to the highest quality standards. The centre will have the capacity to train around 1500 students and is about offering the very best training that we possibly can here in Victoria.

As I said, the latest report on government services demonstrated that Victoria's paramedics and those working in our ambulance services are the most qualified of any state or territory. We need to and we will continue to invest to support our paramedic workforce. Labor stand with our ambulance service, we stand with our paramedics and we will continue to invest and support this critical workforce here in the state.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (11:17): I am pleased to stand with the Nationals in support of this motion. Paramedics and the work of people in that area are just so critical, particularly to people in regional Victoria. A member of my family, their life was saved after suffering heart failure. They live in a regional area, and it was a MICA paramedic that came and assisted. I, from a personal perspective, just want to say how thankful I am for the training and the quick response that happened on that day that saved their life. But I know that is not the situation for many, many others, and I remember – and I raised this in the Parliament in my first year back in 2023 – a family that I heard from in Donald, where they needed an ambulance just 200 metres from the hospital, and yet they had to wait hours for an ambulance. Unfortunately that family member passed away the next day. I have spoken to many other people who have been in contact with me to raise concerns about no ambulance being available, about being told they had to get a taxi to get to the hospital, and yet they live so close to Bendigo in that situation. Others, where no ambulance was available, had to take their loved ones themselves, often in significant pain and distress, to hospital.

I have also raised time and time again the issues that I know are happening in our region of Northern Victoria because of the ramping that is happening at our hospitals. We are seeing that in Wodonga, and we have seen it in Bendigo and in Shepparton. So much time is being wasted by ambulances that need to stay there, not being able to get out again to respond to emergency situations. I know that also an added pressure is the lack of aged care services that we have in regional areas and people that end up having a bed in a hospital because there is simply nowhere for them to go.

I know there was a Productivity Commission report just recently that was talking about the extensive delays to getting aged care assessments, which is obviously contributing to that as well. I know that has been an issue in Albury–Wodonga hospital, as I visited there last year, and in Bendigo I heard too that local professionals were talking about how there were 42 beds being taken by people that needed, really, aged care services. This is the challenge that we are facing. Yet we do have a number of paramedics being trained in Victoria. I received information from Andrew McDonnell, who is with HMS Community Homecare & Clinic. They are based in Gisborne, and they were talking about how in Australia there are 15 universities offering a paramedic undergraduate degree, with a cohort of about 5000 students across the country, but there are not the placements to enable that training. This is causing a significant number of degree-qualified paramedics to remain without work, and this is getting worse year on year. I have spoken to people that know many of their fellow students that have now moved overseas to find work. They are not staying here in Victoria. Some have ended up working in gardening businesses; others have ended up working in supermarkets. It is extraordinary to me, when I see the need that we have for paramedics to be working in our regional communities where

health services are lacking and that divide between the regions and what we see in the city and in life expectancy. There is a big gap there still, and we need to address that. To think that we have trained paramedics and yet here we have ambulance response times that are not where they should be. I know from speaking with residents up in the Indigo shire that it has one of the worst response times for ambulances in the state, and it continues to have. I have also raised in this chamber concerns about a rolled ambulance after, apparently, an 18-hour shift that they had done, and they had an accident. I think this is just some of what we are seeing because of the pressure that is in our system at the moment.

Here we have the Labor government, which has been in now since 2014, yet the issues continue and we see the wrong priorities that this government has. I know that Ms Crozier spoke about that in her contribution, and that is referenced in this motion as well. But currently Victoria does have the highest taxes and the highest debt. We are paying nearly \$1 million every single hour just in interest repayments, and here we have, as this motion refers to, shifts that cannot be filled, simply because of the financial constraints – because we have a government that continues to absolutely waste funds. They certainly do not treat taxpayers money like their own money, because we have seen millions wasted with the cancelling of the Commonwealth Games. We have had millions spent on machete bins, hundreds of thousands of dollars spent to lease pot plants for the Suburban Rail Loop Authority and over \$50 billion on project blowouts in this state. That is the situation we are in. Yet we know that in regional areas it is so important that we have improved response times and we have paramedics that are productively employed to contribute to better health care in our regions. Certainly I am looking forward to November. I am so glad that 2026 is finally here, because we have a state election coming up, and people will get to choose who they want to lead this state. We have seen the record of this government, and I can assure you that a Liberal–Nationals government is absolutely committed to delivering a world-class health system that Victorians can rely on.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (11:24): I thank Ms Crozier for the opportunity to speak on the Allan Labor government's record on supporting Ambulance Victoria. The Allan Labor government will always deliver the resources that are needed for our paramedics. Like others, I want to acknowledge the hard work that our ambos do in Victoria, in particular in western Victoria, and also the extraordinary pressures that our paramedics are under, often confronting situations that they cannot anticipate – situations where 100 per cent of their patients are usually in a very distressed state, perhaps in a situation that they have never been in before. That requires not just extensive medical, first aid and first response knowledge and experience but it also involves extensive personal skills and communication skills because of the diversity of situations and people that they care for. In particular, I want to acknowledge the incredible work that our ambos have done in western Victoria, particularly throughout January this year.

Western Victoria experienced some of the worst conditions of the recent heatwave, with communities enduring extreme and sustained temperatures. I share the deep concern of local residents about the impact of these conditions on health, emergency demand and community safety. Ambulance Victoria saw an average 12 per cent increase in workload across the state on 7 January, the first heatwave day we had, when parts of western Victoria saw temperatures in the mid-40s. These extreme heat events place additional strain on ambulance services, particularly in rural and regional areas, where distances are greater and therefore resources more stretched. Ambos also have to be relocated from branches within declared regions of catastrophic fire danger. I know from my years as a CFA volunteer that the first rule is to maintain your own safety so that you can then help others, and if you cannot maintain your own safety, then you cannot help others. The same applies for ambulance services. There were, as colleagues may remember, a number of ambulance services moved from danger areas, catastrophic areas, to nearby areas so that they were able to ensure that they could continue to respond if needed. Crews are redeployed into the zones in the case of serious or life-threatening situations.

It is impossible to ignore that climate-driven extreme weather is worsening these pressures, and it is deeply concerning that those opposite continue to deny climate change while actively working against addressing the root issues. Unlike those opposite, this government takes a rational approach. We are

not stuck in some tedious rehashing of the culture wars of the last decade at the expense of the welfare of Victorians. We have seen the growing demand for ambulance services and responded by growing the on-road workforce by more than 50 per cent and investing a record \$2 billion in ambulance services. Since 2015 the Labor government has invested \$279 million to deliver 48 new ambulance stations across the state, with two additional stations in planning, providing better working conditions for paramedics and ensuring life-saving emergency care is available for all Victorians, no matter where they live.

Rostering arrangements, including overtime, are an operational matter for Ambulance Victoria. I want to endorse what my colleague Mr Batchelor said about the absurdity of politicians meddling in rostering arrangements for ambulances. I can imagine the disaster that would involve. Ambulance Victoria's whole-of-system approach allows them to distribute ambulance resources across the state to ensure emergency coverage is maintained and patients are cared for. This means the right resource is available for each patient and the closest appropriate ambulance is always sent to an emergency case, regardless of where it is based. As part of its dynamic resource deployment Ambulance Victoria has made changes to its overtime rostering, ensuring resources are allocated to where they are needed. Ambulance Victoria says these changes are about making sure paramedics are rostered when they are needed most, including improving paramedic coverage across night shifts. Better night shift resourcing coverage reduces the reliance on single paramedic responders, which in turn improves the occupational safety of the paramedic workforce. Improving night shift coverage will also improve response times and ensure patients get care quicker. Let me be clear: this is about improving performance and occupational safety.

We are aware additional paramedics are required to fill vacant shifts to ensure community safety. Ambulance Victoria will always seek to roster and fill those shifts, and this strategy does exactly that. And when it comes to mobile intensive care ambulance paramedics, these are a critical specialist resource. Vacancies have been particularly challenging to fill overnight, which is why Ambulance Victoria prioritises filling MICA shifts ahead of those roles to maintain safe access to advanced critical care capability.

We also know that an ambulance is not always what is needed, so we have continued to invest in initiatives to give Victorians the right resources to address their health concerns, freeing up paramedics so they can get back on the road sooner. These include expanding the Victorian Virtual Emergency Department, delivering urgent care clinics and Nurse-on-Call and expanding the ability of GPs and pharmacists to deliver appropriate health services.

Of course the contraction of access to primary care services in this nation was presided over by the coalition federal government, and it is the Victorian government that is responding to those shortages by introducing these health services. In that regard the problem was caused by the conservative government, and we are fixing it. Urgent care clinics –

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Taking responsibility – thank you. These include the Victorian Virtual Emergency Department, the urgent care clinics, Nurse-on-Call and expanding the ability of GPs and pharmacists to deliver appropriate health services. That is taking responsibility. It is no coincidence that the federal government have taken over some of those responsibilities, because Medicare and the primary health system are essentially federal issues. So I think it really is a bit cheeky to whinge about this when a lot of the shortages in primary health services were caused by conservatives in government. Ambulance Victoria know how much this matters. During the recent heatwave they posted call-outs on their social media for people to use these resources and save paramedics for where they are needed the most – for saving lives.

The key reform we have introduced that directly addresses the challenges faced by rural and regional communities is the introduction of paramedic practitioners. We have invested \$20.1 million to train

and deploy Australia's first ever paramedic practitioners, with a commitment to have 25 on the road by 2026 – another initiative taking responsibility for the health of Victorian people and another initiative that takes responsibility for the failure of a federal government. I could go on, but I am running out of time. I would say in closing that I absolutely thank every paramedic that has worked in the heat this January, and I support paramedic services entirely.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (11:34): Well, I am about to be very cheeky, and I am about to whinge, because I care about not only regional but all Victorians getting the health care that they need and access to on-time response times, ambulance services and paramedics. I am going to be very cheeky, and I am going to whinge a lot. I also want to take issue with the previous speaker's comments – and I am doing this from memory – that this government always delivers the resources that are needed. Well, there is a whole lot of evidence to say otherwise, and I am about to read that into *Hansard*. Indeed the previous speaker commented that we are meddling with things. We are shining a light on what everyday Victorians experience. They are highly concerned, and it shows in the data, that our ambulance system is overwhelmed, underfunded, under-resourced and on its knees. Let me give some context for that.

The inquiry of the Legal and Social Issues Committee – one of the committees that I am not on – was a very important inquiry. I thank Ms Crozier for bringing it forward in this house, for taking it on and observing the importance of it and bringing it through.

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Melina BATH: Correct – the government voted against it: 'Nothing to see here. Stop meddling, upper house MPs; stop meddling in the welfare of our state.' Response times came out through that inquiry. One of the key issues was worsening ambulance response times. Ambulance Victoria repeatedly failed to meet its benchmark of 15 minutes for urgent code 1 cases, in some cases – and here they come – recording response times as low as 55 per cent against a target of 85 per cent.

Let me go to my area, which I am very passionate about, and my constituents, and let us look at the performance report that comes from the first quarter of 2025–26. That covers July to September of last year. Let us look at the code 1 response times. In Baw Baw, only 57.3 per cent of call-outs were met within code 1 response times – the average response time was 16 minutes and 25 seconds – against a statewide benchmark of an 85 per cent acceptable rating. Bass Coast met code 1s within 15 minutes 57.8 per cent of the time – average response time was 16 minutes and 27 seconds. Seconds matter when somebody is lying on the floor of their kitchen having a cardiac arrest. Seconds matter if you have broken your hip. I remember a case in Latrobe Valley: they were lying on the road, and they had to wait for a very long time with an injury. In relation to Latrobe City, code 1s were met 71 per cent of the time.

A member interjected.

Melina BATH: Yes, that is below the target. In South Gippsland, 48 per cent – average response time 18 minutes; Wellington, 17 minutes and 45 seconds; Cardinia, 17 minutes; and East Gippsland shire, 20 minutes on average. I can tell you some stories from East Gippsland that are just heartbreaking, stories of families. There were occasions – more than one – when a family member perished because they were waiting for ambulances to turn up.

They cannot manufacture from what is not there. It is the resources that are not there – the lack of MICA coverage in Eastern Victoria Region. Gippsland paramedics have raised deep concern, and they do all the time, about the gaps in this MICA paramedic support. East of Morwell during night shifts there is just not the coverage. We see ambulance ramping in Gippsland hospitals – Bairnsdale and Latrobe Valley. Recently my colleague Martin Cameron and I just happened to walk past the emergency centre at the Latrobe Valley regional hospital, and it was ramped. All of the bays had completely filled with ambulances waiting for the ED to be able to triage them. That is a consideration all its own. We value our regional hospitals so much, but they are chronically under pressure and often

underfunded. And we know that they need letters of comfort to keep them going. These are the concerns that face regional people. These are the things that I am going to whinge about because these are the facts that face our people with the government's mismanagement after 11 years in executive government controlling this stuff.

We also know that paramedics are under-resourced, burnt out and their equipment is often outdated. Again, the further you go into the regions, many paramedics, if you look at their age demographic, are ageing. It is hard to get young paramedics to the regions, particularly when they hear about the workload and the stress that is there. It is a stressful workplace. People go into it fully wide open, understanding that this is a stressful, dynamic career, and we thank those people for doing it. But if they are going to feel under-resourced and undervalued by this government, then it is no wonder that the attrition rate for regional paramedics is quite high. Many of those paramedics are our friends down the street and are respected so much. Sometimes they have multiple family presentations on the sporting field or wherever, and we value and trust them. Indeed they are vital to our wellbeing.

The chronic mismanagement is in this report that was delivered last year. Let us go to some other very sad points in that report. Let us talk about the cultural dysfunction and workplace misconduct. We know that the inquiry uncovered bullying, harassment and intimidation. This is a real shame. Good leadership comes from executive government, from the minister down through the department. Good leadership provides confidence and it provides direction, and we need to see a stamping out of bullying, harassment and intimidation. They have no place in our systems, particularly where you have vulnerable people in the workplace. We see burnt out paramedics. We see 18-hour shifts, outdated equipment and excessive administrative burdens. We all see that, particularly in this space. As Ms Crozier just said, what is the government doing on the sideline there? It is taking away a very valuable service that has been around for many years in terms of VicHealth.

In conclusion, I just want to go to a couple of points in relation to this government. This government's budget is an ever-broadening black hole. We hear often that we are broke. Victoria receives taxes. It receives multibillions of dollars in taxes. It is the direction that this government takes that is putting us into an ever-widening black hole. It wasted \$600 million not to deliver something that could have provided our state with confidence, increased tourism and economic drive in the Commonwealth Games. It wasted that. That is one of the committees that I was on. It wasted money on machete bins that we know our local people could have potentially made for a lot less. It was a joke out in the regions, these machete bins for honest people to put their machetes in, not for the crooks and the thugs. Leasing pot plants – I mean, for goodness sake. This government should take a good hard look at itself and really start to implement the recommendations from this inquiry.

I thank Ms Crozier for again relentlessly driving the issues that are important. She has been whingeing, because we are whingeing on behalf of Victorians. We are whingeing on behalf of the real issues that matter. They are not pot plants. They are not burgeoning blowouts. We are standing up for all Victorians. I will continue to whinge, because the whingeing matters to these people and our people.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:44): I am also pleased to rise and at the outset wish to firmly acknowledge, with my gratitude, our wonderful paramedics and the incredible work that they do. Like many people in this place, I know several paramedics myself and really appreciate the opportunity to hear from them about the good, the bad, the issues and what needs to be fixed in the ambulance service. That is something that I very much greatly appreciate, and it is important to acknowledge that.

There are a number of points in this that I do wish to come to, but I think one of the points that Mr McIntosh and I believe Ms Ermacora as well made was acknowledging that since we came into office – and yes, it has been a long time since the Liberals were in office, and there is probably a reason for that – in the last 12 years there has been a 50 per cent increase in the on-road paramedics and on-road staff working in Ambulance Victoria. There is a considerable investment – I will come back to some other things later if I have the time – but there are some very important points I want to make on

that. We have continued and we will continue to make the investments to support our paramedics and the extremely vital work that they do. In my own electorate just a couple of years ago we opened the new Clyde North ambulance branch, which has already been put to great use and is well utilised by Ambulance Victoria and by that local community as well. It is very good to see that investment flowing through into those better health outcomes for the community.

We also saw in the most recent state budget more significant investment in the ambulance service. This was raised and received as evidence in the Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry. I know that the non-government members were keen to not highlight this, which comes to my point that the government members of the inquiry were absolutely prepared to look at the issues, absolutely prepared to dive into them and see what is wrong. We want to so we can make things better. But the attitude of some members to dismiss completely out of hand the investments that have and are being made does that whole process a disservice.

I note that the government members in a minority report were very, very conscious that, whilst we completely acknowledge, for example, the cultural issues that have existed in Ambulance Victoria management for some time, we also acknowledge that there are a number of people working in that organisation who have been working their butts off, frankly, to drive that organisational change. The way in which Ms Crozier has framed this motion and the very first few words in her motion again undermine the work of those people in the organisation who are trying to make that change and see that change happen. We should be acknowledging the green shoots where they are and providing support to those in the ambulance service who are driving the changes that we are seeing. For example, as we saw in finding 35 of the report, we are seeing that Ambulance Victoria consistently meets its performance targets for high-quality and safe care, including in the metrics of transport performance, cardiac survival and patient experience. We know we have one of the strongest cardiac responses in the world both from our health service and the hospital system more broadly and in very large part from the incredible work that our paramedics do.

It is in that spirit that I wish to highlight that in the most recent state budget we did see significant investment to continue to improve the service, including in extending four stations across regional Victoria to 24-hour operation, at Cobram, Mansfield, Yarrawonga and – I am surprised that Ms Bath did not want to mention this – in Korumburra as well, very good investments. Also there is the ongoing continuation of a program converting single crews to dual crews in 15 units across the state and four new rural peak period units to ensure for all parts of Victoria, particularly as we see from these examples in regional Victoria, where some of those gaps have been more evident, that we are making that investment.

As others have said on this side, the operational decisions of Ambulance Victoria are not playthings for government to tinker with, just as it is not for police or for any of our other emergency services. Political control of an organisation like that is not a good road to be going down. We are providing Ambulance Victoria with the investments and with the supports so that they can do their job. On that, I would also note that another large topic of conversation in the inquiry was in relation to and touched again on staff culture. Many of those issues stemmed from rostering practices, from a number of issues with payroll and in particular from end-of-shift management practices. As part of the new enterprise agreement that we now have in place, we have seen reforms to those end-of-shift management practices. These are very early figures, but we want to see that progress continue. The early figures show that for those staff who are taking up that option to not have their shifts extended when there are other cases, 89 per cent of the time that is able to be honoured within the hour. Providing that staff welfare and that staff wellbeing and that stability around rostering is something that will very much contribute to improved morale and improved health outcomes by supporting our paramedics to do the work that they do best so that they can support Victorians.

Ms Crozier also made some comments referring to the election this year and saying that she hopes that the Liberals will win. I am sure we all felt what can only be described as a collective shiver down the spines of paramedics across this state, because they remember what happened the last time

Ms Crozier's colleagues were in power. It was Mr Davis, who sits over there and who is still in this place, who was in charge. He was the Minister for Health at that time, the same minister that drove ambulance workers and paramedics in this state to despair and to strike, and he then attacked them. He attacked them. He called paramedics militant thugs, and for that he apparently was not reprimanded. He is still –

Members interjecting.

Michael GALEA: I am glad to hear, Ms Crozier, that you disown the comments of Mr Davis. I hope that you condemn those comments in your closing remarks. You should condemn those remarks, because they are disgusting things to say about people that do incredible life-saving work. I will take your condemnation of Mr Davis's comments, and I hope you reiterate that when you have an opportunity to respond to this debate. I know at the last election when you put forward some policies you could not get a single health worker to stand with you. But if you are in that space again, I certainly hope that you will treat our paramedics with far greater respect than Mr Davis ever did, because they deserve that, and they remember exactly what it was like under the last Liberal government, when they had a government that reviled them. They deserve better than that.

I am curious about some of the other tactics that have been deployed. Mr McGowan always has a creative approach to social media posts, and it would be great if he was in the chamber at the moment to perhaps explain going around to an ambulance branch, knocking on the door and then doing a video complaining about those paramedics not being in there. Frankly it is an insult to those paramedics, because he should know all too well that they are out on jobs. They are out doing their work. I do not know what his approach to this is, but why would you be expecting people to be just sitting around waiting for things to happen? That is not how ambulance paramedics work. It is not how firefighters work. It is not how police work. Their role is to be out in the community responding. We saw a number of comments from paramedics on that post, pointing that out to him. I know from speaking to several people that paramedics and people – as you quoted before, Ms Crozier – in the union were very upset about that post and the way it portrayed paramedics, because they are out doing that hard work and going around and knocking on the door and filming it for a social media post does them a complete disservice.

There are, as Mr Batchelor went into some detail on, many other things that we are doing to support the broader health system and support, by connection, ambulance services in this state. In the inquiry we heard evidence about the Victorian Virtual Emergency Department, which is working with Ambulance Victoria in triaging in many cases and improving those triaging processes. We had some really great commentary from the experts who set the system up in Victoria. The Liberal members were asking those experts if they had ever heard of a VED in operation anywhere in the world – and it is happening here; they set it up in Victoria – but aside from that we were glad that the Liberal members could learn from that.

I note that Liberal members have been out helping me to promote the new Cranbourne Community Hospital, a terrific day hospital, a terrific community hospital in the electorate, and promoting the urgent care clinic as well in Narre Warren. Urgent care clinics were an initiative of the Labor government in Victoria, along with the New South Wales government at the time. Initiatives to improve our health care system will continue to expand.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (11:55): Quite an incredible rant from Mr Galea, who spoke a lot about different things but completely sidestepped the substance of this motion. I rise to proudly support Ms Crozier's motion – one that I was amazed that Ms Ermacora used as an opportunity to speak about climate change and to say that we were cheeky to whinge. Now, let me point out what she thinks we are cheeky to whinge about. The latest publicly available data from the Victorian Agency for Health Information shows a continued failure to meet ambulance response targets. That is not whinging, to bring that up. Another part that she said was whinging: ambulances, including mobile intensive care units, were not staffed during heatwave conditions due to budget shortfalls.

Unbelievable to say that is whinging. Another point that she said was whinging: according to the ambulance union, from Friday 23 January to Thursday 29 January 2026 stations with unstaffed ambulances included – there is a whole heap that I could list here, but I am just going to list the ones that are in my area, because that is what I am here to talk about – Belgrave, Mount Martha, Rosebud and Sorrento.

I think we cannot trivialise or minimise the substance of this motion, because it is incredibly important. It is twofold really – well, it is multifaceted, but I am going to talk about two aspects of it. The first one is, obviously, if you live in Belgrave, Mount Martha, Rosebud or Sorrento, during those shifts you could not get an ambulance.

Tom McIntosh interjected.

Renee HEATH: Mr McIntosh just said Rosebud has got the best response times in the state – not when it is not staffed due to budget shortfalls. The other thing I want to point out is that the government, when they talk to motions like this, somehow try to pit us against ambulance workers, healthcare workers and paramedics. I want to make it clear: we are placing the failure of this system squarely at the feet of the government, because it is you who are unable to pay for these. We have incredible healthcare workers, we have incredible paramedics. That is exactly what the substance of this motion is about, because there are paramedics who either are unable to work due to your budget shortfalls or, if they are able to work, have sometimes been sent out on their own without a support person, without another paramedic. Ms Ermacora said – and I thought it was actually something that was true, was good – ‘If you cannot maintain your own safety, you cannot help others.’ It is very hard to maintain your own safety when you are sent out on your own into these situations. Not only that, you are not able to transfer patients.

This is what I want to talk about. I want to talk about the people in my area in Belgrave, in Mount Martha, in Rosebud, in Sorrento. Not only that, I have spoken about parents in Pakenham –

Tom McIntosh: Who is the local member in Sorrento?

Renee HEATH: At least he lives in his area, Mr McIntosh. We have spoken about people that have not been able to get an ambulance, so they have had to –

Members interjecting.

Renee HEATH: It is actually quite insulting when I am hearing people laughing about such a serious issue, but anyway. The parents in Pakenham had to drive their own child in a critical condition to a hospital because they could not get an ambulance. That is shocking, and that is the fault of your government. There is the lady who I spoke about recently who had such severe delays that they led to complications.

Efficient emergency services and an efficient ambulance service is needed to take pressure off a healthcare system that is on the brink. I just want to be clear, in the minute that I have left before question time, that you can twist and you can turn this all you want, but the substance of this motion says this: we are on the side of paramedics, we are on the side of Victorians who want to get an ambulance and this is your failure because you have not been able to manage money, and because of that, every Victorian is suffering.

Business interrupted pursuant to sessional orders.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Waste and recycling management

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:00): (1197) My question is for the Minister for Environment, represented in this place by the Minister for Skills and TAFE.

Jaclyn Symes: I’ll take it.

Rachel PAYNE: Thank you, Treasurer. The cap on the amount of waste that can be heat-treated to generate energy is currently set at 2.5 million tonnes per annum. The Victorian government website on waste to energy states seven licences have been issued totalling 2.35 million tonnes, but this figure excludes existing operator licences for facilities in Maryvale, Dandenong, Laverton and Coolaroo, totalling hundreds of thousands of additional tonnes of waste. We understand that some of the existing operators may be seeking to expand their licence to allow them to burn even more waste. Can the minister advise what the total amount of waste licence for burning in Victoria actually is?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:01): I thank Ms Payne for her question and her interest in this matter, and the Minister for Environment will be able to respond with information about licences in relation to your question.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:01): I thank the Treasurer for referring that on. By way of supplementary, the annual cap on the amount of waste that can be burnt has increased from 1 million tonnes to 2.5 million tonnes – a 150 per cent increase in just a handful of years. Should this rate continue, it will soon outpace the 4.5 million tonnes of residual waste that is currently going to landfill in Victoria, but agreements with these operators require a certain amount of waste to be sent to these facilities. So my question is: when will Victoria start importing waste from across Australia to burn in our backyards?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:02): I will not bite. I will pass that on to the Minister for Environment, who may.

Country Fire Authority

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:02): (1198) My question is to the Treasurer. Yesterday we asked the Treasurer about CFA grant funding, and she repeatedly said we need to look at the totality of income, not just grant income. Well, we did. According to CFA annual reports, total income fell from \$456.3 million in 2020–21 to \$451 million in 2023–24, over the period when the Premier and Treasurer said it had increased every year. So again we ask: will she acknowledge that CFA total income of \$451 million in 2023–24 was less than \$456.3 million?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:03): I thank Mrs McArthur for her question and her ongoing interest in the government's commitment to appropriate funding for the CFA. Mrs McArthur, I encourage you to look at the totality of funding – so every line item, as opposed to cherry-picking one single line item each time you phrase your questions – because if you look at the entire balance sheet plus some of the additional investments that I pointed to yesterday, such as VESEP, I can assure you that funding for the CFA has not reduced as you have alleged. I can continue to point you to the facts; I cannot force you to understand them.

Melina Bath: That will go down well in the regions.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:04): Yes, all those firefighters will look forward to hearing that. Treasurer, yesterday we asked you about CFA grant funding, and you said we need to look at page 74 of the 2024–25 annual report. So we did, and page 74 and its equivalents in earlier annual reports confirmed the total income figures referred to in the substantive question and also that the CFA ran a deficit in 2024–25 and 2023–24. Why is the CFA running a deficit?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:04): Mrs McArthur, we have had numerous questions, and I have endeavoured to respond to you as appropriate. You have got the annual report, you have read the annual report and you have interpreted the annual report in a way that I disagree with. In relation to

the specific questions that you ask about CFA, I think I have been generous, but I will direct your further questions to the Minister for Emergency Services.

Ministers statements: TAFE sector

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:05): Today I rise to remind the chamber of the Labor government's commitment to TAFE. We are delivering a TAFE legacy in this state that can never be unwound. The Education and Training Reform Amendment (Free TAFE Guarantee) Bill 2026, introduced today, enshrines in law TAFE at the centre of our vocational training system. We are mandating that no less than 70 per cent of skills funding must go to TAFE as the high-quality public training provider valued by all Victorians, and we are enshrining in law the free TAFE program for all time. When this bill passes, Victorians will have guaranteed access to free TAFE programs. To remove this guarantee will require an act of Parliament. I wish to assure Victorians that no alternative government would seek to remove this guaranteed access to free TAFE. Sadly, I simply cannot give these assurances. But what I can assure Victorians is that with Labor MPs in this place on this side of the chamber, any vote to remove free TAFE will never pass. This bill is a vote for TAFE, it is a vote for free TAFE, it is a vote for TAFE teachers and it certainly is a vote for TAFE students. This will deliver the skilled workers we need to grow the economy. This will help Victorians get reliable, well-paying jobs that lead to rewarding careers. It is about the core value of access to public education in this state. The choice is clear. I am the minister for TAFE, and I serve in a government that will safeguard TAFE and free TAFE for all generations. Now, I want to know what others will do when this bill comes to the house. Will they be strong enough to support free TAFE and free public education in this state?

Animal research

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (12:07): (1199) My question is for the minister representing the Minister for Agriculture. The latest statistics on animal testing in Victoria have just been released, and they reveal that nearly 1.5 million animals were researched and tested on in Victoria in the last reporting year. Animal testing is notoriously secretive and occurs behind closed doors and in facilities that many Victorians would not even know exist. While reporting of data is welcome, it is consistently vague at best and exact species are not always listed. Curiously, there is also a column with numbers for 'exotic zoo' mammals but without any individual species listed. According to this data, 64 so-called 'exotic zoo' mammals were tested on, in addition to 8765 native mammals and 792 animals described purely as 'other domestic' animals. Can the minister please advise what exactly an 'exotic zoo mammal' is and what tests were undertaken on them?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:08): I thank Ms Purcell for her question and her ongoing interest in terms of animal welfare. I will refer this matter to the Minister for Agriculture for her response.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (12:08): Thank you, Minister, for referring that on. This data highlighted that very few species were spared from the horrors of animal testing in Victoria. In addition to the almost 420,000 mice and more than 311,000 native birds, species such as dogs, cats, wombats, echidnas and koalas were tested on, so too were dolphins, whales, seals, turtles and even tortoises. Can the minister please outline what tests were undertaken on whales, dolphins and seals and why?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:09): Again, I thank Ms Purcell for her supplementary question, which will be forwarded on to the Minister for Agriculture for a response.

Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:09): (1200) My question is to the Treasurer. Victorian SES units in Portland, Warrnambool, Heywood and Dartmoor have been issued council rates notices that include the government's new ESVF levy. This means emergency services units themselves are

being taxed to fund emergency services, punishing the very people who step up when disaster strikes. The emergency services minister, when asked about this, washed her hands of it, saying that questions regarding exemptions from the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund should be referred to the Treasurer. So, Treasurer, why is this government taxing SES units at all and will you now exempt them from this levy?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:10): I thank Mrs McArthur for her question in relation to the ESVF. Indeed the ESVF is all about ensuring that funding be expanded to all emergency services organisations that the legislation captures, including the SES for the first time. This is in response to –

Bev McArthur: Why should they pay the levy?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, in relation to the levy you might be familiar with the fire services levy, and there has been no change in relation to how that is applied in relation to units. Those organisations and those facilities have always received the same treatment previously as they do now. But what we have done for the first time, in recognition of the amazing work of our volunteers, is provide exemptions and rebates for volunteers to apply for under the rebate system. I would encourage anybody who has active volunteers in their electorates to encourage them to apply, because I would like to see greater take-up. The SES provides units with a subsidy to cover their bills, and this was increased in this year's budget. In relation to the CFA- and SES-owned buildings, they are under the public benefit category, which is a lesser rate, in recognition of the public purpose that they provide to the community.

As I said, I am also advised that in some cases there are councils that can begin charging emergency services at the public benefit rate themselves in relation to buildings that they own, so this is also something that I would encourage people to revisit. I do have advice and I am aware that there may be isolated cases where a unit has received a land classification that is not public benefit, and we are awaiting further advice in regard to that. If that is what your question is specifically related to – a particular case where they have not received the correct rate – please bring that to my attention, because we have one or two examples that we are rectifying.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:12): The Portland SES unit rang both the Glenelg council and the government's own ESVF hotline and was told that SES units and other not-for-profit emergency services are not exempt and cannot apply for an exemption. So is it government policy for emergency services to pay this tax?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:13): Mrs McArthur, I went through in some detail the application of the ESVF, which is replicated –

Bev McArthur interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, I explained that there are various ownerships of brigade and unit facilities. On the whole they should be receiving the public purpose rate, which is a lower rate. You are exempt on your farm or your primary place of residence through a rebate if you are a volunteer. There has been no change from the fire services property levy to the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund, except for increased funding to the SES to help with any of those bills that they receive as landowners or land operators. In relation to the specific example of Portland, I will follow up and get them clarity on their situation, but I think I have given you all of –

Bev McArthur interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, I explained to you the difference between an exemption and the applicable rate.

Ministers statements: housing

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:14): Last week we announced the next phase of the high-rise towers redevelopment program following a day of intensive engagement with tower residents. I was really pleased to visit the Layfield Court tower with the member for Albert Park Nina Taylor and speak directly with residents about what this program means for them. Over the coming weeks and the coming months I will continue to meet with residents and to listen to them about the issues that are most important to them. I will do that just like I did last year alongside Homes Victoria – to have a cup of tea with them, to talk through their questions, to hear their feedback and to take action items on board to come back to them with. Let us be really clear: last week represented just the start of a careful engagement process. Over the coming months and years we will continue to engage with tower residents, including older residents, to understand where they would like to live and how we can best support their needs – that they can move to the same building and even the same floor as their neighbours, that they have a right of return to the redeveloped towers if they want to go back when the new homes have been built, that their rent settings will stay the same when they move and that Homes Victoria will arrange movers and pay for their relocation costs. And we will be launching the Hand in Hand community support program, a buddy system to enable current residents to connect with others who have already moved.

Homes Victoria will continue to engage really closely with residents over the coming months, together with our community partners, just as we have done to date, and I will continue to engage directly with residents to answer their questions, to hear their concerns and to make sure their feedback is taken into account, just as I have always done. We will also continue to engage with residents across towers that are not being affected by this latest announcement, because we all know that accurate and timely information is of critical importance to this multidecade project as it continues.

Bushfire recovery

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:16): (1201) My question today is for the minister for housing. During the recent bushfires around 340 homes were destroyed. Those homes housed single families, multiple generations and individuals. Exact numbers are hard to calculate, but there could be somewhere in the region of 500 to 1000 people who are homeless and are now forced to live with relatives or in caravans or are housed in hotels. Minister, apart from the grants and funding, what is the government doing to get these people into appropriate and stable housing within their communities while they rebuild their lives?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:17): Thank you, Ms Tyrrell, for that question. The breadth of your question is something that may invite a conversation with a number of ministers across a number of portfolios. Beyond the housing component to bushfire rescue, response and recovery, there are also a number of supports that are available through emergency services, local government, the work across agriculture and of course the partnerships between the Commonwealth and the state government around access to programs, supports and payments available for families and short- and longer term accommodation.

I will, however, perhaps take you through some of the information that we have around Homes Victoria. At this stage we have no known Homes Victoria buildings that have been lost in these bushfires. In terms of the general figures, the update that we have as at last night is there were at least 437 homes that had been destroyed and 28 homes significantly damaged. But numbers are in flux. As you would appreciate, Ms Tyrrell – and Mrs Cleeland in the other place – things are changing on the ground, and local information and intelligence will continue to be of really significant importance, particularly as those condition processes and assessments are ongoing.

We also know that as we continue with the state of disaster, which will remain in place until 8 February across those 18 local government areas and one of the alpine resorts, ongoing support will be of crucial

importance to people. This goes well beyond the housing portfolio, however, so what I am very happy to do – and without setting any precedent under the standing orders – is perhaps arrange for some further information to be provided to you. But I do want to reaffirm our commitment to making sure that the long tail of recovery is at the heart of what is delivered, whether it is crisis accommodation or short- or longer term housing. The work to rebuild communities to assist them with that resilience development, with preparation, is also about making sure that as we contemplate and respond to ever more acute situations of vulnerability to emergency and to disaster – whether it is landslips, whether it is flooding or whether it is fires or droughts – we are in a position to help communities with information and we are in a position across local, state and Commonwealth governments to have those partnerships that meet people in their hour of greatest need. We will continue to do that, including by reference to gathering information on the ground from communities who know best what it is that they have and what it is that they need.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:19): I thank the minister for her answer. The amount of stress and anxiety that fire-affected community members are under right now is immense, from losing not just their homes but also their livelihoods. These communities need stability and reassurance. Can the minister reassure fire-affected community members that they will be housed in a justifiable amount of time?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:20): Ms Tyrrell, that goes again to a question much broader than the housing portfolio. But just to underscore what has been said on many occasions by the Premier, the Minister for Emergency Services, the Minister for Agriculture, the ministers for local government and planning, Commonwealth counterparts and so many people around this chamber in the condolence motion yesterday, we really need to make sure that we have our shoulders to the wheel in the longer term around response, recovery, resilience and rebuilding. This is where housing is a really important part of that work. After the Lismore floods we saw that emergency accommodation was necessary. We also saw that in October 2022, with that flood recovery work across the north and the east, and of course after Black Summer, so we know where the areas of greatest need have been. We continue to gather further intelligence and information about how to do that better. Continuous improvement is all part of better response and adaptation to emergencies and natural disasters, and we will get you some further information on that work.

Economic policy

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:21): (1202) My question is to the Treasurer. In light of the Reserve Bank's interest rate rise yesterday, will the Treasurer confirm whether the government operates an explicit risk limit or target framework governing total short-term funding, outstanding P-notes and Eurocommercial paper and if there is any control over the aggregate floating rate exposure?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:22): I thank Mr Welch for his question. At the outset obviously the impact of a rate increase yesterday will be felt right across households in Victoria. We know that one of the main drivers of cost-of-living impacts is interest rate rises. In relation to the impact on the state budget, Mr Welch, I can assure you that these are taken into consideration. You will see from the budget update, and I reckon I have got a page reference for you somewhere – page 36 – that interest expense estimates assume that the average interest rate on new and refinanced borrowings will increase over time. Of course DTF model these things, and that is taken into account.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:23): No, you are referencing a different kind of debt. This is short-term floating rate debt – so when an interest rate flows through directly and immediately to that debt. The TCV has historically maintained offshore short-term funding as part of its liquidity toolkit. Will the Treasurer explain the rationale for the ECP being unused for at least 10 months in 2025 with expanding domestic P-note exposure over the same period, given that we had

clear SIP market signals in changes to interest rate outlooks? Treasurer, can you explain how exposure to higher domestic rates was assessed and mitigated and whether the decision not to utilise Eurocommercial paper formed part of that assessment?

The PRESIDENT: I believe there was more than one question from Mr Welch, so the Treasurer can pick one.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:24): The overarching answer, Mr Welch, is that TCV manage all of our debt, and as you indicated in relation to the interest rate changes, they are forecast and accounted for in relation to our aggregates. As I said, the budget update certainly identified that we are entering a period of anticipated increased rate rises, and that was indeed factored in. TCV manage all risks arising from exchange rate movements resulting from changes in both short-term interest rates and other factors that impact our bond issuing or indeed our debt management.

Ministers statements: early childhood education and care

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:24): I rise to update the house on the Allan Labor government's new and expanded regulators that are commencing this year. On 1 January this year the Victorian Early Childhood Regulatory Authority, VECRA, commenced operations as a new independent early childhood regulator. VECRA was obviously created following the recommendations of the rapid child safety review. VECRA's number one priority is clear: keeping children safe from harm. Families should be able to trust that their children are safe in quality early childhood services that are fit for purpose, with no exceptions. VECRA's establishment has been supported by our government's initial \$137 million investment. This investment is supporting implementation of a suite of reforms to improve child safety. For VECRA this means an increased number of authorised officers to strengthen on-the-ground regulatory oversight and undertake nation-leading unannounced compliance visits. VECRA will also be embedding the new regulatory powers it has under the national law reforms that we legislated through this Parliament last year. VECRA has already announced a number of enforcement actions it has taken against early childhood education providers.

A large part of our reforms has also been about strengthening how information is shared between regulators such as VECRA and the Social Services Regulator to identify risk. This month, in direct response to the rapid review, we are bringing the working with children check, reportable conduct scheme and child safe standards into the Social Services Regulator. This means the Social Services Regulator will have more information and authority to act swiftly to reassess, refuse, suspend or revoke a working with children check when credible information is received. In addition, a new intelligence and risk assessment unit is being established in the regulator with access to evidence-based tools to assess risk and ensure consistent and robust decision-making. Further enhancements are coming into effect, including mandatory child safety training and testing for working with children check applicants, and employers and volunteer organisations will be required to notify the regulator when they engage a working with children check holder. This investment in our regulators sends a clear message: child safety is our government's highest priority.

Economic policy

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:26): (1203) My question today is to the Treasurer. We have just seen the RBA raise the cash rate, which is flowing on to interest rate rises for mortgage holders and likely rent increases for many renters. Raising the cash rate is a blunt tool. It squeezes people and forces them to spend less, and I say that noting that there are other interventions that can be used to keep inflation under control that do not target those already having a hard time – the hardest. Treasurer, in your assessment, what is the state's role in tackling rising inflation?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:27): I thank Mr Puglielli for his question. Indeed it has certainly been

occupying my thinking time in the lead-up to what was anticipated, unfortunately, and came true yesterday. I know all too well that this is one of the biggest impacts on household budgets, and I know families are recalibrating their household budgets as a result.

In relation to the state government levers, there are a number of things that we can do, and in particular it is why we are a government that is so committed to supporting cost-of-living relief, whether it is through free public transport for young people or eligible Victorians on power saving bonuses. The way I look at it is cost-of-living relief is one avenue. There are supply-side fixes, so investing in renewable energies and keeping bills down and the like, and housing and rent – increasing the supply of affordable housing and regulating the rental market to cushion some of the areas that you indicated and very much building more houses. The housing minister is giving me a prompt. Building more houses and increasing supply has a softening effect on inflation.

The economic measures that we should take, and this is something that you will hear me talking about very regularly, are about financial, fiscal management – responsible management. A five-step plan is particularly important. Particularly, growing the economy and reducing the state debt as a proportion of the economy has benefits for Victoria's inflation pressures as well. The other lever is addressing labour shortages, so reducing wage-driven inflation pressures – investing in those areas where there are job shortages and staff shortages and making sure we are doing that. I would point to the fact that in Victoria we have around a 3.1 per cent inflation rate, as opposed to Queensland, where it is 5.8. The sweet spot is between two and three, so we have got work to do, but we are in a better position than some others.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:29): Treasurer, will government policies going into the upcoming state election increase inflation further?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:29): Without pre-empting some budget announcements, without pre-empting election commitments, we are a government that is focused on supporting Victorian families. Cost of living is the number one issue, and you can be assured that that will be a priority of ours. We will invest in frontline services to take the pressure off certain families, as opposed to perhaps the alternative, which has an \$11.1 billion black hole, which will only result in cuts to frontline services.

Vocational education and training

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:30): (1204) My question is for the minister for training and skills. Under the Allan Labor government's policy to cut funding to registered training organisations during the skills shortage, Training & Quality Management Services – a meat-processing, smallgoods and food safety compliance training organisation of 27 years – had their 2026 funding placements cut by more than 50 per cent just before Christmas. That is despite successfully supporting and training a large number of workers from vulnerable and CALD communities, including migrants and refugees. Why is it the Labor government policy to cut training without notice for organisations like Training & Quality Management Services, harming the very people from vulnerable and CALD communities that need access to these services?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:31): Again, this is a question about the Skills First contract arrangements that the department has with providers. The department is informed by the Victorian Skills Authority, which is the umbrella for the industry consultations that occur. There are a number of industry advisory groups that are connected to the Victorian Skills Authority. It is then coupled with data that is collected in the state but also with regard to what is happening nationally. From there it is determined how the Skills First moneys are allocated. The key consideration in all of this is to ensure that the contracts are consistent with government priorities, and that is exactly what has happened. If there are issues that a particular company has or that an industry has, I will repeat what I have said before: please make contact with the Victorian Skills Authority so that there can be a conversation about what has happened in the first

place, so that we can have established facts connected to whatever the issue may be and then there can be also a conversation to take the issue forward.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:33): Well, it is hard to have a conversation when you do not get any notice of the change. The consequence for this vulnerable cohort of workers is they will lose training access to safe knife and machinery use, WHS requirements, hygiene and allergen controls, food safety standards and product specifications, which may impact their ability to retain their job and increases their risk of injury at work. Will the minister commit to reversing these harsh training cuts?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:33): I do not know which assertion to tackle first, because that was a question full of absolute assertions. Again, I implore the member to properly advise the constituent or the organisation that he is talking with to contact the Victorian Skills Authority and to talk through the issues. The fact of the matter is that what we are delivering is government priorities, and this is government-subsidised training on top of the free TAFE program that this government provides. We are very much interested in making sure that CALD individuals and cohorts are very much part of our program, and that is why we have seen record numbers of people from CALD backgrounds participating in the free TAFE program. So please, can I implore you, in terms of the genuine nature of this issue, if it is to be genuinely dealt with then you need to genuinely make contact with the Victorian Skills Authority and the industry advisory group that advises the VSA.

Ministers statements: ADHD services

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence) (12:34): I rise to update the house on further reforms to make it easier and cheaper for Victorians to get care for ADHD. I was pleased to join the Premier and the Minister for Health this morning to announce changes to enable Victorians with ADHD to obtain a one-off emergency prescription of their ADHD medication through the Victorian Virtual Emergency Department. We know that managing living with ADHD is hard. Trying to quickly replace a lost, expired or depleted prescription can make it even harder, and suddenly stopping your ADHD medication can have significant ramifications for your life. These changes are about providing a free, safe and accessible option to obtain a prescription for ADHD in an emergency situation, such as where a prescription has run out or someone cannot get to see their regular doctor or psychiatrist. Through the VVED adults and children aged six and over with an existing diagnosis and treatment plan will be able to connect with a doctor via video link. The doctor will verify their current medication and dosage, and they will receive access to clinical support and a one-off prescription of at least 30 days sent directly to their local pharmacy. It does not replace the critical role treating GPs and psychiatrists play, but it provides Victorians with ADHD another pathway. Patients will continue to receive ongoing clinical care and support through their regular clinician, and the VVED will support patients to ensure that this happens. This change will ensure that families are not caught short and help them get the critical ADHD care that they need to support their mental health and tackle the challenges of living with this condition. This is all part of Labor's plan to make health care work better for busy families.

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (12:36): Can I thank Minister Symes, who has committed to get answers to Ms Payne's questions from the Minister for Environment in line with the standing orders. Similarly, I thank Minister Tierney for chasing up Ms Purcell's questions to the Minister for Agriculture.

Gaelle Broad: On a point of order, President, question on notice 2178 remains outstanding from last year.

The PRESIDENT: Could I get a minister to commit to chase that up?

Harriet Shing interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Thank you, there you go.

Constituency questions

Southern Metropolitan Region

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (12:37): (2098) My constituency question is to the Minister for Ports and Freight. My ask is: how is the opening of the new Hampton Pier benefiting residents in the Southern Metropolitan Region? Recently I went down to Sandringham harbour and had a look at the brand new Hampton Pier, which has been rebuilt by the Labor government after the last pier fell into disrepair and became unsafe and was demolished a couple of years ago. It looks fantastic – a massive construction effort to put new concrete and steel covered in timber cladding and a 24-metre pontoon with an adjustable walkway so that it is accessible for all people, including those with prams, who were down there when I was there the other day. It is an excellent new resource for those who like kayaking or paddle boarding or who have got a tender they want to get out on to one of their boats moored in the Sandringham harbour. It is a great way to spend a summer's day. I encourage everyone to get down and check out the new Hampton Pier.

Northern Metropolitan Region

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:38): (2099) My constituency question is to the Attorney-General. Can the Attorney-General explain why the government's amendments to the Criminal Organisations Control Act 2012, which were meant to outlaw the public display of outlaw motorcycle gang insignia, have not been implemented or enforced? The *Herald Sun* recently reported that the Hells Angels have reinstated prominent signage at their Alphington clubhouse, and legal advice reportedly provided to such clubs indicates that no action can be taken until the Attorney-General formally proscribes them in regulation. Well, I think it is about time the Attorney-General formally designated outlaw motorcycle gangs such as the Hells Angels and explained why these gangs currently appear free to display their symbols as if the law has not changed.

Southern Metropolitan Region

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:39): (2100) My question is to the Minister for Public and Active Transport. A constituent has contacted me about the fairness of Victoria's student Myki concessions for people commencing full-time postgrad study. Transport Victoria's published eligibility rules state that postgrad and part-time students cannot get a student concession. I note many other jurisdictions generally provide concessions on full-time tertiary enrolment rather than excluding postgraduate studies. For example, New South Wales offers a tertiary concession on Opal for eligible full-time students in accredited higher education and VET courses. The ACT states tertiary students are eligible for concession fares. WA and SA offer concessions for full-time uni and TAFE students, regardless of whether that is undergraduate or postgraduate. In a cost-of-living crisis, Victoria punishes people who are going on to postgraduate studies despite the significant study placement and travel costs that it takes to do so. Will the minister review the student concession eligibility settings to include full-time postgrad students, and if you will not, why not?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (12:40): (2101) My constituency question is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport as well. Last week I had the pleasure of joining the minister to officially open the Allan Labor government's newest electric bus depot in Preston. This facility features a Victorian-first innovative overhead charging system, which will power up to 58 new zero-emission buses. These modern, quieter and cleaner buses are expected to travel more than 2.8 million kilometres annually in the northern suburbs. Specifically, and significantly, they will reduce our carbon footprint while providing a more comfortable journey for thousands of commuters. As we transition away from the older diesel fleets my constituents in the Northern Metropolitan Region are eager to

use the new buses in their travel. My question to the minister is: what are some of the bus routes across my electorate that will be serviced by the new electric fleet operating out of the Preston depot?

Northern Victoria Region

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (12:41): (2102) My question is to the Minister for Government Services, and I ask: what is being done to ensure regional Victorians have reliable power and mobile coverage? Sue Davies lives in Norong. The only phone service she can get is through Telstra. Sue spent \$2000 on a Telstra booster and aerials just so her family could use their phones inside their home. The phones only work when the booster is on, so if they lose power, they lose phones. They have single-phase power, which often drops out. In January they had a frightening reminder of how dangerous these unreliable services are. The VicEmergency app notified them of a bushfire nearby. Just 16 minutes later the power went out, the phone failed and they could no longer monitor bushfire updates. Mobile black spots continue across so many regional areas, yet we live in an age that relies upon being connected. Sometimes you need cash in shops in Maiden Gully because of the poor coverage. More than 100,000 properties lost power last week amid high electricity demand. Heat-related illnesses kill more Australians than any other natural disaster. Sue's letter states:

Surely having reliable power and mobile ... coverage should be essential services ...

I could not agree more, and I look forward to the minister's response.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:42): (2103) My constituency question is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport. My constituent is a resident of Cranbourne. He is the vice-president of the Casey Residents and Ratepayers Association, who continue to advocate for the Cranbourne train line extension. The densely populated City of Casey is rapidly growing. Existing infrastructure is inadequate and will not support projected growth. The combined population of Clyde and Clyde North is predicted to almost triple by 2031. During peak hour Clyde commuters travel up to 30 minutes to Cranbourne station, where the car park is often overflowing. Infrastructure Victoria projected that weekday passenger boardings at Cranbourne station will double in the next five years. So my constituent asks: will the minister ensure funding for the Cranbourne train line extension?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:43): (2104) My question is for the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. I have had the opportunity to attend a number of multiple community events across my region of late again, and I have been consistently impressed by the dedication of multicultural organisations in supporting their communities and supporting families and social cohesion as well. The Victorian government's Multicultural Capacity Building Program provides important funding to help grassroots organisations grow their services and better meet local community needs, particularly at the neighbourhood level, where support is most impactful. Minister, how will the Multicultural Capacity Building Program support multicultural organisations in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region, and what opportunities are available for local groups to access this funding?

Eastern Victoria Region

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:44): (2105) My constituency question is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport. Recent V/Line timetable changes have delayed the earliest Gippsland morning service. Passengers once arrived at Southern Cross before 7 am, and now they arrive at 6:56 – too late for many jobs and classes. As a result Gippslanders can no longer reach work by 7 am. Tradies, students, apprentices and early shift workers are being locked out. Any role requiring a 7 am metro start is unreachable now by train. What steps is the government taking to urgently restore early Gippsland services so regional commuters can reach work by 7 am?

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:45): (2106) My constituency question today is to the Minister for Health. A constituent from my region has shared the unacceptable wait times that their wife has experienced in seeking medical care for debilitating endometriosis and chronic pelvic pain – public waitlists of over a year, 7 hours in an emergency department with pain so severe that she could not work, and after being seen she is often just given pain relief and discharged. Minister, will you increase public gynaecology and endometriosis services and theatre lists for public hospitals in North-Eastern Metro and across the state, as well as improve multidisciplinary pelvic pain pathways for people in my region so that they are not too often forced to attend emergency departments. As was highlighted in the inquiry into women's pain, there are still major gaps in access to appropriate care for endometriosis and pelvic pain. Minister, please expand gynaecology and endometriosis services so that people in my region and across Victoria can have their conditions treated promptly and thoroughly.

Southern Metropolitan Region

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:46): (2107) My constituency question is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport, and I want to start by commending the government and the minister for all the work they have done to reduce pressures on families. The introduction of the youth Myki concession will provide real and practical savings for families across the state. In my community in Southern Metropolitan there are many families who are facing ongoing cost-of-living challenges that stem from rent, groceries and transport as continued costs. This action to make public transport free for those under 18 allows for those families who rely on public transport for children commuting to school to take the added cost off their plate. My question to the minister is: how much will families in my community save with the youth Myki concession making it free for under-18-year-olds to travel?

Eastern Victoria Region

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:47): (2108) My question is to the Minister for Disability. The state disability subsidy for supported independent living group homes ended last year, and it disrupted care, reducing staffing and putting participants and their families at risk and in a state of high concern. Homes are at risk and participants are concerned that they will be evicted. This impacts homes in Bass Coast, in Wonthaggi; East Gippsland, in Maffra, Orbost and Bairnsdale; South Gippsland, in Sale; Latrobe, in Moe and Morwell; and Baw Baw, in Warragul. The minister has in the past cited a lack of communication with the federal government and negotiations with the federal government. Well, January has come and gone, and I ask the minister: have you now engaged with your Commonwealth counterpart and what will you do to sort out this dire issue to ensure that vulnerable people with disability in my electorate are not left without homes? They need secure homes and secure futures.

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:48): (2109) My question is for the Minister for Education. Will the minister give Wodonga Primary School the courtesy of meeting with school council representatives so they can put their case directly to the minister for retaining their modular buildings which are scheduled for removal in April? Two months ago I asked the minister to intervene to prevent the removal of two modular buildings from Wodonga Primary School which are crucial to inclusive and accessible teaching spaces. The minister has now passed the buck and tried to avoid responsibility by claiming it was the school that selected two temporary modular classrooms for recovery. The school council president has written to me saying the school leadership, the council and parents do not want these buildings removed. They cannot understand why their buildings have to go. Removal of the portables reduces the flexibility of the school and comes at huge cost to the taxpayer when the Labor government already has paddocks full of modular buildings that are not being used.

Southern Metropolitan Region

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:49): (2110) My question is to the Minister for Education. I recently visited Cheltenham East Primary School, which is located in the electorate of Bentleigh and also my electorate of Southern Metropolitan Region. It is a high-performing school that continues to suffer from underfunding and a lack of future planning by the Allan Labor government. I first raised the need for a master plan in 2023, and since then the condition of the school has deteriorated as students, teachers and families miss out on the fit-for-purpose classrooms and modern facilities they deserve. The school relies heavily on its dedicated parents committee to fundraise for necessary repairs and maintenance of school facilities. The main school building, housing 10 classrooms, a science room and offices, was built in 1956 and is in dire need of an urgent upgrade. So I ask: when will the Allan Labor government fund a master plan for Cheltenham East Primary School to provide the school community with certainty for the future?

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:50): (2111) My question for the Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts concerns the Geelong West fire station, where rear access to the site is proposed to be permanently removed and developed into housing. Minister, if the land on McCurdy Road is developed under the Small Sites plan, the station will be landlocked. Developing a small portion of marginal land will cause a loss of access and slow emergency response when every second matters. Fire trucks will have to continue reversing out into oncoming traffic despite the station being a key mustering point for strike team deployment. The site was purpose built for the future acquisition of this land to allow for drive-through rear access. Minister, will you reconsider the development of this block in the Small Sites program, given the serious concerns raised by the Geelong West fire brigade?

Sitting suspended 12:51 pm until 2:02 pm.

Motions**Ambulance services**

Debate resumed.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:02): I rise to make a short contribution on the motion in Ms Crozier's name around Ambulance Victoria. At the outset I want to reiterate the important work that our paramedics do: when we are in times of need, when we are in emergency situations, they are the people that we call and they are the people who are on the frontline dealing with this day to day.

This is what we heard during the inquiry into Ambulance Victoria. As a member of the Legal and Social Issues Committee, we looked at this extensively throughout 2025. The report was delivered in October 2025. The government has until April 2026 to respond to the recommendations that came out of that inquiry. When looking at this motion that is before us today, we do have to allow for that time and that process to take place. It is some of the important work we do in this place. As members of the committee we went through the process to consider all of the evidence, listen to all the experts and the stakeholders, listen to and consult with those that are most impacted by some of those misgivings about Ambulance Victoria who did come forward and did share those experiences with us. I feel it is our role as members of Parliament to allow those due processes to be supported. I emphasise the fact that I think it is important to allow the government time to respond to those recommendations, some of which will be alleviated and also the concerns raised in this motion will be alleviated through that process.

I also note the new CEO of Ambulance Victoria Jordan Embry did come and speak to us during that inquiry process. He was adamant that there are major failings within Ambulance Victoria and adamant that things do need to improve.

He has barely got his feet under the desk. He has been in that role for seven months at my count, and I think it is important for us as MPs to make sure that we are giving him that space to rectify some of those issues, particularly as he came forward as part of that inquiry process and acknowledged that.

Georgie Crozier: How many CEOs? I am not blaming him.

Rachel PAYNE: Exactly, Ms Crozier, I agree that we have seen a multitude of changes in that administration. To just briefly touch on what the inquiry highlighted, it included the challenges that Ambulance Victoria is undergoing, and that was evident throughout that inquiry process. Many of these challenges were acknowledged by the executive and the CEO of Ambulance Victoria. Some of the challenges that we did examine throughout that inquiry process, and particularly where we had a lot of robust discussion and a lot of the workforce coming forward and speaking to us about their experiences, were around staffing and the need to build that workforce. One of the recommendations that came out of that inquiry was for investment in building up that workforce. Workplace culture was also a paramount discussion at the inquiry. We heard about flexible working arrangements and rostering, and this was particularly relevant to those working parents and regional workers and the experiences they shared around wanting to be part of this organisation but not having those flexible working arrangements and those improvements needing to be made. Mental health and wellbeing support was also a discussion that we had time and time again, particularly with those coming forward and sharing their experiences and some of those failings of the workplace culture within Ambulance Victoria. But I do note that one of the recommendations that was made was that Ambulance Victoria develops a culture that achieves operational effectiveness without compromising employee wellbeing.

It was also evident that there needs to be that lived experience from the top down, ensuring that the board of Ambulance Victoria has proportionate representation of paramedicine experience and expertise. Lived experience is paramount, and it really does help in ensuring that the workplace culture within Ambulance Victoria is at its best. We did hear a lot on the reporting of misgivings and failings, and I note that some of that is also included in the motion before us today, including public reporting of ambulance ramping data. A major issue that was paramount and highlighted throughout the inquiry process is this disconnect between where ambos are and where they are most needed, ramping being one of them.

Systems and improvements were something else that was raised. It is evident that the systems that they are currently operating mean that they are not able to provide the best value of service. I feel as though the CEO was adamant that that needed to be improved. Upgrades to digital communications and information technology for ambulances, particularly in regional Victoria, was something that we did discuss as a committee and made recommendations on.

There is also the issue around triage and around codifying and quantifying the triage and urgent call-outs. There were, at the time of the inquiry, many callers into talkback radio and things like that, talking of their experiences where they have called an ambulance and had an urgent call-out because they have had chest pain, but it may not have been a heart attack. It may have been chest pain, but I think in one instance it was someone talking about having an ingrown hair. The way that is captured within the reporting from calling 000 and through to dispatch was something that as a committee we identified needed to have that override power to be able to ensure that ambulances are getting to those who most need it.

Just to finish, I think as someone who was on that inquiry we did really go into great detail about the failings and misgivings around Ambulance Victoria. But there were also some things that we highlighted are operating quite effectively, and that in particular is around service delivery. I just want to finalise my contribution today by emphasising that we saw that Ambulance Victoria consistently meets its performance targets of high-quality service and care and that the metrics of performance were effective in that space.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:10): I want to thank those that have contributed to this debate. It is an important debate that we are having. I take on board some of the comments in support of our paramedics, and I too want to make that point. This is not about them and their work, this is about the government and the failings of the government to be able to support them to do their work. I think that was very evident in some of the shortages that have been highlighted in recent days. Also, as Ms Payne has just alluded to, there was the inquiry I put forward in this house, which the government voted against and did not want to go ahead. You are right, Ms Payne, in terms of the current CEO being very up-front and I think doing his utmost in the circumstances that he has been provided with. I note that he is also very up-front with his members, and I congratulate him on that. I think that is a refreshing look, because as we have had a revolving door of CEOs at Ambulance Victoria (AV) over recent years, we have not had that up-front component.

He said in an internal memo just recently around the shortages of shifts, which this motion goes to, that there had been an ‘oversupply’ of resourcing during the day so they were prioritising overtime for busier night shifts. He also said that budget considerations formed part of that discussion.

Those opposite made a ridiculous assertion about members of Parliament wanting to roster. That is not what this is about. It is not the point, and I think they miss the point about what is going on here. We need all of those shifts to be filled. I have worked night shift. It is absolutely ghastly. I am probably one of the few people in this place that actually know what a night shift is, working through it. You have, Mr Bourman, as a police officer. Others have in various roles. But there are not too many of us that have. It is not easy work to do and it does not suit everyone, but those shifts are incredibly important and they do have to be filled. But you are leaving big gaps in other parts of the system too, and I think that is the point of why I highlighted those shifts that were highlighted by the union. It was not just one or two; the point was that there were multiple stations that were affected, and I found that terribly concerning. That is why I say the problem still exists. A Labor Party MP said we were a bit cheeky to whinge about this. They were the exact words of the Labor MP. I find that incredibly concerning, given the Victorians who have died waiting for an ambulance, their family members who have been so distressed by not being able to get an ambulance and the paramedics who are trying to do their best but are ramped outside hospitals and cannot get to patients. That is the system. That is not AV and that is not paramedics; that is the government, who have failed the system. To say that we are whingeing, I can tell you I will be raising this time and time again till November.

Victorians want change in this state. They are desperate for change in this state because they are sick of the failings. They are sick of the excuses. We see, as I highlighted, the spruiking of providing extra MICA paramedics, but the funding is not there. I got that through an FOI. For the government to come out there and defend their position and say ‘Well, we’re putting in more funding’ – well, they should be. Since we were in power there are a million more Victorians in the state, so of course you should be funding adequately, but you have mismanaged the system and you have not understood what is needed. That is why I find it incredibly disappointing that the government have lost their way in providing proper governance for services and in providing the services that Victorians need, like health, like ambulance services, like education, like law and order, like community safety, like fixing potholes. Things that are impacting everyday Victorians every single day actually matter.

The priorities of this government are all wrong, and we have seen that, and that is why Victorians are crying out for change. I say again to those opposite: I will be highlighting the failures of your government, because there are many. People are dying because of your failures. People are not getting the services and the care and the support that they deserve and need. This motion highlights those failures. It is not about paramedics, it is about the government and their failures.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (15): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Noes (19): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Motion negatived.

Economic policy

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (14:22): I move:

That this house notes:

- (1) the financial position of Victoria has seen the state deliver deficit budgets and massively increasing debt in recent years, with debt scheduled to exceed \$190 billion at the end of the forward estimates;
- (2) that due to financial stress a number of government agencies have required letters of comfort from the government to continue operating as a going concern, including:
 - (a) Museums Victoria;
 - (b) Greater Western Water;
 - (c) Alpine Resorts Victoria;
 - (d) Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority;
 - (e) the Australian Centre for the Moving Image;
 - (f) the Geelong Performing Arts Centre Trust;
 - (g) VicTrack;
 - (h) V/Line;
 - (i) many health services;
- (3) that a number of government statutory authorities and agencies have referred to financial challenges they face or will face –

and I will detail a couple of those in my contribution –

and

- (4) that a number of Treasury advances were provided to agencies outside the normal budget process where the agency required additional funding to remain solvent.

The article by Sumeyya Ilanbey in the *Australian Financial Review* on 29 June picked up on this point of the bailout of a number of government agencies. Whatever you think about the level of government funding of particular agencies – and you can always have a debate about ‘more is needed here, less is needed there’ or a different amount or different shape of funding is needed – what should be common agreement across the chamber is that government agencies should be funded properly. They should have secure funding and they should have funding that is predictable, that enables their boards and the staff of the agency to plan into the future properly in a way that is not weakened by the uncertainty of funding or funding that is sometimes lumpy. But more than that, they need to have a sensible funding pattern and funding that does not undermine the work of the agency but enables proper planning to occur. These are important points.

The Treasurer, in response to my questions about letters of comfort yesterday, admitted that a large number of letters of comfort were used. She said that this had occurred for a longer period, and it is true that letters of comfort have been used for a longer period. There do appear to be rather more at the moment than is traditional. Further to that, the Treasurer also admitted that many of these letters of comfort were signed by her, but it seems clear that not all of them were signed by her. We do not know from the Treasurer whether the ones that are not signed by her are vetted or agreed to by her or her Department of Treasury and Finance, but we do know that a number of agencies are also putting out further information that makes it clear that they are under very significant funding stress. It is true that the state’s financial position has deteriorated massively under the period of this government.

A member: No, it hasn't.

David DAVIS: It sure has. You do not think that the state's debt is a problem? Is that what you are saying? That is probably what you are saying. We know that Labor is not concerned about the financial position of the state. They actually run away with things. They do not properly constrain costs. We know the way Labor have behaved with many of the major projects.

Members interjecting.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): Just a moment. Everyone is going to have their chance in time. We have only just begun. Mr Davis to continue without assistance.

David DAVIS: I am being provoked. I am finding it very hard to resist engagement with the provocation. I just want to point to one important point: more than \$50 billion has been spent by this government on cost overruns on major projects. That is not the cost of the scoped project at the start, that is how much additional funding they are paying at the end. That is a huge amount of money under this government – more than \$50,000 million in cost overruns. It is no wonder the state is under significant stress. It is no wonder the state budget is creaking, because they cannot manage projects, they cannot manage money, and because of their inability to manage these projects, the state budget is in some significant challenge. There is no question about that. A sign of that is the stress that is coming through into agencies with uncertainty in funding and funding that has not been secured for some agencies. It is interesting to point out here – and I am going to quote from the Sumeyya Ilanbey article here directly – that ACMI, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, an important agency centred down in Fed Square, said:

... it was economically dependent on the financial support of the Victorian government "as the recovery and growth of self-generated revenue continues to be materially impacted by the cost growth impacting all its operations and the wider economy".

The agency said it was able to prepare its 2024–25 financial statement on a going concern basis because it had received confirmation from the government it would be given additional funding.

ACMI received \$30.5 million in government grants in the past financial year, but its self-generated revenue of \$6.6 million fell below \$7 million for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic. It finished the year in the red to record an operating deficit of \$4.9 million.

Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority said it received a letter of comfort from the Treasury Department after June 30 for the period up to October 2026, as well as a treasurer's advance of \$6.1 million granted in August 2025.

A treasurer's advance –

as Ms Ilanbey says –

is often used for urgently needed funds that are not listed in the budget, and the Victorian government has faced criticism ...

We have had discussions in this chamber about what is appropriate use of a Treasurer's advance and what is inappropriate use of a Treasurer's advance, and sadly, it seems that the Treasurer is not changing her ways. The use of these –

Jaclyn Symes interjected.

David DAVIS: It is true. Here is the evidence on some of these authorities, where the government are backfilling agencies because either they have not properly funded them at the start or there is some financial challenge at the agency, and the government is using it to backfill that rather than properly setting out the funding year to year across the term. That is what is going on here. No-one has a problem with a Treasurer's advance used for fire or flood or other emergency, or indeed sometimes, as the Treasurer is fond of pointing out, for capital projects that have got scheduled payments and the money is released by the Treasurer.

A member interjected.

David DAVIS: Let us get to all of these, but many of these are not in that category, I am sad to say.

A member interjected.

David DAVIS: No, I am making the point. I understand precisely what the Treasurer is saying, but I also understand that she is using it for a whole range of other purposes as well. The good use of Treasurer's advances, the appropriate use of Treasurer's advances, is sometimes overwhelmed by inappropriate use on other occasions, and that is what we are seeing under this government.

When we looked closely at the solvency support that was provided by government, the Geelong Arts Centre, under 'Economic dependency' at section 1.3 in its annual report, states:

The Trust is dependent on the continued financial support of the State Government and in particular, the DJSIR (Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions) ... in consultation with ... (DTF) has provided confirmation that it will continue to provide the Trust adequate cash flow support to meet its current and future obligations as and when they fall due on the basis of adherence to the agreed principles to operate in financially sustainable way –

they have sought, in effect, a letter of comfort –

On that basis, the financial statements have been prepared on a going concern basis.

It seems to me that that case might not be an actual letter of comfort, but effectively they have sought certain security guarantees because they have been very close to the wind. They have gone to government, and that has enabled them to go forward and prepare their statements with a measure of confidence because the government has given them certain secure guarantees. But those guarantees are only made public by one short paragraph in the papers.

Museums Victoria states under 'Revenue from government and other grants':

Following the lapsing of exhibition renewal capital funding in 2022–23, the combination of base funding and base uplift funding has proven insufficient to meet operational and program delivery requirements. As a result, an additional \$13.723 million of government funding was granted over April, May and June 2025.

This is the sort of top-up that I am talking about, a top-up where the government has had to come in because it has not been properly funded at the start or the arrangements have not been clear at the start or because of some other deficiency in ministerial level governance. They go on to say:

As a State Government entity, Museums Victoria received this solvency support to facilitate essential activity and service levels –

in other words, they would have had to stop providing certain services; that is what they are talking about –

in line with the conditions attached to that funding and to ensure the organisation's ability to trade as a going concern.

I am just using some of these as examples. People will understand that whatever level of funding you think is appropriate, it should be provided in a transparent way that enables the organisation to fund and to work through its challenges and to do that in a predictable way where good governance can come to the fore, not staccato funding, top-up funding of this type, other than in true times of crisis or flood – we understand all of that, but that is not what we are talking about with these.

The State Library of Victoria states under the heading 'Going concern':

As part of the preparation of the financial statements, the Library has undertaken an assessment of its ability to continue as a going concern for the next 12 months. In June 2025, Creative Victoria confirmed the Library's base operational funding of \$54.4 million for the financial year ending 30 June 2026, with forward estimates –

they had to guarantee the forward funding –

indicating continued funding for approximately \$54 million annually through to 2028–2029. The Library will actively work with Creative Victoria and the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions to develop a sustainable operating model –

that means they do not have a sustainable model. That is what that means –

that aligns with government expectations and maintains essential services.

This is the library that planned to close and cut the research librarians, the assistant librarians, at the library. That was their plan. They have pulled back from that now, but they were going to cut the librarians. A library without librarians seems very odd, research librarians in this case. They have sort of forgotten their mission, and we can see that there are clearly funding problems at the library:

Based on this future funding indication the Library's going concern assumption has been deemed to remain valid.

I have just picked those as a number of examples. They are obviously arts-related portfolio ones, but there are others across government as well. You can see that organisations are under real pressure. The government have clamped the screws, they have tightened the screws and made it difficult for organisations to get through on the money that is involved.

Some organisations are going to government and saying, 'We're on the edge of being a going concern here,' and the government has given them some security, some indication of future funding, which has enabled them to say, 'Yes, we're a going concern.' It is not a formal letter of comfort, but it is a comforting engagement of that type. Then we have, of course, all those formal letters of comfort that we have talked about, and the Treasurer was at pains yesterday to try not to give away too much information, but it is clear she signed some of them. Some of them are not signed by her, and we do not know the numbers there. She did not seem to be able to answer about the number of letters that she had signed. I find that extraordinary. I would have thought across government –

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

David DAVIS: No, I did not, actually; I asked her about the financial year that finished in June just gone, and she could not answer that. She was Treasurer for seven months of that period – seven of the 12 months. If she cannot answer questions about seven of the 12 months –

Members interjecting.

David DAVIS: The going concern letters and the letters of comfort had been provided near the end of the year, when Jaclyn Symes was the Treasurer, and she did not know whether she had signed these letters or how many she had signed. I mean, I find that extraordinary. Across government she is responsible for these things. She is responsible for these letters of comfort, and she does not know how many she has signed and she does not know how many have been provided separate from her signing. I say that is a real concern. It was in a financial year when she was Treasurer, and it was when the reports were being finished towards 30 June, when she was Treasurer. Unlike what was just said over there before, she was Treasurer leading up to 30 June, when the reports were being produced. And what does she say? 'Oh, I don't know how many I've signed.' Really? Seriously, a Treasurer who is signing letters of comfort for organisations that are teetering on the edge of being going concerns, and in fact, organisations that have teetered so far that if they do not have a letter of comfort, they would not be going concerns. The board would have to report that they are not going concerns. The board would have to come to the Treasurer and say, 'We've got to close. We've got to freeze. We've got to stop.' If there is no going concern letter, if there is no letter that provides comfort for those board members, they have to act. In good propriety they have to act.

But this Treasurer does not want to face up to the facts and does not want to tell us. We still have not heard how many letters she signed in the financial year just ended. How many letters did this Treasurer sign? Were there dozens? Were there scores? Were there hundreds? We do not know the number, and she appears not to know the number either. And that is before you get to the other letters provided by someone else – presumably the secretary of a department – on which she has not been clear about whether she knows whether they are all going or not, and how many of those. I want to hear how many of those letters there are too.

Then there is another tranche, which is a couple of these organisations I have just used as an example now, where they are teetering on the edge; they do not quite need a formal letter of comfort, but they need some formal statement out of government that says, ‘It’s okay, you are going to be funded, you’re not going to fall over, so you can report that you’re a going concern.’ So that is three layers, and we have not heard the full figures out of this, but the Treasurer is going to have to come clean with the full figures. How many letters of comfort did she sign? How many letters of comfort were signed by secretaries or others in different departments to underpin organisations related to that department as going concerns? All of this is a sign of serious financial stress.

Members interjecting.

David DAVIS: I want to say here that letters of comfort are appropriate on certain occasions, but what we want to hear from the Treasurer is how many she has signed this year, how many have been signed by others and how many of these other agencies are teetering on the edge where the financial position of the entity is problematic. We should also hear how many top-ups have been popped into these agencies in the last two months because they are teetering and they need an injection of funds to make sure they remain going concerns. That is what is going on here. We all know what is going on, and we know that it is wrong.

In conclusion, the state has got a real financial problem. The Treasurer has not managed this well. The Treasurer has not been transparent about this. We want to know the number of letters of comfort she signed. We want to know the number of other letters that were signed by secretaries and others in departments to prop up organisations that would otherwise not be going concerns. We want to also know what has gone on more broadly with these last-minute top-ups that have been put in place, and we want to know, finally, what the situation of those organisations is. Why were they in a position in May and June where their budgets had almost run out and they needed those top-ups? We heard about service levels being impacted unless the top-ups were made. That would make it very transparent – if the library or the museum had to close their doors for a few weeks because they had run out of money. That is what we are talking about. We are talking about running out of money and not having enough money to keep going. They are talking about whether they are a going concern.

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

David DAVIS: You have heard the words.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (14:42): The Liberal Party knows a thing or two about teetering. They are teetering on the edge. They have been through, what is it, six leaders in seven years. Talking about top-ups, I mean, they are at the front of the queue for top-ups.

David Davis: On a point of order, Acting President, this is about letters of comfort. It is not about the Liberal Party. He has not even made an attempt to talk about the motion in question.

Michael Galea: On the point of order, Acting President, Mr Batchelor had not been talking for 15 seconds when Mr Davis put up his point of order. He was responding to you, Mr Davis.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): Mr Batchelor, if we can keep it at least confined to the motion before us, that would be awesome.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Absolutely. All I was doing was responding to the contribution made by Mr Davis and his invocation of ‘teetering’ as a concept relevant to this motion.

I will go to one other element of his motion today, and that is his inability to read the state’s budget papers and his inability to understand the state’s fiscal position. For the benefit of others who might be listening, I will take the house through what the state’s fiscal position actually is, because if you listen to Mr Davis, you may be misled. It is very, very clear. The annual financial report for the state of Victoria for the year 2024–25 tabled in this place in I think October last year showed that we had an operating cash surplus of \$3.2 billion. It is the third year in a row that we have had an operating

cash surplus in the general government sector. The operating cash surplus in the annual financial statement was in fact \$2.6 billion higher than it was in the revised estimates for the 2025–26 budget. The operating result for the general government sector in 2024–25 was \$816 million better than the revised estimates in the 2025–26 forecast and \$1.6 billion better than the result in 2023–24. From one financial year to the other an operating result for the general government sector that was \$1.6 billion better, and this year we are forecasting a net result from transactions that is in surplus. The latest update, which was published in the budget update at the end of last year, shows the revised estimate of that surplus from transactions as being higher than forecast in the budget. We will have to wait and see what happens in the figures that are released in the budget papers in May, but I think there is a pretty clear trajectory.

There is another thing that Mr Davis neglected to mention in his contribution. He did mention what the net debt figures are projected to be, but what he did not say was that the projections on debt are lower than they were in updates prior and that net debt was lower than forecast in the last budget.

They are just some facts that might like to be put on the table if we are wanting to get into a conversation about the state's fiscal position. People can actually go and read for themselves, in black and white, the numbers that are reported in the annual financial report for the state of Victoria for 2024–25, which gives you a full-year picture for the last financial year. The two estimates for the budget for 2025–26 show quite clearly that we are on track to deliver that surplus result, as the third step in this government's fiscal strategy for the state of Victoria we are delivering – each and every one.

This government is not going to take any lessons from the financial incompetence of the Liberal Party or from a person, particularly in the context of this debate, who when he was the Shadow Treasurer could not add up. We are not going to take a word of advice from him and from them about the fiscal position of the state of Victoria and what is necessary to make sure that this government continues to deliver. Because what we do know is that the Liberal Party now have dug themselves into an even bigger problem, an even bigger hole, when it comes to the finances of the state of Victoria, because they have spent the last three years wandering around the state telling anyone who cares to listen that they are going to keep scrapping taxes – I think it is five, maybe six different taxes that they keep going out, day in, day out, and telling people that they are going to get rid of. The problem is that when they go and tell people they are going to get rid of the tax they do not like, what they do not then say is how they are going to fund the services that rely upon it. Because when you go out and say you are going to scrap the tax, what it means is you are going to cut the funding. They have got an \$11.1 billion hole in their projected finances should they ever form government. The only way the Liberal Party is going to make up that revenue hole that they have created is by cutting services, because that is what the Liberal Party does. The Liberal Party cuts frontline services in the state of Victoria. They did it before and they will do it again.

David Davis interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): Order! Mr Davis, if you are going to interject, from your spot, please. And just for the record, interjections are unruly anyway.

Ryan BATCHELOR: They did it before, they cut before, and they will cut again, because that is central to the Liberal Party's DNA. They have dug themselves into a massive hole by parading around the countryside, telling anyone who will listen that they are going to scrap a tax they do not like, but they do not complete the sentence. They are not honest enough with the Victorian people to complete the sentence and say that they are going to cut funds to pay for it. That is the only way that they are going to be able to deliver what they promised. What they promised the Victorian people is to cut the funding. If they want to be serious about coming here and having a debate about the letters of comfort that the Treasurer is providing to various agencies to deal with the routine course of running agencies that often have revenue variations that do not always necessarily accord on a cash flow basis with their expenditure, they should know that a routine and common part of making sure that those agencies do

not have unnecessary cash reserves to hand is that they are very clearly able to be confident, through these letters, that they can meet their obligations as and when they fall due.

If the opposition is serious about wanting letters of comfort, the Liberal Party needs to write a letter of comfort to the Victorian people telling them how they are going to fill the \$11 billion black hole that they are creating in the state's finances by their promises to scrap a range of levies. If they cannot provide that level of comfort to the Victorian people about the cuts to frontline services that they will make if they ever get elected to the government benches in this place, then they are being dishonest with the Victorian people.

If we want to get into a debate about letters of comfort, if we want to get into a debate about the state's fiscal position, the Liberal Party should first start by telling the truth about the state's fiscal position: that we have got a cash surplus and we are projecting and will deliver an operating surplus here in the state of Victoria. They have got to come clean with the people of Victoria and tell us – tell them – what frontline services are on the chopping block to pay for the \$11 billion of lost revenue that sits on their projected fiscal position as a result of the taxes that they have said that they will scrap. If they cannot tell the Victorian people, if they cannot give comfort to the Victorian people about how they are going to pay for their promises, we should not listen to a word they say.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:52): I rise to make a brief contribution on behalf of my Greens colleagues with regard to motion 1234 that the opposition have brought to the chamber today. I have been listening to the debate and do not seek to in any way engage in any kind of mudslinging with regard to management of the state's economy. However, in review of the motion as it is before us, largely I would say it is a reflection of matters of fact with respect to the state's budget. I do not think it is the entire reflection necessarily of the state of Victoria's economy. However, it does list a number of concerning matters that would be of interest to the Victorian people, notably, from the outset, deficit budgets and increasing debt over recent years:

... debt scheduled to exceed \$190 billion at the end of the forward estimates ...

It highlights the financial stress and impacts facing a number of government agencies and statutory authorities and the challenges that they are facing in the current state of Victoria's economy, detailing the required letters of comfort to several agencies operating as a going concern. There is a list that has been provided that Mr Davis has detailed: Museums Victoria, Greater Western Water, Alpine Resorts Victoria, Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority, Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Geelong Performing Arts Centre Trust, VicTrack, V/Line and many health services.

When I look at an institution like the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, having recently attended their exhibition of *Game Worlds*, for example, this is a really important institution in Victoria that sits right at the centre of our cultural map for many parts of these industries. Looking at the incubation of talent that that centre undertakes for early- to mid-career professionals who are looking to break into what is a growing and booming industry, where Victoria really can be and should be a leader on the global stage, where we have seen successes come out of Victoria and our artists and practitioners from this state, we want to know that an institution like that has the funding that it needs in the long term, that sense of security, to deliver those outcomes from now and into the beyond. So Mr Davis I think has spoken to that somewhat in his opening contribution, this idea of security and continuity of funding to important institutions like that for what they provide to people who work within those industries but also more broadly to the Victorian people.

The motion does highlight the challenges facing a number of agencies and authorities, particularly referring to Treasurer's advances being provided to agencies outside normal budget processes where the agency has required that additional funding. This is a tool that is available to government to respond to matters that are facing a particular body or agency at a point in time. However, we have seen – and this has been documented through budget estimates and outcomes processes – the increasing prevalence of Treasurer's advances and the challenges that poses both to us in this place trying to scrutinise government operations and spending but also for transparency and the Victorian people.

There are a range of matters that come up when we see that increasing prevalence of Treasurer's advances. People want to know that there is that stability in the management of funds going to important services, programs and agencies that serve everyone here in the state. And if there is not the transparency that you would receive from regularly acquitted funds through the budget processes, then that can be a cause for concern – that we are not seeing that transparency in how and why funds are being given out, and for what purpose, to various agencies at a point in time.

When we look at budgets for Victoria – and we hear this at budget time in May – budgets are a matter of priorities. So when we look at the reflection of the state's economy that the opposition have brought to the chamber today, we put it in the context of other decisions that the state has made in recent or past budgets, like funding of corporate boxes and the expansion of provision to the grand prix. We look at the continued propping up of the greyhound racing industry in Victoria. We look at allowing the continued expansion of fossil fuels and exploration for fossil fuels in Victorian lands and waters. Decisions like that have ensuing impacts in the long term, both, in the case of fossil fuels, environmentally and economically. These decisions have impacts, and these are priorities that are being expressed by the government. We see at a snapshot some resulting impacts from what has been presented here in the motion before us.

We see recent plans with regard to attempts to axe VicHealth. It effectively creates a false economy, axing an important, world-leading health promotion agency to try to save money in the short term when the long-term impact of removing an agency like that has been well documented in recent weeks – the challenges that poses to preventative health for Victorians. That decision shows the wrong priorities. So when we look at what is before us, the state of affairs for Victoria right now, in the matters that the opposition have brought to the chamber it highlights in a sense the challenges that are facing the state economically right now. And how we respond to these challenges as people in this place from varying parties, backgrounds and communities that we serve is going to be the test of our values, our character and our priorities. It is how we respond to the challenges that are listed here that is going to be key. The Greens will be supporting the motion as it is noting matters of fact. So I thank the opposition for bringing it.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (14:58): I thank Mr Puglielli for his contribution, and I also rise to speak on Mr Davis's excellent motion on letters of comfort. We saw this reported on in the *Australian Financial Review*: the state of Victoria has delivered significant budget deficits that are scheduled to exceed \$190 billion at the end of the forward estimates. We note that the number of agencies that, due to their financial stress, have required letters of comfort includes Museums Victoria, Greater Western Water, Alpine Resorts Victoria, Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority, Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Geelong Performing Arts Centre Trust, VicTrack, V/Line and many, many health services.

I could not help but hear Mr Batchelor speak. He was going on about us going around the state scrapping taxes. That is because we are the party of lower taxes. I am old enough to remember the former Premier, then opposition leader, on the eve of the election saying, 'There will be no increases in taxes under a government I lead' – there would be no increase in taxes. Over 55 new taxes or increased taxes later, where did that promise go? They broke it almost immediately, so they lied their way into office. We know they rorted their way into office through the red shirts, but they lied their way into office because they knew that tax increases were not popular with the Victorian people.

Mr Batchelor is repeating the old same cuts scare campaign, just like the Mediscare campaign of the past. We know that Jess Wilson has already announced a frontline services guarantee. They want to talk about cuts, this from the party who are cutting VicHealth. We have former Labor luminaries like Nicola Roxon and others saying that you people are mad for even considering this. Surely there are some people in the Labor Party thinking that this Treasurer cannot manage the books. Surely there are some people on that side of the chamber who think we should be putting some money into VicHealth instead of the Suburban Rail Loop Authority spending \$200,000 on pot plants, instead of bungling ministers spending \$13 million on machete bins. Maybe we should be putting that money into

VicHealth, into some of our health services that the government has tried and tried and tried again to merge, and they want to talk to us about cuts.

Mr Batchelor was going on about an \$11 billion black hole, which on her first test the Treasurer failed, because she had a massive black hole within her accusation of our black hole by suggesting that we were going to scrap all forms of emergency services taxes rather than reverting to the previous emergency services levy. Rather than scrapping it completely, we want to go back to the previous tax that existed. But the Treasurer is either incompetent or misleading Victorians, which is what she is doing. Mr Batchelor wants to talk to us about black holes. Maybe he did not see the announcement from Ms Shing about the Suburban Rail Loop and their value capture plan. The government now – which was never in the business case, by the way – wants to hypothecate all existing taxes around SRL stations: stamp duty, land tax, you name it. Money, and we are talking billions, that would usually go to consolidated revenue and fund frontline services like our hospitals and our schools across our state is now going to be going towards a rail line from Cheltenham to Box Hill that does not add up unless you build the northern section, which the government is not going to do.

I notice Mr Batchelor has gone a bit silent, because they cannot explain their own billions of dollars in black holes and how they impact on the budget. It is extraordinary that the government has announced a value capture plan to capture the value in the area to that is going to add to the budget bottom line. The government is already funding a third of this project and now it is going to be funding most of the value capture of this project as well for an eastern section that does not even provide a return. It is crazy, and this government wants to lecture us about cost.

This government is cutting health services. This government has attempted over and over again to merge health services. It is cutting VicHealth. There are 400 less police since this Premier came to office, and this government wants to talk to us about hypothetical cuts. Look in your own backyard. It is just astonishing that this government once again is going to rely on an imaginary cuts campaign when people see the slashing of services in their own backyards. I am going to name one thing the government should cut, and that is the lawn on Mickleham Road in Greenvale. You know the difference between a council road and a state government road from the length of the grass.

As soon as you get off at the airport onto the Tulla and then onto the ring-road, you are greeted by graffiti, you are greeted by weeds and you are greeted by overgrown grass – it is completely different to the experience when you get off in Sydney – because this government cannot manage money. How are we meant to attract tourism and investment and good impressions of our city when your first impression is graffiti and weeds and overgrown grass and potholes? There is no pride in our state under this government. This state is in a malaise under this government due to lack of funding of our essential services, of our roads and of our government agencies.

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

Evan MULHOLLAND: I am not talking the state down. I am proud to be a Victorian. I am bloody proud to be a Victorian. I want to restore pride in our state, unlike this government, who have left our state in despair, who have left our roads in despair, who have cut our CFA, who are cutting VicHealth, who are trying to merge health services – and they have the gall to lecture us about cuts. Really? I mean, they are hypothecating taxes, existing taxes like stamp duty and land tax, to pay for a rail line from Cheltenham to Box Hill that does not even have a cost–benefit ratio that adds up. You want to talk to us about cuts – really? There is a reason why we have a frontline services guarantee under our opposition leader Jess Wilson, which has completely muted their argument. We want to do things like pay nurses properly, we want to do things like pay our teachers properly and we want to do things like keep VicHealth. They do not – you know they do not – because they would rather spend billions of dollars on a train line from Cheltenham to Box Hill. That is not going to build a new hospital in the northern suburbs. That is not going to fix Donnybrook Road. That is not going to help anyone.

You have communities that are starved of infrastructure. The government twice – twice! – have promised to electrify the rail line in Melton and Wyndham Vale, at two different elections. There is still no further progress – all election promises, all spin. But they can get the SRL going very quickly. They can get it quickly on an election timetable and rush through multibillion-dollar contracts consigning our state to hundreds of billions of dollars worth of debt – over \$190 billion of debt. We are going to be paying over \$25 million a day – over \$1 million every single hour – and that is going to keep going up with interest rates as well. I tell you households are very unhappy about an interest rate increase. But the second most unhappy person in Victoria will be the Treasurer when she realises her balance sheets are going to go through the roof because we do not have any leg room for economic shocks. Our agencies are on their knees and our health services are on their knees. We had that case of a health service in the member for Euroa's electorate that was asked to dip into workers' annual leave entitlements in order to pay down their debt. That is the crisis of economic management that is happening under this government, and I will not take any lectures from those opposite on the state of our finances.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:08): I am delighted to rise to speak on this motion that has been put before us today by the defeat-seeking missile that is the Victorian Liberal Party and Mr Davis. Again, it is a shambolically put together motion with less than 24 hours notice. I am not sure what you were originally going to do, but you have put this together – you have found something and slapped it together at the last minute, as is your style, and here we are. Again, Mr Davis, you ignored some really critical points in your comments earlier. You talked about the AFR, the *Australian Financial Review*, but I invite you to actually read the other AFR – that is, the annual financial report. We have had this discussion before, Mr Davis. I do not know if you have, because if you had read it, you would have seen on page 2, under 'Fiscal objectives', that for the past financial year Victoria's net debt to GSP was at 23.7 per cent, lower than the May projections of 24.5 per cent. You would also know, Mr Davis – or perhaps you forgot to mention – that the net operating cash surplus is \$2.6 billion higher than it was forecast to be in the May budget. But I do want to get to the heart of this and into this matter of letters of comfort. Mr Davis well knows that these are relatively routine mechanisms that governments and treasurers use.

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

Michael GALEA: Well, right you are to point me in that direction, Mr Batchelor, because in fact I understand, Mr Davis, when you were last in government, when you were the Minister for Health, under your watch, the Treasurer – I am assuming it would have been Kim Wells, probably –

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

Michael GALEA: Oh, there were two. Let us not go into the revolving door of who the Treasurer was or who the deputy leader was or is this week and what you guys are up to in Nepean. Who is your deputy leader? Mr Southwick again? I understand that two members of your party room could not even vote properly in that ballot. Two informal votes is an extraordinary lack of faith in your own party.

Evan Mulholland: On a point of order, Acting President, the member is drifting very far away from the substance of the motion.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Gaelle Broad): I will bring the member back to the content of the motion.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Acting President. I did get distracted there, but I will return to the point when Mr Davis was the Minister for Health in the shambolic Baillieu–Naphthine governments of just over 10 years ago. In 2012, 29 letters of comfort from the health department were issued to public hospitals under his watch. In 2013 it was 28 letters of comfort and –

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

Michael GALEA: Just in one year, Mr Batchelor, and in 2014 it was 32 letters. You were on the upward tangent there, Mr Davis, towards the end. I realise it is hard to imagine Mr Davis's activities being able to provide comfort to anybody, but he did provide a large number of letters of comfort, or his department was given a large number of letters of comfort by the Treasurer in that government. I illustrate this to make the point that there is nothing unseemly or untoward about a government undertaking this process.

On that note I return to another part of Mr Davis's motion and that is Treasurer's advances. Again, a number of these have been undertaken by governments – Liberal and Labor – in this state. I also know in coming to speak on Treasurer's advances that the Treasurer has been very clear in her objective to increase transparency around that and to reduce the instances of those Treasurer's advances, but there are very legitimate ways in which they are used. As we would know, and as I have heard ad nauseam in debates in this place and in the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee and in other forums as well, they are routinely used for mechanisms such as stage payments and unforeseen contingencies, which is part of their purpose. I do note that they continue to be reported. Indeed the reporting of Treasurer's advances is one of the most transparent parts of the budget that Mr Davis, if he cares, could go and have a look at for himself. On that too, it is also worth noting that since the peak of the pandemic when we did see a number of Treasurer's advances used for the emergency circumstances that we were in, they have reduced now by over 50 per cent from that point. Even just in the last year they reduced not quite by such a dramatic figure, but I believe about 9.7 per cent so far this year.

There is clear evidence to show that this government is living up to its commitment, that we are continuing not just with our broader fiscal strategy but, when it comes to Treasurer's advances, providing that transparency and accountability. As you would be able to see from the budget papers, that amelioration of Treasurer's advances as a tool for –

David Davis: On a point of order, Acting President, the member has referred to a percentage change in the numbers of letters of comfort, which implies that he has available to him the actual numbers, otherwise he would not be able to calculate a percentage. I ask if he might make available to the chamber those figures.

Ryan Batchelor: On the point of order, Acting President, firstly, that is not a point of order, and secondly, Mr Galea was referring to Treasurer's advances, not letters of comfort.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Gaelle Broad): Thank you, Mr Davis. It is not a point of order, but I will leave it to Mr Galea to respond.

Michael GALEA: Look, I am disappointed that Mr Davis clearly has not been listening to my contribution. Clearly his listening skills are about as good as his reading skills when it comes to the annual financial report. If he had been listening, he would know that I was referring to Treasurer's advances, which he may not recall, but it is actually a part of this motion. You might not recall when you were hastily putting this all together last night, Mr Davis, but you did actually put that into the motion, and I was trying to be as relevant to your points as I could, which is why I did discuss letters of comfort, yes, and then I discussed Treasurer's advances. If you cannot interpret what I am saying, Mr Davis, I would be more than happy to continue this conversation with you beyond my speech. I would be more than happy to invite you to look at *Hansard*. But I did refer to the recent reduction of TAs of that 9.7 per cent figure. That is the figure that you may have mistaken for something else, but I encourage you to keenly listen, because we do have very interesting things to say on this side of the chamber, Mr Davis, because unlike members opposite, we actually talk up this state and we talk up the investment.

We are proud to acknowledge, for example, the incredible net growth that we have seen in small businesses in this state over the past 12 months. I am proud of the fact that our business investment has gone up by 39 per cent since the peak of the pandemic, which compares to 30 per cent for the rest of the nation. I am proud of the fact that we have major international cultural and sporting events that

draw people in, such as the Australian Open – again, yet another record crowd that we saw last week. The Liberal Party members may not be ready to serve. The Liberal Party deputy leader himself might be complaining about the atrocious behaviour that he experienced at the hands of his Liberal Party colleagues, because we know that they are more interested in themselves and attacking and bringing down each other than they are in governing in the interests of Victorians.

David Davis: On a point of order, Acting President, he is flouting your earlier ruling and deviating well away from the motion again.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Gaelle Broad): I will uphold that point of order. It was talked about earlier. If you could bring it back to the content of the motion, please.

Michael GALEA: I wondered if perhaps because Mr Davis was not listening to my remarks directly on his motion, he might be more excited by comments on the Liberal Party, and indeed he was, because we know that that is what they care about.

But this is a government that has a proud record of investing in this state, and we will continue to provide the support that we need for all agencies to operate in a fiscally sustainable manner. I reiterate the point that neither of these things which are being squawked about by Mr Davis today is in any way unique to this or any other government in the country. Letters of comfort and Treasurer's advances are undertaken as part of routine government spending, and Mr Davis should know that. If not, I do question how he was presiding over the health portfolio for four years and somehow unaware that so many letters of comfort were provided to his department in that time. Maybe he was too busy cutting the whooping cough vaccination program, which happened at that time, or attacking the paramedics in our state, because we know that is what he would do if he were given the keys of government again. That is the first thing you would do. You would cut \$11.1 billion out of services.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:18): I would also like to speak on this motion concerning debt and letters of comfort. I would like to say from the start that the Libertarian Party is very concerned about the financial position over the long term of this state and where it might go and the hundreds of billions of dollars in debt. This is a big problem, but I take issue with and strongly disagree with one of the comments made by Mr Batchelor. He claimed, quite rightly, that if there are major tax cuts by the Liberal Party, there will have to be cuts. The problem with what Mr Batchelor said is the assumption that the Liberal Party will actually make any cuts, and they have stated quite openly that they will not. One of the things –

David Davis interjected.

David LIMBRICK: They will stop waste; they will be better managers. Right. Well, one of the very modest things – a bit too modest, in my view – which has been brought up in this debate that the Labor Party has done recently, which I have publicly said is very sensible, is defunding and abolishing VicHealth, which has about a \$50 million budget. It is a significant amount of money, but in the scheme of billions it is not that much. But the Liberal Party apparently are refusing to support that. Weirdly – I do not know why – they have come out and said, 'No, we're going to keep VicHealth.' They want to keep VicHealth. If you want to talk about waste, let us look at some of the stuff that VicHealth actually does and why the Liberal Party want to keep VicHealth, because they should not want to keep VicHealth, and I guarantee that I will support cutting VicHealth and abolishing VicHealth. One of the things that VicHealth does is make a lot of videos. They put them on YouTube, and they are very, very high-quality videos. They look quite expensive actually – very high production values, obviously a lot of work and thought has gone into it, lots of people. One of the videos that they did was around running tips and drills, because of course there are no fitness videos on YouTube at all and VicHealth needs to do that and to enter into that market. I can tell you that the running tips and drills video got 24 views, and at least four of those views were my office and my staff. I do not know whether anyone in the Liberal Party gets running tips from VicHealth, but I certainly do not. I am

pretty sure that if I do a search on YouTube, I can find some videos on exercise. I am pretty sure I do not need VicHealth to do that.

VicHealth do all these things with councils, and one of the things that they did is celebrate the Nillumbik Shire Council Rainbow Ready audit, where they worked with the council to get the Rainbow Ready audit and raise the Progress Pride flag. I am sure Mrs McArthur wants to keep that and raise the Progress Pride flag at Nillumbik Shire Council. They went to all this trouble to make this video. It got nine views. Four of those were from my office. City of Kingston – that is in my area – alcohol-free youth events. That is a great thing, right? Let us make a great big video on alcohol-free youth events in Kingston – 20 views. Has anyone in the Liberal Party seen these videos? I do not think they even get their own staff watching these videos.

One of the other things that VicHealth has been lauded for – I have no idea why; the major parties seem to exist on a different planet to me – is our tobacco policy, which back on planet Earth is an absolute disaster. In fact the rest of the world looks at us and sees us as a case study on what not to do. They look at us and they look on in horror at what has happened in Victoria and the rest of the country. They look at the hundreds of firebombings. They look at the murders that have happened – assassinations. They look at the explosion in organised crime. What we have done with vaping has been an absolute disaster, and they look at our tobacco policy and they see an absolute disaster. In fact it is so bad it has put our national security at risk. Those same organised crime networks that distribute tobacco were outed by the AFP and ASIO as having been linked to the Islamic regime in Iran and have conducted firebombing attacks. That is how bad our tobacco policy is. Yet Dr Demaio, the former CEO of VicHealth, May 2023:

As Australia announces world-leading protections on vaping and a bold new National Tobacco Strategy, these comprehensive measures once again place Australia as a global leader in tobacco control!

Absolutely fanciful. This is insane. No-one looks at Australia and thinks we have good tobacco policy – no-one in the world. Everyone looks at us and thinks, ‘My goodness.’ 2 May 2023:

Well done to @Mark_Butler_MP and the Australian Government for their groundbreaking reforms announced today – protecting generations from the harms created by Big Tobacco and the vaping industry.

I could walk 100 metres from this Parliament and I could probably find a dozen shops that will sell me vapes over the counter, imported from China, totally unregulated and controlled by organised crime. 28 June 2024:

This new vaping legislation is a BIG step forward for Australia –
a big step forward for organised crime –

in protecting young people from addiction and a host of health risks. The industry is busy making noise and spreading confusion. This is what they do. The facts remain that this is an important policy for health.

I was listening this morning when there was talk about inflation. I actually dispute the CPI figures put out by the ABS and the federal government. Do you know why I dispute those figures? Because they include tobacco and they assume tobacco is being sold at retail prices. Organised crime controls most of the market. The inflation figures are inflated because you can buy packets of tobacco cheaper than ever right now. Organised crime is literally lowering inflation in this state because of our tobacco policy. It is so mad. You can laugh, but why does the Liberal Party not want to hold these people to account? Shut them down. Hold them to account. There is so much in government that we could shut down. No-one should look at this stuff and say this is essential for Victoria.

Here is another thing that they have done – this is not related to tobacco policy; it goes on and on. Back in May 2023 this was funded primarily by VicHealth at a university: a new position with a total remuneration package of about \$125,000. It could be done remotely, apparently. What they did was employ someone to go around the university and wave their finger and give lectures to students – remotely, apparently, so maybe they were waving their finger by Zoom – about vaping, telling the uni students not to vape. They want to spend \$125,000 a year. This is just at one university, Melbourne

University. They have got a whole bunch of other ones they want to do. Maybe the Liberal Party wants to expand their budget so they can do this at every university in the state. This is not good spending of taxpayers money. It is an absolute waste.

They are not even focusing on tobacco; they are focusing on vaping. They want to take credit for policies that they think are attacking the most harmful consumer product ever produced, which is tobacco, and instead of attacking tobacco, they are attacking vaping, which is the pathway away from tobacco for many people. They have not stopped vaping at all. In fact vapes are more widely available than they have ever been, but the problem is they are all imported from Shenzhen in China. They are unregulated; you do not know how much nicotine is in them. In the old system, when we had this grey market where we could import some of this stuff from more sensible jurisdictions like New Zealand, at least we had some sort of regulations, or at least we relied on New Zealand's regulations, which we do not do anymore – we rely on the goodwill of whoever is making these things in China.

With the tobacco, the tobacco is not made in China. Some of it is – it depends which criminal syndicate you are buying from. But it seems that most of the tobacco that is being sold now due to policies that were pushed by VicHealth, which the Liberal Party seem to refuse to want to shut down, comes from the Middle East. It is smuggled in via the UAE. The most common brand that you see is Manchester. You see packets of them right out in front of Parliament. You see them everywhere. Where is this money going? Where is this money being laundered? The owner of that company is located in Syria. We already know that there are connections to terror networks. What on earth have we created here, and why aren't we holding these people to account?

You could go through the entire public service like this. There needs to be not just tinkering around the edges, because what we see in VicHealth is not unusual, it is common. When the Liberal Party talk about stopping waste, this is exactly the sort of waste that we should be getting rid of, and yet the government cannot seem to even get this tiny, modest thing through. They cannot get any support for it. It is even controversial. Mr Puglielli got up and said how wonderful VicHealth is. I do not know – maybe he wants to see the video of the alcohol-free youth events, and maybe the views will go up to 21 now. This is not a good spend of taxpayers money, and if – *(Time expired)*

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (15:28): Yesterday in this house the Treasurer started responding to Mr Davis's important motion pre-emptively, and her instinctive response was revealing. She turned the issue around and tried to claim that the proliferation of letters of comfort across government agencies is actually a good thing, somehow a clever way of managing the state's finances. I would not deny that they have their place, but to try to pretend this general proliferation is an endorsement of Labor's financial management is not credible. They are not a sign of strength. They are the financial equivalent of life support, keeping entities alive while their operating models have effectively collapsed.

We are not talking about bodies which simply exist to redistribute taxpayer funds from departments, we are talking in the main about bodies which are designed to act commercially. For decades Parliament has created these bodies for a clear purpose: to separate service delivery from the central bureaucracy, to impose commercial and financial discipline and to protect the state's balance sheet from operational risk. This is particularly explicit, to refer to the motion, in the case of water authorities, rail asset managers and resort managers. They were not intended to be just departments with a different name; they were supposed to be financially accountable and responsible bodies with their own books, their own boards and their own discipline. That system is now breaking down. We are witnessing the rise of what could be called statutory zombies – agencies which technically exist in law but in reality only survive because the Treasurer signs, as she seemed proud to proclaim yesterday, a piece of paper saying 'Don't worry. The state will pay if they can't.' This is explicit in the case of the water industry. Section 94 of the Water Act 1989 states that every water corporation:

... must act as efficiently as possible consistent with commercial practice.

That is not guidance or a slogan, it is an obligation. It is the very reason water authorities were removed from the previous rural water commission and corporatised in the first place, so users would pay for services, not taxpayers, and so poor management would not be hidden inside treasury.

Now we have Greater Western Water, the corporation responsible for Melbourne's western and regional supply, who required a letter of comfort from the Treasurer in November 2025 to continue as a going concern. Why? Because its billing system failed so badly that customers received late bills, multiple quarter bills or no bills at all. Their cash flow collapsed, management could not demonstrate that the organisation could meet its debts and ultimately the Auditor-General could not even complete the audit on time because of what he described as 'contentious issues'. It is an extraordinary thing when a commercial utility cannot bill its customers, cannot complete its audit and cannot demonstrate solvency without a government guarantee. It is certainly not, as the law requires, operating 'consistent with commercial practice', yet the Treasurer yesterday characterised letters of comfort as a mechanism to avoid having to put taxpayers money into agencies. That should not be in question. Of course we should not be paying Greater Western Water for their failures. This letter of comfort is a blank cheque from Victorian taxpayers, signed by a Treasurer who knows that other people have to foot the bill.

Alpine Resorts Victoria is another of the agencies Mr Davis identified in the motion. Alpine Resorts Victoria was created in 2022 by this Parliament to 'build economic resilience'. Its own corporate plan says:

Our priority is to move towards each resort achieving an annual break even or cash positive position, with each resort being able to independently fund the renewal of their asset base, and surplus funds committed to an ARV Capital Investment Fund ...

This is the statutory vision: self-funding resorts investing in their own future. The reality: Alpine Resorts Victoria requires more than \$13 million a year in emergency support just to keep Lake Mountain and Mount Baw Baw operating. It requires letters of comfort to be considered solvent, and three years after its creation it is still writing a pathway to sustainability report for the minister. That is not economic resilience, it is permanent dependence. The contrast with the private sector in this case is particularly devastating. Private operators at Mount Buller, Hotham and Falls Creek are sufficiently successful to invest their own money, \$17 million at Hotham alone, taking real commercial risk and operating without state – that is, taxpayer – guarantees. The alpine industry generates \$2.14 billion in economic output every year. It is a thriving private sector, yet the state-run operation cannot even break even. V/Line is another, albeit different, example, recording a \$443 million deficit while relying on a letter of comfort from the Department of Transport and Planning to stand behind them. VicTrack, the custodian of the state's rail assets, required by law to manage them for commercial gain, received a modified audit opinion from the Auditor-General, forcing Treasury to make central adjustments to stop that failure contaminating the state's consolidated accounts.

Again, letters and adjustments are being used to paper over the cracks of total incompetence. The Treasurer yesterday suggested that letters of comfort are good for government finances because they avoid cash outlays. Yet, as I have described for many of these supposedly commercial agencies, the letter of comfort simply replaces missing revenue with the state's taxing power. The idea that this is fiscal discipline is laughable; it is more like fiscal camouflage. It is just a variation on the government's other method of filling budget black holes: Treasurer's advances. In 2024–25 the Treasurer quietly issued \$1.5 billion in off-budget advances to health services to keep them operating – money that was not in budget paper 3 and not debated in this Parliament and which totally bypassed the proper appropriation process. The Public Accounts and Estimates Committee has now had to ask where that money went, including how much simply went to keeping insolvent hospitals alive.

This is the same pattern. When agencies fail to live within their statutory funding models, the government does not confront the failure. It bypasses Parliament, issuing letters of comfort and plugging holes with Treasurer's advances. That is why we now face a debt level which is fast rising towards \$200 billion. That is why we face a debt interest bill of more than \$20 million every day –

Victorian taxpayers money going direct to our creditors without providing a single doctor, nurse, teacher or repaired road. For the Treasurer to stand up and pretend that all is well and that the Victorian government is a model of efficient, effective financial operation is incredible. It is hard to know whether she is trying to cover up the problems for political reasons or whether she truly believes it. Either way it is a disaster for Victoria, and the only solution seems to be to replace the Treasurer or replace the government. I urge everyone to support Mr Davis's motion.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (15:38): I was surprised to hear last night this motion read in at the last minute. I thought there was going to be another topic.

David Davis interjected.

Jacinta ERMACORA: At the last minute, and the agenda for today changed. I can just imagine what it must be like in the party room with these sorts of changes at the last minute all the time. What I do not see is an overarching, clear and concise, unified strategy from the other side. This swapping of motions at the last minute is very lazy and disorganised.

Members interjecting.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Gaelle Broad): Order! I ask Ms Ermacora to continue, in silence.

Jacinta ERMACORA: It is obvious that the previous plans for the day were not going to be supported, so they changed their minds at the last minute. It just is hard to imagine any sense of order in the party room of those opposite. The opposition's motion is concerning, because it contains a long list of inaccuracies about the state's fiscal position and about the budget processes and about financial management and errors of basic financial literacy. The first paragraph's claims about the state of the budget are completely incorrect. The budget's position for this year is a surplus, and we are forecast to deliver a surplus in every year of the forward estimates, delivering on step 3 of the government's five-step fiscal strategy. What we see here is the demonisation of ordinary financial management activities of the state – demonisation of an ordinary instrument used in the financial management of the state. Let me give you an example of that. When I was on Warrnambool City Council it was not uncommon for the council to issue a letter of comfort to a sporting club that was upgrading its sporting facilities and taking out a loan to do so – a perfectly normal instrument to support your community and to support the activities of various different entities. The other scenario that I remember a letter of comfort being used in was in the context of a merger where financial systems had not yet been aligned, and away they went. There was an instrument used for the first year of the financial management. I really think that with the kind of freaking out that is going on, you are trying to contrive this sort of terrible, terrible thing, that letters of comfort have been used in various different situations, when in actual fact they are a very normal and common and accepted instrument in ordinary financial management exercises.

When we do think of the financial position of Victoria, I would like to say that Victoria's economy is resilient and strong and continues to grow and is 29 per cent larger than in 2015, 10 years ago. In terms of jobs, over the year December to December the number of Victorians in work increased by 59,300 in Victoria. You over there have been saying how bad our economy is when jobs are being created all of the time, and that figure is the highest number of jobs among the states for the last 12 months. Victorians are participating in the jobs market at a higher rate than in most other states, and that is also a strength. Our participation rate is second only to Western Australia. Our unemployment rate is 4.6 per cent, and before you get wound up about that, compared to 4.1 per cent nationally and 6.7 per cent in 2014, when you guys last left office. If our participation rates were the same as in New South Wales, our unemployment rate would be less than 1 per cent. Just consider that for a minute.

We have also got good news in regional Victoria, where unemployment is even lower. It is 3.4 per cent across all of the regions of Victoria, compared to 5.9 per cent, which is nearly 6 per cent, in 2014. It is lower particularly in Warrnambool. It is only 2.8 per cent in Warrnambool and 3 per cent in Hume,

and Geelong is 3.3 per cent. So we have got a really good story to tell there in terms of the financial position of the state of Victoria in that regard.

Members interjecting.

Jacinta ERMACORA: I can hear laughter, but I really think you are just trying to make up something. I think that is a bit rude. Your tone is a bit rude.

Members interjecting.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Gaelle Broad): Order! Ms Ermacora does not usually interrupt others, so I ask that the same respect be shown to her.

Jacinta ERMACORA: In closing, we will have a look at what is going on in business in Victoria. Household consumption has increased by 0.5 per cent. That is running at 2.1 per cent despite consumer sentiment nationally slipping a little bit at the moment. We have created 123,000 new businesses, and that is a net figure. There are a lot of people in this chamber that understand that exactly, but I will point out that that is the total number of new businesses started minus the total number of businesses closed. It is positive to the tune of 123,000 new businesses. That is a sign of confidence in the state of Victoria – the exact opposite to what you are saying over there day after day. I wish Mr Davis was listening because, honestly, he is saying the sky is falling in but 123,000 people invested in new businesses in Victoria from June 2020 to June 2025.

It is a very strong picture there. I could go on, but I will not because I have run out of time. There is more good news, but I have not got time to share it with you. I really think this motion is totally contrived to try and turn something that, as I have said, was a perfectly acceptable financial instrument into some catastrophic sort of blank cheque rubbish. That is not true. In most cases when a letter of comfort is used, it is not drawn upon.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (15:47): This is a very straightforward motion but an important motion. The government members are trying to tie themselves in knots because the motion is put together very moderately. It does not take a huge whack. It just points out that there are financial problems. It points out these issues with using letters of comfort, and we have readily conceded that there are appropriate uses for letters of comfort. But we really do want greater detail out of the Treasurer on this, and there is some real resistance from her in telling us how many she has signed and how many have been provided by other bodies within government, perhaps secretaries, perhaps others, which have underpinned these organisations being able to claim that they are going concerns.

Let us be clear about this. There seems to be a cascade of issues here. Sometimes there are new injections of money at the last minute, sometimes there are Treasurer advances, sometimes it seems that the government has provided indications and letters of statement or information to agencies, to boards, to enable them to feel comfortable short of a letter of comfort and in other cases, many, many cases, formal letters of comfort have been provided to the agencies to keep them as going concerns.

Mr Puglielli was quite right when he said this motion is mainly a series of four statements of fact. These are all facts that are listed on these points here, but they do give a genuine cause for concern, a cause to look at these matters and to say the state has to be careful here. We are actually in real financial problems. Some of them on the other side want to say it is all hunky-dory. Actually the debt level is the highest it has ever been in the state, and it is getting worse and worse and worse. If it is \$1 billion or \$2 billion less than what had been suggested in earlier government documents, that is regarded as a major win by certain people on the other side, but actually the debt is still going up very significantly, and we know that it is going to exceed \$190 billion by the end of the forward estimates. That is a huge whack of money, and that is the general government sector. If you count the outer sector, it is actually much greater still. But we also know that the government's skint arrangements are actually seeing these letters of comfort become more and more important and more and more widespread.

We heard from a number of government members, ‘Oh, there’ll be cuts, there’ll be cuts, there’ll be cuts.’ Well, let me just tell you, in my portfolio under this government there are savage, savage cuts in the arts going on at the moment and in the night of the long knives that occurred just before Christmas. This is Scrooge-like behaviour by Creative Victoria. The calls went around to the Abbotsford Convent, which received \$200,000 a year for more than 20 years to support that arts hub. Their funding from the end of the financial year has been cut to – how much? – zero. Nothing. No document provided to them, just ‘Your funding’s gone. It’ll be zero.’

Writers Vic has been funded in Victoria since 1989. They had a call, and the call said, ‘Your funding of \$150,000 a year’ – that is \$600,000 over four years; it is a very modest amount of money that actually facilitates large numbers of writers across this state, and Creative Victoria called them just before Christmas, a Scrooge-like call – ‘has been cut to zero.’ Nothing. We are the only mainland state that does not fund its major writer organisation. So do not let us hear about cuts from that side. Your government is cutting and it is cutting hard. Musica Viva gets very modest funding from Victoria for schools programs. That has been cut to – you guessed it – zero under this government.

I could go on. You are getting the theme that this government is a nasty government. It is a government that has botched the finances of the state. It is going into deeper and deeper debt. The Jacinta Allan Labor government is cutting and cutting and cutting hard, and it is doing it right across the whole front. And now we see letters of comfort that are designed to skate the government through its cuts.

Motion agreed to.

Committees

Environment and Planning Committee

Reference

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:53): I seek leave to move my motion 1231 in an amended form.

Leave granted.

Nick McGOWAN: I move:

That this house requires the Environment and Planning Committee to inquire into, consider and report, by 1 June 2026, on the 2026 summer fires across Victoria, including but not limited to:

- (1) the preparation and planning by government, emergency services agencies and the community ahead of the fire season, including management of public and private land and roadsides;
- (2) the causes and circumstances of the bushfires, including climate change and the adequacy of the government’s climate policies and actions, forecasts, warnings and public education on bushfire threats;
- (3) funding, equipment and appliances for the Country Fire Authority (CFA), Fire Rescue Victoria and Forest Fire Management Victoria, and recruitment and retention of CFA volunteers;
- (4) the emergency responses to control and contain the fires, including adequacy of resources and communications;
- (5) resilience of critical services and infrastructure such as electricity, water and telecommunications during and after the fires;
- (6) the impact on the community, business and agriculture and efforts to aid in recovery;
- (7) the impact on the environment, including native wildlife, and any measures to better protect native forests, including technology for early detection and firefighting in remote locations; and
- (8) lessons from and progress on the implementation of recommendations from previous inquiries, reports and royal commissions.

It is an honour to rise today and speak on this motion. It seems to me that never has a government had the opportunity to do so much and has in fact done so little. We all know this because over these last weeks – and in fact a couple of months now, because we are now headed into February – unfortunately

it is Victorians themselves who have had to fend for themselves in an unprecedented way. But before I get into that, I did note that one of my colleagues in the lower house yesterday, Annabelle Cleeland, the member for Euroa, gave a heartfelt speech on behalf of her community. Annabelle and her community were directly affected, and in order to, I suppose, fully appreciate and get the essence of why it is this inquiry is so important not just to the people that were affected but frankly to all Victorians, I would like to quote from Annabelle's speech that she delivered yesterday:

On the Friday of the catastrophic fire day, I received a call from our neighbour. His wife is my best friend, and we are raising children together. He screamed into the phone, 'I'm alive, I'm alive. Tell her I'm alive.' For our families throughout our region – Longwood, Ruffy, Euroa, Highlands and right across the state – this summer did not just take homes and livestock, paddocks and fences. A devastating fire tore through our region, and it shook something deeper. It shook people's sense of safety. It is the fear of driving down a road you have known your whole life and suddenly checking the tree line. It is the fear of hot winds. It is the fear of a text message, a siren, or that relentless bloody 'beep-beep-beep' of the VicEmergency app. Your heart rate will never stop rising when you hear it. It is packing the car in a hurry and telling your children to grab what you love most – important documents, photo albums, the pets, your wedding dress – and then trying to explain why the bike cannot come because it cannot fit, or why the chickens and the cubby house have to stay, why the dream you spent your life building with your partner cannot be packed in the back seat, and why dad has decided to stay and defend. You drive away praying that there will be something to come home to. But at that exact moment, others are driving as well. The pager goes off, the boots go on, and the truck goes out the gate, driving towards flames while their own families sit at home waiting.

For me that beautifully encapsulates just a moment in Annabelle's life and just a moment in the life of the family of one Victorian. But the truth is – and Annabelle points this out very clearly – it affected many hundreds if not thousands of Victorians, and so there are very, very serious questions that need to be and must be answered. Other speakers today who will follow me will speak in regard to the CFA more precisely, and they have great expertise and a love and passion for our volunteers, as we all do, but they know them more intimately than I. Members Melina Bath and Gaelle Broad will both speak to that on our side of the house, as will Wendy behind me – Wendy Lovell – and so I will leave that to them.

I am the Shadow Minister for Fire Rescue Victoria, so I will focus most of my comments on that aspect. I think what Victorians perhaps do not understand is that Fire Rescue Victoria and our career firefighters also played a role in defending not only property and not only people – they have a much larger role than that too in providing an emergency medical response right around our state, perhaps better than any other state in this country and perhaps the best in the world, in my opinion. I want to make this very clear to all Victorians: we are united in everything we do to make sure that our firefighters, plural, be they volunteer or career, have the very best equipment that money can buy, have the very best apparatus that money can buy and have every bit of support from this entire Parliament. It is with some pride today that I stand – together with the support of the crossbenchers, without which we would not be here – and look to forge forward with this important inquiry so that if mistakes were made, they are never made again; if there is underinvestment, that underinvestment ceases; and where things are promised, they are actually delivered, because time and again from those opposite what we are seeing is a failure to deliver. We are seeing a concentration on words and not actions, and that simply has to cease.

That was never more evident than when I went to Bendigo recently. All the firefighters up there are career firefighters based there from Fire Rescue Victoria. Again, not many people know this, so I am going to give Victorians the list. Victoria has some 4032 firefighters – that is, career firefighters – in total. We have 765 corporate employees. We have 85 stations. Of those 85 stations some 47 are in the metropolitan area. For most Melburnians they are the fire stations we would expect and encounter every day of our working week. But what Victorians in Melbourne may not know is that we also have 38 fire stations in Greater Melbourne and regional Victoria. I am going to list them off because it might surprise some people. We have Ballarat, Belmont, Bendigo, Boronia, Caroline Springs, Corio, Craigieburn, Cranbourne, Dandenong, Eltham, Frankston, Geelong City, Greenvale, Hallam, Lara, Latrobe West, Lucas, Melton, Mildura, Mornington, Morwell, Ocean Grove, Pakenham, Patterson

River, Point Cook, Portland, Rosebud, Rowville, Shepparton, South Morang, South Warrandyte, Springvale, Sunbury, Tarneit, Traralgon, Wangaratta, Warrnambool and Wodonga. What I mean to demonstrate there is that our career firefighters working for Fire Rescue Victoria are not only in metropolitan Melbourne but are right across the state.

They ostensibly have two functions. One is to preserve life and property in the case of a fire. The other, and it is really important that Victorians understand this, is they are in something close to 60 per cent of cases the first responders on a scene when it comes to a medical emergency. This is where it matters in terms of Fire Rescue Victoria and how efficient these men and women are. I have spent a night – it was an honour to spend a night – with the South Melbourne brigade. Within 90 seconds those firefighters are in that truck and they are out that door. They are not just getting ready; within 90 seconds of receiving a call for help they have left the station. Whether it be your mother, your child, a relative, a partner, a friend; if someone has had a heart attack; if someone has almost drowned or has drowned in a pool or at the beach; if someone is having a cardiac arrest; whatever the incident is – and it could be a car incident, because in close to 60 per cent of those cases, certainly here in the metropolitan area, a firefighter will be the first on scene and the first to administer life-saving support.

So it matters that not only our firefighters but also, as I have mentioned already, the CFA and all of these emergency services have the best possible equipment, because I can tell you what, if those firefighters can get in that truck in 90 seconds flat, we do not want to let them down by them getting halfway there or not even getting out of the station bay because their vehicles break down. I can tell you it happens all the time. I have only been the shadow minister for a number of weeks – barely months – and I have visited very many stations, and every single station I visit in the metropolitan area, to say nothing of country areas, which fare much worse – and Gaelle Broad, I will come to you in a moment, and Bendigo, because I will come back to that theme – every station I have visited has had an issue, including Dandenong, where of the two pumpers that they have there, one of them, the hinge of the door was literally detached from the door. You might think that is minor, but I tell you what, if that affects the seal on the door, if suddenly that truck is engulfed by flames, if suddenly there is an issue there, we are putting the safety of the very people we are sending in to save people at risk. It is entirely unacceptable. It is absolutely an occupational health and safety issue for those firefighters.

I spoke a moment ago about Bendigo. I had the great pleasure of going up to Bendigo and spending some time with my colleague Gaelle Broad. Gaelle has done a sensational job of highlighting that in Bendigo there is a station that is not fit for purpose. From the bushfire royal commission recommendations flowed the decision to basically refurbish and rebuild the entire fire station at Bendigo. It was built for between five and six firefighters, and today it houses 12 every single shift – completely unfit for purpose. They have a Coates hire room in the middle of a bay which is intended for the appliances. That is where the men and women have to get changed into their overalls. It has been that way for four years. What is worse, they have shunted out the volunteers – they did that years ago – put them in the back blocks, in an industrial estate, in anticipation of the new station being built. But the new station was never built. What was built instead? A temporary station, which was finished nearly five years ago, and it has been sitting empty ever since – \$2.5 million for construction, another million dollars thereabouts for the purchase of the land, rounding up, so \$3.5 million, and they are renting it back from the CFA.

You have an empty fire station, a ghost station, and it is all in the Premier's own electorate. This is happening under the Premier's watch. Under the Premier's watch we have a station that is not fit for purpose. It is a situation where there are only three showers. If those firefighters, for example, in Bendigo go out to a fire right now or tonight or at any moment – we all know that time matters, because the particulates that they get on their body and their uniforms start to penetrate their body and poison them – they cannot have a shower quickly enough. But with 12 of them, they have got two showers for men and one for women, so what happens if you have three or four women on shift? They are waiting. Every minute that goes by, every quarter hour that goes by – because it cannot be a quick shower; the whole idea and the purpose is to shower properly, to wash yourself thoroughly – our

firefighters are being poisoned slowly, one by one, like some scene from Chernobyl, because we have not got our house in order. And when I say ‘we’ I mean the government. It is simply absolutely intolerable in 2026.

If we fast-forward for a moment, this government has now made it not a purpose of general revenue to fund these operations; it has devised a special tax of its own making – a volunteer tax I call it. So we are taxing volunteers to provide services both for paid and for volunteer firefighters and departmental staff – secretaries of departments, which is what the government wanted to do – and we still have a situation in Bendigo in 2026 where they have a station that is more than 20 years old, which is not fit for purpose, and an empty fire station that could house 12 firefighters every day of the week. It was not constructed the right side of the train lines. It does not have the water pressure, I am told, but you would need to correct that. It does not have the ability for the appliances to come in the rear of the building, they have to back in, so it is a health and safety issue. You cannot make this stuff up. The incompetence is next level. And if you can get over the incompetence for the minute – and I cannot, but if you could – then just think about this for a moment: it is in the Premier’s own electorate, and she has done nothing about it for four years long. If the Premier cannot fix her own backyard, what chance do Victorians have? Sadly, they have none.

I remind Victorians of this: volunteers do it because they are sensational citizens and they want to look after their communities. Career firefighters do it for the same reasons: they, perhaps like many professions – firefighters, ambulance officers, paramedics – want to contribute to our society. But I can tell you this about career firefighters: they have not received a pay rise in five years. 1 January 2021 was the last time firefighters got a pay rise in this state. That is appalling. I think if the public knew that they would be appalled. The starting base wage for a firefighter is also something I need to talk about, because I think there is a public perception that somehow firefighters get these grandiose wages. The starting wage for a firefighter is in the order of \$80,000. I would suggest to Victorians that that is not grotesque – in fact I would argue it is not enough. Anyone who wants to argue with me that any firefighter is paid too much I would happily take on any day of the week, because I will not have it – it is just nonsense. Those firefighters go every day into situations that put them at risk.

While I am talking about them, the fact is that I have sat in this chamber for the last four years almost, and we had an opportunity that we let pass in terms of presumptive legislation that would save our firefighters if they contract cancers, because typically we know they will – and credit to the Greens, because last year they attempted to make this happen, and we had a collective failure. I have spoken about this publicly before. I am not saying anything new. We had a collective failure to say to firefighters, ‘When you do contract cancers – which we know is scientifically proven you are more likely to contract because of the job you do in saving our lives and our property and saving us when we have our heart attacks and when we have our car accidents and when we are drowning and all these other incidents – we are going to have your back.’ We should all be ashamed of ourselves that we have not done that. If I have anything to do in the remaining time I have in this place, it is to try and bring presumptive legislation back to the fore and back to this place to consider, because we did not do it. We added some last year in a craven political act by those opposite to include some female cancers, and we are 100 per cent supportive of that. What we were not 100 per cent supportive of is the fact that it did not go the whole way. They should have included more, and they could have. I am going to leave my comments there because I want to give others an opportunity, and I am conscious I will get an opportunity at the end of this to speak as well. There are many who want to contribute.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (16:11): Yesterday and today it has been touching to see the bipartisan and multipartisan words of support in this place that everyone has shared as they reflect on this summer’s bushfires. The words of sympathy from those that represent bushfire-affected communities and indeed those that do not has been truly touching. After hearing these words it is my belief that everyone in this chamber and the other one feels some really deep sadness about the fires that have affected us this summer. That is why for me I am finding it really hard to read this motion as prepared by Mr McGowan. I thank him for bringing it to this place, because I have got some words to

say about our CFA. While some opposite may continue to play politics with the CFA, I think that on almost every level our emergency services need to be thanked and honoured.

It is the Allan Labor government's belief that the independent inspector-general for emergency management is the very best placed individual to provide informed and honest advice about this summer's bushfire response. Might I remind those opposite that it was the Napthine government, which some members were a part of, that established the inspector-general for emergency management in 2014, with the then Labor opposition supporting it. Even though they are the ones that created the role, those opposite seem to fundamentally misunderstand what the inspector-general actually does. The member for Gippsland South in the other place stated incorrectly that if the inspector-general were to investigate and gain insight into the January 2026 bushfires, that would be tantamount to 'marking his own homework'. Not only is this statement factually incorrect, but the member for South Gippsland does not even know that the inspector-general is not in fact a man. It is a woman, and her name is Emily Phillips, and she has had the role for nearly two years. Instead of wanting an independent and informed opinion from the inspector-general, what we have before us is the opposition playing politics.

Whilst I have heard remarks about the likelihood of this motion before us passing, I want to introduce to the chamber some amendments. If it comes to pass that this inquiry reference passes with the will of the chamber, I would like three additional terms of reference to be considered that would enhance the motion before us and enable the Environment and Planning Committee to look into these with due consideration. I am asking that they be circulated. I move:

1. In paragraph (7), omit 'and'.
2. After paragraph (7), insert the following new paragraphs:
 - '(8) the impacts of climate change on the natural environment, which has resulted in more frequent and intense bushfires occurring in Victoria;
 - (9) the prevalence and impact of misinformation leading into and during the fire season;
 - (10) the interjurisdictional support into and out of Victoria leading into and during the fire season, including interstate and international deployments, Commonwealth support and relief efforts; and'.

Amendment 1 will allow the committee to seek to understand how climate change interacts with fire management before, during and after bushfires. Climate change is already challenging our ability to manage fires. It leads to longer fire seasons, increased firefighter fatigue and reduced capacity to share resources nationally and interstate and in fact internationally, I might add. Even before fire seasons it shortens our ability to prepare and reduces the time available for safe and effective planned burning. After the bushfire season is finished, climate change is increasing the cumulative recovery costs for individuals, for the community and for government. While some are vague in their commitment to, understanding of and belief in climate change, there is a major contrast between the pre- and post-2000 fire eras that demonstrates, tragically, how the intensity, the size and frequency of our state's bushfires have dramatically changed.

Amendment 2 will empower the committee to examine the effects of misinformation and miscommunication on bushfire-affected communities. As I have said, we have heard some members from this place and others inexplicably go after the very public resource that is the VicEmergency app. It is worth noting this app has been a critical resource for those Victorians that are most at risk from bushfires. On New Year's Day 697 warnings were issued by the VicEmergency app, and 6.3 million people have downloaded the VicEmergency app. These are not just statistics, this is life-saving information being distributed to Victorians across the state. This amendment before us grants the committee the ability to understand how dangerous misinformation conflicts with that provided by the emergency app and other officially distributed information. I will not give any more airtime to that misinformation, just to say that this amendment will examine the role that both public figures and the media play in making sure that what is being said about these emergencies is both accurate and informed.

Finally, amendment 3 will allow the committee to investigate how Victoria's bushfire response is complemented by both the Commonwealth and other jurisdictions. We know Victorians are incredibly grateful – and we heard that in the contributions here – for the support we have received from across the country. No state or territory can do this on their own, and that is why Victoria has a robust and agile national resource-sharing centre to ensure that all jurisdictions get the support they need during these incredibly difficult times. This is a critical amendment that will allow our state to improve and build on our interstate and Commonwealth emergency services cooperation efforts that are so important to our bushfire response.

These amendments drastically expand the scope of this inquiry, I understand that, but as mentioned, this will be supplemental to the inspector general's insight that will be provided at the conclusion of the season. It further illustrates to Victorians that we are actually listening to them and that we want real improvement in Victoria's bushfire response. Over this summer period I have had multiple meetings with stakeholders who understand better than anyone not just what their communities need to recover from these bushfires but what are their very cause. They do not need us telling them how to rebuild their community. They absolutely know it is our role here to listen to them and to understand their concerns and not to play games.

I had the distinct benefit of receiving a briefing from the state emergency management commissioner on this season before the season began. Emergency Management Victoria's understanding of the risk factors when it comes to bushfires, the conditions that lead to bushfires and the preparation that is needed to mitigate the risk of bushfires is truly world class and world leading, no doubt about it. But it is not just this knowledge itself that saves lives, it is how it is communicated to those most at risk. It is my firm belief that Emergency Management Victoria's ability to communicate bushfire risk to Victorians has saved countless lives. In meeting with the commissioner, he outlined to me the value of being able to communicate to Victorians that despite rainfall in the lead-up to this season, he still wanted people to understand that there remained a very significant and serious risk of bushfire and to listen to the feedback of Emergency Management Victoria and the CFA throughout the season.

Some are playing politics with these groups and undermining their credibility. We here are listening to them and we are working with them to provide them with the support that they need to prevent bushfires, what they need to fight those bushfires when they do occur and later how they can continue to support communities to recover, including the recovery of those agencies themselves. This is not just lip-service, it is played out in the numbers, and under our annual investment in emergency services that number has doubled.

In conclusion I am just going to finish my remarks by saying that this government backs our emergency services at every level. We trust Emergency Management Victoria, we trust the CFA and we trust the independence of the inspector-general for emergency management and any insights that she can provide into our bushfire response this summer. Not only do we trust them but we thank them. We thank them for the work they have already done and the work that is still to come, because as we have said many times here over the last two days, the season is not over.

These proposed amendments that have been circulated I understand if passed will work in conjunction with the inspector-general's forthcoming investigation to make sure that government is as bushfire-ready as possible for our increasingly dangerous bushfire seasons. The truth is that those seasons, the ferocity, the frequency and the intensity of them, are increasing time and time again, and that is why I am such a supporter of all of the amendments that I have moved here today. The truth is that climate change is having a very real impact on our seasons; that our cooperation with our friends in other states and territories and the Commonwealth is needed just as much as ever, if not even more; and that every bit of information that comes to people in the critical time needs to be accurate and correct and reflective of information that has come from trusted sources. That is why all three amendments have been moved before us today.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:22): I rise to speak on behalf of myself and my Greens colleagues with respect to motion 1231 in its amended form moved by Mr McGowan. From the outset I thank Mr McGowan for bringing this motion before us and will state from the outset that the Greens will be supporting it. Also at the outset can I just take a moment to acknowledge all of those who have experienced loss and trauma as a result of the recent fires. The most recent fires resulted, as we know, in the death of farmer Max Hobson and the loss of over 340 homes and almost 1000 other structures. Countless people have lost their farms and livelihoods, and whole towns, like Ruffy, have been destroyed; tens of thousands of farm animals have been killed; hundreds of hectares of our ecosystems have been decimated along with countless native animals; thousands and thousands of Victorians experienced extreme stress and uncertainty as they evacuated or made heartbreaking decisions about what and who to leave behind; many thousands of people were impacted by heat and smoke, reflecting a big spike consequently in demand for acute health care; and there are the mental health impacts which will continue long after the last ash has washed away. The road to recovery from fires like these is going to be huge, and the risk of course has not passed. We still have a lot of hot weather to go, and several fires continue to burn across the state.

We owe so much to emergency services agencies, CFA volunteers, career firefighters and other first responders who put their lives and health on the line time and time again to keep us safe, often while their own properties and their own families were at risk. The fact that more lives and more homes were not lost is a testament to their efforts.

It is entirely reasonable to have an inquiry into these fires looking at the issues outlined because, firstly, we can and always should do better but also because we know that we are going to have more frequent and more severe fires into the future. The trajectory we are on with climate change is truly terrifying. The 10 hottest years on record have all occurred in the past 10 years, and the nature of fires is changing. They are getting more frequent, more intense and more difficult to fight. The fires that have just burnt were observed to be unlike anything seasoned fireys have ever experienced. This is exactly what has been predicted by climate scientists, and we are now living it. While heroic efforts of fireys prevented more devastating losses, the fact remains that this state, as it stands, is not well enough prepared for these kinds of disasters into the future.

This was clear in last year's inquiry into the climate resilience of our state's built infrastructure, which identified the risks to critical infrastructure like electricity and telecommunications, particularly for rural communities, many of which came to bear during these fires. The inquiry report also made a range of recommendations aimed at improving the readiness of communities and homes to better withstand disasters and aid in the recovery. Chief among these were the recommendations regarding the establishment of a climate resilience fund to help communities prepare and adapt and a resilient homes fund to help people in high-risk areas rebuild or relocate, but we are yet to see action on this.

Then there is the impact on wildlife, on habitat, on waterways, which are already severely stressed and suffering due to human activities and climate change. The impact on wildlife and our environment is often an afterthought in fires like these, yet recurrent disasters, like this summer's fires, the Budj Bim and Grampians fires last year and the Black Summer bushfires, are pushing already fragile ecosystems to the brink. While protecting human life and property as a priority is understandable, we cannot allow fires like these to rip through what remains of native habitat time and again. We need to have a discussion about how we can prevent and protect our forests and our grasslands and all of the life that they support.

Then there is the resourcing, of course, of our frontline services. It was disappointing to see over the summer the political fight that erupted while fires were still burning become about accounting, which stifled the real discussion our state should have, which is that our emergency response services to climate disasters need a massive increase in funding. This is something that they have long called for, with so many CFA stations, equipment and trucks all being way beyond their useful life currently. Given what we know is coming in a changing climate, simple replacement will not be enough. The costs of fires alone, before you consider any other climate disasters, are monumental, and they are only

increasing. It is time as a community that we had an honest conversation about this and how we are going to fund it. It should be the fossil fuel companies, who are given free rein over our land and over our waters but pay minimal tax, that should be forced to cover the cost of the mess that they are wreaking on our community, not everyday people.

We recognise and welcome the government's establishment of an independent review by the Inspector-General for Emergency Management and look forward to seeing the outcomes of that process. We firmly support their role and their independence, but the issues they are looking into are not the same as the ones that have been outlined, and there is not necessarily the same ability for the public to participate in that process. A parliamentary inquiry allows different perspectives and issues to be explored, which my Greens colleagues and I believe is complementary rather than duplication of IGEM's work. Once again, I thank Mr McGowan for bringing this motion before us, and I commend it to the house.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (16:28): I would like to thank Mr McGowan for bringing this important motion to the chamber today, because this motion talks about reviewing the causes of and the state's preparedness to deal with bushfires that have ravaged Victoria in the past month. After every major fire it is important to learn from the experience of those involved so we know what was done well and how we could improve our response before the next fire season, and I believe there are many lessons to be learned from this fire. Mr McGowan's motion calls for a number of areas to be reviewed, and I will speak to some of those points in my contribution. As Mr Puglielli just pointed out, the inquiry that the government have set up through the emergency management commissioner, although it is called independent, is still a government inquiry, and there is no opportunity for the community to actually participate in it, and it is the voices of those on the ground that we need to hear when we review these bushfires. The people who actually experienced the fires, the people who actually fought the fires – they are the people we should be listening to because they are the ones that have the best knowledge of what went on on the day.

Point (1) in Mr McGowan's motion talks about establishing the environmental and resourcing starting point for fighting the fires. It is important that we know whether our state government had ensured that everything possible to reduce the risk of major fires had been carried out prior to the fire season or whether more needs to be done in this space ahead of the next fire season. Our CFA volunteers on those firegrounds will be certainly able to tell us whether enough had been done to ensure that we were at the right point to fight those fires or not, and they should be able to voice their opinions on that.

Point (2) establishes the source of the fire – that is, whether the fire was started by nature or whether it was accidentally ignited or deliberately lit. It also examines the effectiveness of messaging to the public on preparedness of their properties and the public's understanding of and the clarity of weather forecasts and warnings. These are all important points. It is vital that we understand the causes of the fire so that it can be established if future fires may be prevented. It is also vital to know whether the community's understanding of preparedness, forecasts and warnings is adequate or whether there need to be better public education campaigns or whether the messages need to be simplified. We can only establish this need by talking to those who are affected by the fires, and a better understanding of this has the potential to save hundreds of lives in future events.

Point (3) talks about resourcing of our fire and other emergency services, and this is something that has been hotly debated over the past year, but for some reason the government has been reluctant to discuss the matter with those who are affected. Both the CFA volunteers and FRV, through a campaign led by the United Firefighters Union (UFU), have been vocal about the age and reliability – or should I say unreliability – of Victoria's ageing fleet of fire trucks, and this is not a new problem. During the public hearings held in Wangaratta on 10 July 2017 for the inquiry into fire services reform, the then

CFA assistant chief officer for the north-east Ross Sullivan, when talking about trucks that were 30 years old, told the inquiry:

We need trucks that are fit for purpose. But in those discussions with people around our firefighting fleet, I have said to them, ‘We’ve people who aren’t born today that we’re expecting to drive these fire trucks to fires in 18 or 19 years time, and drive them for 10 or 12 years post that, without all of the things that they are used to in a normal vehicle of today’s standards’.

That is true. We are expecting a child who is born today in 20 years time to drive a fire truck of today’s standard, not of the type of vehicle he or she will have been taught to drive, and certainly they will be then expected to drive them for another 10 or 12 years beyond that point. We just would not put up with it with our own family cars, and our volunteers should not have to put up with it with their fleet of fire trucks. We were talking about this in 2017, we had been talking about it long before that as well and we are still talking about it today, nine years post that review. We are still talking about trucks that are 30 years old, and I know of at least one ageing fire truck that broke down during the Longwood area fires. The UFU has been very vocal over the past couple of years about the age and unreliability of their fleet, so it is vital that we do discuss what the needs of our fire services are to adequately resource them to make sure that they can rely on those vehicles when they get a call to a fire. It is vital also to discuss the recruitment and retention of volunteers, as we need to understand what we can do to attract more firefighters in our state. I have heard stories from captains of brigades who desperately called for additional support and were told, ‘Sorry, all resources have been deployed,’ which fits with both point (3) and point (4).

Point (5) is another important area that talks about the critical services and infrastructure such as electricity, water and telecommunications during the fires, and this is an area that definitely needs to be reviewed and where changes must be made, as these latest fires have highlighted the fragility of our essential services in bushfire areas, where telecommunications can be poor at the best of times and many residents rely on signals boosted via an electrical system. We can and must do better for these communities.

Point (6) talks of the impact on businesses and agriculture. Business support has been slow in coming and in fact has not come at all yet following the fires. But business and tourist operator income just stopped whether they were directly affected by the fires or not. Whilst our first priority is always to support those directly affected, governments need to remember the effects of the fire are wide reaching in a community and require a holistic response.

Point (7) goes to the impact on native forests, the environment and wildlife, which is always going to be the greatest when fires are unplanned and burn out of control, which is another reason why our planning and preparedness need to be reviewed. And point (8) recommends reviewing the lessons learned and the progress made on recommendations from previous bushfire inquiries, including the royal commission.

We all know that we live in an environment where fires are inevitable – they are an inevitable fact of life for us – but we can and must do more to reduce the impact and severity of future fires. This inquiry is not about laying blame. It is not a witch-hunt. It is about holding a sensible review of resourcing and practices to ensure our state is best equipped for future fire events. I note that the government has distributed some amendments to the motion. I always thought that we actually had an agreement that we would not amend motions in opposition business, and therefore I will not be supporting the government amendments, but I do commend the original motion to the house.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:36): I also rise to speak on motion number 1231 in Mr McGowan’s name today. I am pleased to be able to share some comments further to what this chamber extensively canvassed yesterday on the very serious and very heavy recollection, remembrance and condolence for the victims of the recent fires that we have seen, which are in fact still underway, and it is a great mercy that they are now approaching containment. But as I and many others said yesterday, we are certainly not out of the woods yet for this fire season. It is incumbent on

all of us to remain vigilant and to remain as prepared as we can and to have our fire plans executed ready to go, especially those in higher fire risk areas, especially of course in regional areas, but indeed as well in that outer metropolitan fringe, and even those in places such as growth estates near areas of large grassland as well need to be very cognisant of fire. I think it is a worthy time to remind ourselves of that.

I want to actually jump straight into the conversation that Ms Lovell was raising in relation to the inspector-general for emergency management. At the outset, I appreciate that Ms Lovell was at pains to acknowledge that IGEM is an independent authority. But despite that, the ‘I’ in IGEM does not actually stand for ‘independent’, it stands for ‘inspector’ – it is the inspector-general for emergency management. IGEM has a role to play in all of these types of incidents, and it does that already very well. I would also like to challenge the perception that IGEM is a closed-book inquiry. They do, and my full expectation is they will continue to, embrace and invite public submissions from community stakeholders into their inquiries. I think it is important when we are discussing what we are discussing here with bushfires and with the inquiry process that follows that we are doing so from the basis of accuracy. You can go onto the IGEM’s website and you can see their previous reports. You can see the extensive ways in which they have embraced public consultation and feedback into their inquiries. I do not want to see the very good work that IGEM do denigrated or reduced or minimised as a pretext for establishing a parliamentary inquiry when, as many of us on this side of the chamber are saying, the appropriate authority with the appropriate experience, expertise and know-how is no doubt already going to be undertaking this work.

I also note, for that matter, contrary to comments made by the Leader of the Nationals in the other place, complaining of IGEM that ‘he would be checking his own work’. It is actually Dr Emily Phillips who leads IGEM. Clearly, again, we seem to have a problem where the Liberal and National parties do not understand the very things that they are criticising. That is why I do have some reservations about the way in which this has been put forward to the house today. I do think that IGEM and Dr Phillips and her team will no doubt conduct an exemplary job, as she is charged to do on behalf of the Victorian people. But the very fact that the coalition are so desperate to try and jump in to apparently make political hay out of this just goes to one of the points that my colleague Ms Watt was making about mis- and disinformation.

When it comes to bushfire, we all have in this state different and varying levels of experience with it. Many have had very recent and very difficult and traumatic experiences with it. I am blessed that despite having lived in fire-prone areas for much of my life I have not had to deal with any of the horrific end of the scale. But it is a very serious thing, and it is a time of incredible anxiety and tension for many Victorians. Those are the times when we need to be as accurate as we can possibly be, to be precise and not just to be peddling something because you think it might benefit you politically without checking the veracity of it.

I have outlined the reasons as to why I believe IGEM should be the most appropriate body to conduct this inquiry. Irrespective of whether the Environment and Planning Committee is charged today to conduct this inquiry that is before us or not, IGEM will no doubt do that work, and I expect that it will do it thoroughly. It is on that basis that I am pleased to rise in support of the three amendments as moved by Ms Watt, who is of course in addition to being an active member of this chamber also the Parliamentary Secretary for Emergency Services and has a deep and vested passion in this field. I am grateful to her for including these amendments, firstly, just alone for the reasons I have briefly outlined. Although some of the examples may be trivial, they do go to the point of misinformation and disinformation when it is in a critical setting, when it is in the setting of a state of disaster. The consequences of that, intentional or not, can be devastating. I think that is worthy for us to be looking at or for our colleagues in the EPC to be looking at should this inquiry pass the house.

Another one, which has been raised by Ms Watt, is the impact of climate change on the natural environment. The Environment and Planning Committee is surely the appropriate place for such an inquiry to be held if it is to be done, given its very recent work on its inquiry into Victoria’s climate

resilience. I know they conducted a hearing just outside my electorate, up in Emerald, and they conducted hearings right across regional Victoria as well and were able to glean lots of really valuable feedback from communities in and adjacent to my area as well as others across the state.

We are seeing these events happen more often at a greater severity, and that is undisputed. We can challenge and question whether in particular any individual fire event or any individual disaster event is a direct consequence of climate change of course, but you cannot dispute that in the frequency and severity of events that we are seeing, the phrase ‘once in 100 years’ has become almost comical in some places, whether it be fire or whether it be flood. We have always faced those challenges in this country and in this state, but we are seeing it at a greater severity right now. That is an appropriate thing to be considered if we are to be looking at a broader perspective of our state’s fire response, and also, quite rightly of course, it is appropriate to acknowledge the interjurisdictional support that we have had once again from firefighters. I discovered that it was the first time that firefighters from the Northern Territory had come to Victoria, which we certainly very much welcome and are grateful for. As mentioned yesterday, even some firefighters from Alberta Wildfire came down to help, which was an extraordinary act of decency and mateship, which I know all Victorians will be very, very grateful for. To be reaching out from literally the other side of the world and to support each other is very important in these times of crisis, knowing that we also, of course, will send our crews to help overseas in places like Canada or New Zealand or elsewhere where there are disasters occurring. It is a special bond that we have and one that we very much value and that should be acknowledged quite properly in the work of any such inquiry that is to take place.

I think it is important to reiterate at the end as well that we are not at the end of the fire season. There are still many, many weeks to go. We are having a hot day again today; we could have much more heat on the horizon. For those reasons we need to be constantly vigilant to the risk of fire as well. No doubt, as I said, the IGEM will be doing its role as it is appropriate to do, and we should all be respectful of that process in a healthy cynical or critical fashion, as may be the case – we are politicians, after all. We should be observant and watching that process closely, but we should also be allowing the appropriate independent mechanism to do its job properly and thoroughly as well.

I have outlined the reasons for why I am not convinced this inquiry is the most appropriate use of this committee or this Parliament’s time in light of the duplicative nature that such an inquiry would bring. Nevertheless, I am very confident that in either respect, whether it passes or not, the amendments that have been put forward by Ms Watt will make any such potential inquiry much stronger and much more inclusive and give the inquiry a greater ability to actually provide some meaningful reform recommendations that may help in future preparedness as well.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:46): In Victoria and in Australia every summer everyone fears the bushfires that may come, and we always have things that we can learn from and do better. That is why we have inquiries and that is why we have in Victoria the inspector-general for emergency management – IGEM. They do this type of reporting every time that there is an incident. I take some of the government’s points that we do not want to disparage or undermine the work that they do. I am sure they are professionals and do their job well. However, this inquiry is far broader than what I believe IGEM would normally look at, and therefore I agree that what this inquiry will look at is complementary rather than duplicative.

I also take the government’s point that the fires are not yet out so this is somewhat premature. I do agree with that – that it is somewhat premature. It would be my preference that we wait at least until the fires are out before we start looking at what could have been done better. But nevertheless, I think that this is a valuable opportunity for people that have been affected by bushfires to put in their submissions and to appear before public inquiries that will happen. And I think that parliamentary inquiries in general are a really good way – in fact probably the best way in many ways – for members of the public to interact with Parliament, get their views known and get them into a report. So I do think that it is really important that inquiries like this happen. Therefore I will be supporting this inquiry going to the Environment and Planning Committee.

Another concern which the government has raised is the duplicative and wasteful nature of this. There will be some extra costs, I imagine, in travel and accommodation and things like that. But members of Parliament are already getting paid, so they are not going to cost any extra apart from travel. I am not sure of the staffing requirements, but I do not imagine that it will be a huge amount of money compared to the benefit that we will hopefully gain from this. Therefore I will be supporting the inquiry going ahead. I hope that the committee can do their best work and come up with useful recommendations that will improve the way that we manage bushfires and their aftermath and the other issues that are going to be tackled by the inquiry when it goes ahead.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (16:49): I firmly believe that this is one of the most important issues facing our regional communities at this time, and I completely and fully support the motion to present and inquire into the points raised by Mr McGowan today. This has been a collaboration of work through many shadows: Danny O'Brien, the Shadow Minister for Emergency Services; you, Mr McGowan; me as well for public land management; and many others. I thank them all for working constructively and I thank the crossbench for their constructive discussions with Mr McGowan, Mrs McArthur and others. We spent a number of hours yesterday very appropriately reflecting on the impact of out-of-control bushfires through this 2026 summer season and the horrendous impact that these fires have had on lives, livelihoods, infrastructure, homes, stock, farms and businesses in our beautiful regional towns. Of course bushfires are not only the space of the regions. They can nip into the suburban landscape as well, and it is just lucky that it has not happened so far.

I want to re-place on record my gratitude to all of those people, all the CFA volunteers who run towards danger with their equipment, their skills, their passion, their understanding and their ageing trucks. They run toward forest fires and they work with all the skill and effort they can to suppress them. I want to thank all of the other staff that sit in behind that. I could reiterate all of my speech from yesterday, but I will not because there is plenty to talk about. Thank you to the volunteers. Thank you to all the community organisations. Thank you to the departmental staff that work so hard. Thank you to Victoria Police. Thank you, thank you, thank you on this.

It is for this reason that we need to interrogate, investigate, analyse and lay on the table in this Parliament the truth in an inquiry by a committee of which I have been a member for now 11 years, the Environment and Planning Committee, to investigate, analyse and tease out the truth of these fires.

You will hear me say this regularly: Australia and our state of Victoria have evolved with fire in the landscape. That is a natural phenomenon. We then overlay a change in regimes over thousands of years. In the last 200 years we have put people in the landscape and we intertwine people and the environment. Unless we continue to be responsible about how to mitigate fire and reduce fire in the landscape, put in prevention – creative prevention, thoughtful prevention and physical prevention – in our landscape, we are going to continue to have to back-end bushfires with huge suppression, huge personnel and infrastructure and equipment into bushfire when it exists. And then we have to present recovery, and not only recovery in a financial sense, which is a huge burden on taxpayers – there is no doubt about it – but recovery of the psyche of many of those people whose lives have been so drastically impacted. We owe it to all of those Victorians to investigate this.

We have heard some quips about the IGEM role. It was a Liberal and National government that introduced the inspector-general of emergency management. But the difference here is that this institution, the IGEM, reports to the Minister for Emergency Services. It does not report to the Victorian public, it reports to the minister first, and it sits within the Department of Justice and Community Safety. That is the way it was set up. It was set up to analyse a very important issue. But this issue over time – over decades – we have seen it expand, and we need that more forensic detail. We need to be able to have public hearings with a breadth of people. We need to be able to cross-examine as members of Parliament. As limited as we are in our knowledge, we need to be able to forensically investigate this. That is a broader spectrum than the inspector-general. I appreciate the work that Emily Phillips does, but it is a case to a certain degree of an internal audit within the system we need across the board. This motion that Mr McGowan has read through covers a lot of that breadth.

We need to talk about and understand former inquiries. The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission into the Black Saturday fires is a supremely important issue that I do not believe this government has paid homage to enough, reflected on enough or bothered to implement. A royal commission, again, hears from a broad range of experts, from on-the-ground locals to scientists from across the board. They have made recommendations that this government has wiped. The government have gone, 'No, we've changed our mind. We're going to introduce a thing called Safer Together.' Well, at the moment the government is not presenting information around Safer Together. It is not presenting the fuel-driven risk that is now 18 months old. We want to go and ask what is happening on the ground. One of the recommendations from the bushfires royal commission, one I state often, is recommendation 56 about a long-term program of prescribed burns – 5 per cent as a rolling target – on public land. Then the next one is that the department – it has changed its name now – should report annually on prescribed burn outcomes in a manner that meets public accountability and objectives. Surely one of the objectives of public accountability should be around saying that we are doing the work to protect this state in a better capacity. We will never remove fire from the landscape. We need to learn to live with fire, but we need to be able to take the wise advice from previous recommendations and work out how they can be remodelled into this state.

I could speak ad nauseam about fuel reduction, but what I will say is that we have got an amazing group of people there who work on this. There needs to be respect for what they do, and I know my colleague Danny O'Brien raised an issue that I have been working with him and others on about paying the staff. Now, there is more to say on that, but it is about paying the staff of that plant panel – think civil contractors – who have been told that they would have work. Many of them have not been paid. The minister said into *Hansard*, 'We're about fighting bushfires, not about doing the book work' – something like that. You ask contractors to go out into the forest and use their plant and equipment – their feller bunchers and their harvesters and bulldozers – to take down dangerous trees to help with the suppression of these bushfires, and then the minister says that. Look, to his credit, he said, 'I'll go and check, but we're not too worried about book work.' Well, we all get paid every week. These people need to be paid and respected, and I hope the minister comes back with some positive results in that space, I really do. I am not saying it is his fault per se, but a good government looks at the holistic nature of not only mitigation and suppression but also recovery and paying those people that you contract to help you out. I do not think that is too much to ask.

In relation to some of these other things that the government wants to insert, I am technically not opposed to them, because I reckon there has been some impact of misinformation that we have heard from the government, so what works for the cat can work for the goose as well. I am not opposed to seeing this. Let us unpack some of the minister's own misinformation – or just lack of knowledge – but also the Premier's. I will wait and see where we go with that one.

The other thing is the impact on native wildlife. Every bushfire has an impact. We saw in the 2019–20 fires it was actually billions of wildlife, flora and fauna, destroyed and incinerated. That goes on top of livestock, which is just horrendous. I support this motion. This is a very important motion, and I will be more than happy to stay up late and get up early to make sure this inquiry succeeds in building capacity and understanding and direction for government.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (16:59): I rise to speak on this motion seeking an inquiry into the bushfire season which we all experienced over January. As someone who represents an inner-city electorate, my community was not at the centre of where the fires were devastating bushland, farmland, and rural properties, towns and regional cities. But so many of us in Southern Metro know somebody who does live out in those areas who had to evacuate, whose community was damaged, whose business was disrupted or whose children were terrified or worried day after day that their community would be next. Listening to the emergency broadcasting and the ABC, one could hear the pain in the voices of those who were ringing up and reporting on what they had seen on the ground – people whose properties had been destroyed, with the streets they had known for decades made unrecognisable. Both the state and federal governments have made solemn commitments to the

communities affected by this summer's fires that they will not be abandoned and that we will help them rebuild.

As we are all aware, at the end of January the Allan Labor government announced jointly with the federal government a package worth \$160 million in recovery support, which came on top of the \$210 million already announced. This additional funding will be used to support regional communities, households and businesses in the difficult and long work of recovering and rebuilding in the aftermath of the disaster. This funding is being delivered on top of the more than \$210 million already announced in relief and recovery supports for Victorians affected by these destructive blazes, including emergency relief payments, grants for primary producers, access to emergency accommodation and support for councils. The Allan Labor government has also secured an additional \$112 million that will expand the state coordinator clean-up program with Forge Solutions. It will be available to uninsured and underinsured residential homes and structures, as well as businesses and community assets like sporting facilities and community halls. There will also be another \$200 million for the emergency recovery support program. This government understands that Victorians need support throughout the recovery journey, helping people affected by bushfires access government support programs and the services they need.

The Victorian Labor government has made it easy for people when it comes to staying alert and updated about the risk of fires across the state. I want to take a moment here to acknowledge all those people in rural communities that have been dealing with the harsh reality of bushfires in this state and our hardworking emergency services and their continued efforts to prepare and respond to fires across Victoria. The 2024–25 annual report for the CFA demonstrates that funding has reached its highest level in five years. Grant funding to the CFA has increased by nearly \$22 million under the Victorian Labor government. Its total income is up by more than \$26 million, with the CFA's assets base growing by about \$106 million.

The further \$80 million provided for fire season preparedness shows the Allan Labor government's commitment to more funding for volunteers, more equipment on the ground and more investment in the stations, trucks and tools that Victorians rely on during emergencies, supporting early deployment of regional aerial firefighting, helping increase the CFA's water storage across the state and improving fire danger signs across Victoria. On top of this the Allan Labor government has announced a \$40 million rolling stock replacement program for the CFA, building on the almost 100 vehicles currently on the production line and the 95 vehicles recently delivered to brigades across the state. It was under the Victorian Labor government that the VicEmergency app and hotline were created, keeping more Victorians safe and informed, allowing live tracking of blazes and monitoring risks to local communities. This streamlined all emergency warnings into one place in 2016 through a single service.

I believe every member in this chamber can agree on keeping Victorians safe. The Allan Labor government remains steadfast in its commitment to investing in frontline workers and resources, supporting volunteers, strengthening aviation capacity and deployment, modernising land and fuel management, embracing new technologies and building climate resilience, always with the aim of protecting life, property, flora and fauna. The Allan Labor government will continue to build a safer, more resilient Victoria today and for the years to come, and we look to support Victorians in the aftermath of another challenging fire season. Victorians should feel confident that this government is dedicated to ensuring the safety of everyone during the recovery process.

Last year the Allan Labor government set out to safeguard schools, ensuring they were well prepared. 345 campuses across 330 government schools were granted \$8.4 million to carry out essential maintenance work as part of the bushfire preparedness vegetation program. The program was introduced in 2018 to assist schools to undertake their risk reduction practices of vegetation clearing around school buildings prior to bushfire seasons.

The Allan Labor government is committed to backing our hardworking CFA volunteers, ensuring they have new fit-for-purpose vehicles, enhanced technology and tailored safety gear. We will back the people that protect our vulnerable communities in difficult times by ensuring they have the tools and the protection they need. Victoria is one of the most bushfire-prone places on earth. Preparedness must be ongoing, adaptive and grounded in evidence, and the Allan Labor government are doing exactly that. Over the past decade, Victorians have shifted from a simplistic, hectare-based model of fire reduction to a risk-reduction model, one that was directly recommended by the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. This model enables Forest Fire Management Victoria to prioritise areas close to communities, key escape routes, regional towns and high-risk corridors. It allows a combination of fuel reduction burns with mechanical works, slashing, mulching and targeted economic burns. Local communities are involved in decision-making about bushfire management all year round. This means understanding what these communities care about most and working with them to determine local solutions to reduce the fire risk. This approach sees the movement from a hectare target for planned burns to a risk-reduction target for bushfire management. It means a more integrated approach across public and private land, with fuel management just one of the range of different management actions that are taken to protect lives, homes, jobs and the environment. Fuel management today is more effective and strategic because of these changes, protecting more Victorian communities and keeping what is important to keep them safe. That is why we continue to work closely with communities, local brigades, councils and emergency leaders to plan, prepare and adapt to best support fire-prone communities. We want Victorians to feel supported, confident and equipped with the information they need.

Those opposing this government refuse to acknowledge the reason for the increased severity of the season and want to double down by pushing back progress for cleaner energy. They want to talk about risk reduction but do not want to comment on how these outcomes stem from larger environmental changes which mean regional communities have faced floods, storms and bushfires with increasing frequency. Risk reduction is crucial in avoiding uncontrolled blazes – that is true – and the Allan Labor government will continue to take serious, evidence-based and climate-informed approaches to the risk of bushfires. Victoria's climate is changing, our fire seasons are becoming longer, hotter and more unpredictable, planned burning windows are narrowing, fuel is curing earlier and severe weather events are becoming more frequent. The Allan Labor government continues to strengthen emergency services, choosing to invest in the people facing these blazes, delivering the Victorian climate resilience strategy, which supports local councils to prepare for climate impacts, investing in community-based resilience programs across regional Victoria and expanding fire prevention programs in high-risk local government areas.

Preparedness also does not just happen at the government or agency level; it happens in households and neighbourhoods and communities. That is why our government is continuing to strengthen information access, local fire planning initiatives and targeted engagement programs. The Allan Labor government is also delivering vital water security for drought-affected farmers in western Victoria. Construction is now underway for the Mininera rural pipeline project. This project will enhance firefighting capabilities, with 10 hydrants and seven firefighting tanks to be installed within the project. The Allan Labor government knows preparedness is not reactive; it is sustained and, importantly, it is an approach that adapts to the weather change and area. We cannot eliminate the risk of bushfires entirely, but we can ensure that Victoria is prepared by supporting protective management practices. Under this government, that work will never stop.

The Allan Labor government understands the importance of climate change and the need to work in a broader framework within the states, territories and the Commonwealth. Importantly, we need to fight the misinformation being spread across Victoria about these bushfires. The Allan Labor government understand the impacts of climate change on the natural environment and will continue to fight misinformation around these natural disasters so Victorians are informed and can be kept safe.

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (17:09): I rise to make a short contribution to this in support of the motion. It was interesting listening to a few of the contributions earlier. Ms Bath probably put up one of the best reasons for this inquiry as opposed to just the IGEM report, which is that IGEM does not report to Parliament directly – it reports to the minister, and the minister goes through – while this does. There is a little bit of me that wonders why this is not an ongoing reference, so every year the Parliament does their own investigations. Is it doubling up? I do not know. But if it is out in the open, it is done, we have public hearings, and we can talk about it. It is a lot easier to talk about it here. It does not have to go through a process and maybe pop out one day when the minister of the time feels it is appropriate; it is out there and ongoing.

I do not have a lot of time, so I am going to go through some of the notes I have made. Part (2) is the causes and circumstances of bushfires. I was honoured to go and have a look at some stuff at Swinburne University in Hawthorn a little while ago. It was mostly about using AI-type technology to predict floods. But I was thinking about it and remembering the technology they were using. It may also be possible for that to be used, maybe not to predict bushfires as such, because that is hard, but certainly to predict which way they are likely to go. There is a lot of meteorological data that goes out there. There is a lot of satellite data, there is a lot of data in how fires burn, topographical issues and things like that. I am not on that committee, so maybe I am making work for them, but it is something that they could definitely think about approaching. Is there a way of at least getting an idea where a fire is going to go? And by using the computing power we have today, we can have it in a usable amount of time. Obviously, you cannot rely on that sort of technology, because things change, but even just being occasionally ahead of the curve is going to work.

Part (3) is about the funding, equipment and appliances for the CFA, FRV and Forest Fire Management Victoria. There are obviously ongoing problems with volunteerism across the board, but the CFA are feeling it too. I will not thrash away at the problems that they have had in the recent years that have caused people to feel a little less than appreciated at the CFA. But there are people turning up, and we need to make sure that they are talked to and listened to when it comes to this. Forest Fire Management Vic are a bunch that we do not hear a lot of, but they are normally out there in public land doing the hard work along with everyone else. I too sometimes forget about them, and I need to do better with that.

Part (4) is:

the emergency responses to control and contain the fires, including adequacy of resources and communications ...

That brings up the problem that the FRV have been having in the new tunnel. There are also black spots just with hilly country; it is easy to get black spots. Again, there is new technology that we can be using and looking at that can help, because communication also saves lives. If someone knows that there is a fire front coming – because obviously when it is really full-on it is smoky and you are not really sure – they can get a radio message and they can deal with it.

Part (5) is:

the resilience of critical services and infrastructure, such as electricity, water and telecommunications ...

I reckon this is probably the most important one of the lot, because fires will happen. We get dry lightning; we get all sorts of things that create a fire. We deal with the fire as a community, and then we leave it more or less to the insurance companies and some of the government departments to work on resilience. There are a lot of people feeling left out, and whether that is just a feeling or a reality is something that we need to be looking at. We need to get the recovery going faster and better.

There is another part, just before I run out of time. It is a strange one, but it works back into some of my core stuff – the impact on the environment, including native wildlife. One of the problems we had in the 2009 bushfires was that the regrowth created the perfect storm for deer to breed. Right now the amount of land that was burnt is close to that of the 2009 fires, so we need to get on the front foot now.

That does not mean declaring them a pest, because you cannot hunt pests in a national park, you cannot use dogs, you cannot use hound hunting. Farmers will then be responsible for pests, and farmers can already do everything they need. So it is about management, not just feel-good carry-on, which is the inevitable ‘let’s call them a pest’. Right now we have got all this ability to make sure that when the regrowth comes we can use contractors, we can use organisations, we can use recreational shooters – whatever makes people feel good. But we need to get on to the population before it becomes a problem. But on the whole I support this motion, and I hope everyone else does too.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (17:14): I appreciate the opportunity to speak in support of this motion. I think it is very important. I am a member of the Environment and Planning Committee, but the decision is not made just because I am a member. It is up to this chamber to support the move for an inquiry, and I think it speaks to the value of committees and the work they do with a range of different political parties represented to actually have witnesses and do a deep dive into the issues and to make recommendations to government.

I know from observing what has happened in these recent bushfires that the elements reflected in this motion are so important. Talking about overgrown roadsides and everything, I remember getting a text from a person who lost their house in the Harcourt fires, and it says:

My property backed directly onto the rail track. There grass and scrub berry behind my fence was 6–12 foot high. Crown land beside me. Also 6ft high. They never ever came out to maintain their land.

I think I saw a slasher there 6 years ago

We have talked about ageing tankers. I know I have raised that in this chamber. Also I remember speaking to fire brigade volunteers with the CFA. They took a trip to Shepparton on the highway there in open cabin – people on the back, volunteers, in over 40-degree heat and fibreglass seats. That is the situation we are putting our volunteers in. I also spoke with other brigade members who talked about the radio failures of communication and how dangerous that was in the situation that they were in.

I know we need to talk more about the facilities that there are in our regions. Nick McGowan spoke earlier about Bendigo and the incredible waste of money there and the failure to redevelop that fire station that is not fit for purpose – and an empty station, a ghost station with \$2.5 million or more spent on that and it still remains empty – while we have got brigades like Axe Creek that do not have facilities and are washing their materials in buckets out the front of their station. And also the Charlton fire brigade is divided between different locations, so members have to go and get gear from one and then go offsite to access the tanker, wasting critical minutes. I know Charlton did have fires that damaged I think it was 15 farms or so in December.

There are so many issues. I know there are power outages – I talked about them in the chamber today – and the telecommunications dropouts that occur across our region. We saw the impact on Mount Alexander of the loss of ABC radio because the telecommunication towers there were damaged during the fires. So there was no live TV for some time as well, which had a big impact on the area.

I have also heard discussed in the halls of this chamber the impact on wildlife, and I know trained personnel that were not permitted to go out and assist the injured wildlife. So there are definitely issues that need to be addressed, along with livestock that urgently need to be euthanised. I have spoken to farmers that have had to deal with horrendous situations and felt completely cut off because of road closures. I think it is important to think that after the floods we did have a parliamentary inquiry and I was a part of that, and I know my colleagues Ms Lovell and Ms Bath were also part of that inquiry. It is so important to reflect, to look back on what has happened and to think, ‘What can we do better?’ And that is why I really encourage this house to support this motion.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (17:19): Well, of course I support Mr McGowan’s motion to establish an inquiry into the 2026 summer bushfires, because what we witnessed and reflected upon yesterday was not just a natural disaster. There was also, unfortunately, some degree of failed preparedness, resourcing and accountability. The inquiry we propose is not a formality or a box-ticking

exercise. It is the only serious way to ensure that what went wrong is identified, confronted and not repeated.

The scale of devastation certainly demands our attention. Over 110,000 hectares of farmland have been affected – more than half a million hectares of land in total. More than 41,000 livestock have perished, including nearly 32,000 sheep. One man, cattle farmer Max Hobson, tragically lost his life defending his property near Seymour. There have been endless livelihoods destroyed and compromised, generational farms hard hit and breeding programs built over generations wiped out overnight. As an example, the Mansfield shire gave me some interesting information. There, 5000 hectares were impacted and businesses reported an average of 70 per cent loss of income. Service stations in Bonnie Doon that normally trade \$25,000 to \$28,000 per day saw their takings collapse to just \$5000 to \$7000. Even the Mansfield races were cancelled, costing nearly \$50,000. Music in the Vines was cancelled. This inquiry is imperative.

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:20): This inquiry is not about politics, it is about good policy. If you need any evidence of that, then look at the people who have collectively worked to make this inquiry a reality. It is appropriate that I thank all of them, including those who spoke today: members Watt, Puglielli, Lovell, Galea, Bath, Berger, Bourman, Broad, McArthur, Limbrick – all of them spoke today, and I thank them for their contributions.

I also want to make particular mention of Max Hobson. We mentioned him yesterday in our condolence motion, and it would be appropriate to do so again now. Further to that, I must pay special tribute to a particular group of people led by the United Firefighters Union and Peter Marshall, the farmers and the CFA volunteers. For months and months and months those three groups, who you may not necessarily find together, have banded together and done two things. They have continued to shine a light on what our firefighters, plural, whether they be volunteer or career, need to do their jobs successfully. In large part, if this inquiry is successful in coming up today it is because of their willingness, led by Peter and the UFU, and as I said, in a combined effort with Andrew Wiedemann from the Across Victoria Alliance and the CFA volunteers. Their ongoing efforts have brought us to this point. We thank them for those months and months of work and their efforts right across Victoria.

I also want to thank of course the leader of my party Jess Wilson for her leadership by example. There is not a day that has gone by in the time she has been the Leader of the Liberal Party where she has not provided a great example and been on the ground speaking to people one on one. Danny O'Brien, the Leader of the National Party, not only in his shadow portfolio but also as Leader of the National Party, has been unwavering in this regard, as has Melina Bath – she was here before, but I am sure she has just stepped out for a moment – in her shadow ministerial responsibilities. Bev McArthur too, and of course Gaelle Broad, the local member – each has continued to show ongoing advocacy for not only the CFA but also farmers and professional career firefighters, unwaveringly so in that respect.

I will perhaps come back to the chamber for a moment. The reality is, again, if there is success to be had today it is because the whole crossbench have made that a collective success. Without the support of the Greens – and I make particular mention of Ellen Sandell and Dr Sarah Mansfield and their leadership – it would not have happened. It is likewise with the Legalise Cannabis Party – Rachel and David, although he is probably watching at home; sad as it is, he is not well. But if he is, then David, get back to bed and stop annoying Rachel, please. To the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers – to Jeff – thank you for your support. Likewise thank you to Georgie, who I know is somewhere around, from the Animal Justice Party. To One Nation, to Rikkie, thank you to her as well, and to David Limbrick, who I have mentioned already, from the Libertarian Party, who spoke as part of the contribution.

This is not just about thanking people, it is about a reality on the ground. As I said at the beginning, it is not about politics, it is about good policy. You would not get these names, this collective group, together if it was not about that. I need no other reminder than what happened when I finished yesterday here at Parliament. The first thing I did was drive back to Ringwood, because unfortunately during the course of the day I had a picture sent to me. We have two appliances at Ringwood. One of

those appliances is a replacement appliance for a teleboom that we have not had. It has been on and off for a year, and this is in Ringwood. It is an appliance we are supposed to have. It is an aerial appliance so firefighters can fight fires from above – two stories and so forth. The picture I received yesterday as I sat here in Parliament during the condolence motions was of that fire truck literally being towed out of the fire station at Ringwood. That is the replacement truck being towed away, so we are now down to one appliance in Ringwood. Yesterday was a very hot day. Today was a very hot day. There will be very many hot days to come. The sole purpose of this inquiry is to make sure that no mistakes are made and that our firefighters – plural – career and volunteer, have the resources they need. This is not a competition. It is about making sure they have everything they need to save property, to save lives and to respond to medical emergencies when called to do so. The fact that we have had such broad support today speaks to that.

Council divided on amendments:

Ayes (21): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, David Limbrick, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Noes (15): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Amendments agreed to.

Amended motion agreed to.

Business of the house

Notices of motion and orders of the day

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:32): I move:

That the consideration of the remaining notices of motion and orders of the day, general business, be postponed until the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Statements on tabled papers and petitions

Department of Treasury and Finance

Budget papers 2025–26

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:32): I rise to speak on budget paper 3 of the 2025–26 budget papers, specifically the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing output initiatives and in particular the output initiative of LGBTIQ+ equality policy and programs.

This budget, like many previous budgets, is one that is seen as further evidence and proof of the Allan government's continued support for Victoria's vibrant and strong LGBTIQ+ community. In particular we saw initiatives around QHub expanding on-site mental health and wellbeing services to where people need them in the western Victoria region, including in Ballarat and Geelong. We have also seen the extension of the trans and gender-diverse peer support program as well, which I know many advocates in the community were very thrilled to see continue because it is a very, very important piece of work that makes a real and substantial difference to people's lives.

This work of course builds off this government's long and proud history in standing up and defending our state's LGBTIQ+ community from hateful attacks from wherever they may come from, including banning conversion therapy laws quite some time ago now. We are also the first and still only jurisdiction in the nation that has a dedicated Minister for Equality, a role which is now being

very ably filled by Vicki Ward. We also have Australia's first and still only LGBTIQA+ commissioner, and in this respect Joe Ball is undertaking an absolutely fantastic job and acquitting his responsibilities extremely well.

This government of course was also very proud last year to successfully legislate reformed anti-vilification laws, giving people with diverse genders and sexual orientations representation in those laws and giving them that protection as well, which is something that I know many, many advocates in the community have been campaigning for for an extraordinary amount of time – in excess of 20 years. I do want to make brief note of and acknowledge Jamie Gardiner for his extensive advocacy in this space. It is great to see these laws, albeit opposed by the opposition, now coming into effect in Victoria.

A few weeks ago I had the great privilege of representing minister Vicki Ward at the opening at the carnival for Midsumma. Midsumma is an annual festival that many members will be very familiar with. It is community run and community driven and does an outstanding job, you have to say. It is not just Carnival day and the Pride march, there are events right across the state – in fact continuing right as we speak – for another few days yet before the festival wraps up this Sunday, 8 February. It was a privilege to be there on Carnival day along with many other colleagues from this place, from all different parties, and great to be meeting with and talking to people, especially those for whom this was the first carnival, the first time they felt safe to come out and be part of it. There was lots of entertainment and shows – you could say 'wig snatch', maybe 'mic-scratch', depending on what you are reading – but fundamentally it was a terrific, terrific event and great to see the community out in force.

We also of course had Pride march just a few days ago. It was great to once again join with my colleagues from the Labor Party, and I know many others from this place were there on the day as well to take part in that march and the show of love and solidarity amongst the community down in St Kilda with people from our Victorian community coming from all corners of the state in unity. It was great to have some milder weather this year compared to previous years – and certainly very welcome before a busy sitting week, because the last thing you want is to be red with sunburn – but it was a great day to be there. We were also joined by Mitch Brown, who of course made history last year when he came out as bisexual – the very first former AFL player to come out. He told a few of us how special it was; he had been to Pride march and watched it from the sidelines many times before, but this was the first year he was able to fully embrace it and be himself, and how wonderful that was.

There is ongoing discussion, and I understand that the organisers have undertaken a two-year trial of uniforms in relation to police and other emergency services workers. I myself have had contact with many constituents in my region, including one paramedic who works in the Seaford Ambulance Victoria branch. He was very distressed as he feels he cannot march in uniform in Pride and be proud of who he is, and for the sake of constituents such as him and others, I hope that he will be able to again sometime very soon.

Environment and Planning Committee

Inquiry into Climate Resilience

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:37): I would like to make a couple of comments in statements on reports on the Victorian government's response to the parliamentary inquiry into climate resilience. The response has just come out today I believe, and I have just started to have a look into it, so there will be more things to say moving forward. But as I start on this conversation, I would like to put on record my thanks to somebody, a very special person, in this place who retired after I think it was 29 years of service in the Victorian Parliament, and that is our former secretariat of the Environment and Planning Committee – in fact I think she has been secretariat to many, many, many committees – and that is Lilian Topic. I was very pleased to attend her farewell, and I know there were very lovely speeches made about her. What I appreciate is the dedication of our parliamentary staff and their expertise but also very much their humanity in dealing with the general public when we have hearings, when we have submitters. They really work hand-in-glove to maximise the experience of those people

and also to maximise the truth so that humble members of Parliament can analyse. Then, without taking anything away from the chair of the committee, I assume that our secretariat, including Lilian, workshops the most skilful interpretation of very difficult legislation and regulations – and I will not say it is intergalactic stellar, but it is all the way in-between. So thank you, Lilian, for your service to the Victorian people and certainly to our committee into the bargain.

In relation to some of the things that the government has agreed with, I am pleased to say that if you go back and look into the report, there are some good sections in there, including:

That the Victorian Government ensure First Nations land management practices are firmly embedded in climate resilience ... including adaptation plans.

I am pleased that that is in there. I think as part of the whole climate change discussion we have to look back into history and understand what worked in the past and how our traditional owners, our First Nations people, actually managed the land. Many, many times I have said in here and many books have been written on the fact that they actively managed the land through fire in the landscape. We should reintroduce that practice and bring it back in a holistic sense. I think that this state, the government and the Liberals and Nationals without a doubt can look to walk and chew gum. I think we can do bushfire mitigation and fuel reduction as well as First Nations land practices such as cool burns. I think this is a really important part of not only reducing the risk in our communities but also healing country. I know that is a glib word. Somebody will probably say ‘How can you say that?’ I think it is very important. When you go out into the forest you often hear people say – whether they be old mountain cattle men or women, whether they be aged Victorians up in East Gippsland like John Mulligan or whether they be very knowledgeable fire practitioners – that the country is sick and we need to heal it. Part of that discussion needs to be around how we can do more of these cultural burns. They are cultural burns, or certainly cool burns – the right smoke creeping over the landscape – but they also have a net positive effect for the environment and, as a by-product, bushfire mitigation.

I would like to put on record and again invite people to have a look at the minority report. We speak about very much adapting to climate resilience on our coastal fronts. Right across Victoria and indeed in Gippsland there are issues facing our coastal communities, including coastal erosion. This must be an imperative that all sides of Parliament work towards, because we are coastal dwellers. There are a lot of people that live in coastal communities and towns, and we need to have a coordinated response. There is a great example in WA about a traffic light system to understand the importance of and target the resources in relation to coastal erosion.

Petitions

Planning policy

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (17:43): I move:

That the petition be taken into consideration.

I rise to speak on petition 722, which I sponsored and tabled in the Legislative Council on 2 December 2025. This was a paper petition signed by 2414 residents and ratepayers of Mansfield shire, and as such it qualifies for debate in Parliament. The petition asks for the Legislative Council to refer the Planning Amendment (Better Decisions Made Faster) Bill 2025 to an inquiry so that consultation with rural communities and councils can occur before drastic changes are made to the planning system that will centralise decision-making power in the minister’s office and silence local voices and councils in the development of their communities. I thank the Mansfield Shire Council for starting this petition and all the residents of Mansfield shire who shared and signed this petition and collected so many signatures in such a short period of time.

The petition states that:

The Bill was introduced with no community consultation, imposes a Melbourne-centric model on rural communities, removes our community’s right to have a say and strips our Council of its ability to make decisions that protect the unique country character of Mansfield Shire.

Although this petition refers to the Mansfield shire, it was clear in the period before this bill came to the Parliament that there was widespread, in fact almost universal, opposition to this bill from local government authorities who would be directly affected by its significant shift in the retrospective powers and responsibilities of planning bodies. I received a flood of emails and phone calls about this bill from councils in my electorate – Mansfield Shire Council as well as Moorabool Shire Council, Nillumbik Shire Council, Murrindindi Shire Council, Yarra Ranges Shire Council, Mitchell Shire Council, the City of Whittlesea and the peak body, the Municipal Association of Victoria.

The Labor government has introduced these legislative changes in order to force councils to approve permits faster and to stop local communities from having input into planning decisions in the mistaken belief that this will lead to houses being built more quickly and more affordably. But the bill will not achieve those objectives. What it will do is make the planning system more expensive for councils, it will make property development more chaotic, it will undermine the democratic principle of community control over neighbourhoods and it will reduce public trust in the planning system. This bill is of particular concern to regional and rural councils, who will be forced to comply with the rapid approval timelines but without being able to access the same planning workforce that metropolitan councils can. The bill will also significantly increase the burden on council IT systems and document workflow processes but without increasing any resources, all at a time when rural councils face massive unexpected costs to recover from the destruction caused by this year's bushfires. All the councils that contacted me about this bill were alarmed at how the changes are being forced through without first properly consulting the councils who will have to implement the new system.

It is no surprise that in designing a bill to shortcut the consultation process for planning permits Labor also took shortcuts when it came to consulting with councils about the bill itself. One major concern that numerous local governments raised with me was the liability for developers to bypass initial council assessment and select their own application pathway. This could lead to frequent unintentional errors or even a developer intentionally choosing the wrong pathway to access an easier assessment process. This is a real concern because there is only a tiny five-day window for council planning staff to assess applications and change the pathway if there is an error. Higher risk planning permit applications may be locked into low-risk pathways and seek automatic approval.

Several amendments were made to this bill when it first came to the Legislative Council. When the Assembly considered those amendments, some were accepted, others were refused, and yet other new amendments were made by the government to its bill. This inconsistent tinkering shows the bill is still not ready for implementation. We should not move forward with a bad bill that clearly requires more careful consideration and thorough consultation with stakeholders. I urge the house to hear the plea of the petitioners and agree to refer this bill to a committee when the Council considers the Assembly's amendments.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (17:47): I am very pleased to rise to speak on the petition brought to the Parliament by Ms Lovell from residents and ratepayers of the Mansfield shire and visitors regarding the Planning Amendment (Better Decisions Made Faster) Bill 2025 that we as a chamber spent a deal of time considering last year. The parliamentary process is underway, but not yet complete, to consider all of the amendments and the bill is listed for further debate.

The petitioners clearly are very proud of where they live, and they have every right to be. As the petition highlights, the unique country character of the Mansfield shire is something that they should be very proud of. It is a beautiful part of the world. My grandparents retired to a small property about 20 kilometres outside of Mansfield in the 1980s, and I spent probably more time in that region when I was in primary school and in early high school than in any other part of Victoria. It is gorgeous.

This bill is not going to change the unique country character of the Mansfield shire. At its core this bill, which the petition seeks further consultation on, is about ensuring that Victorians have a planning system that delivers them the homes that they need, that we have a planning system that ensures that the goal of the planning system is to facilitate the construction of more homes in a manner consistent

with the planning schemes and frameworks that are before us and that the system itself, as has been the case in the past, does not get overrun with processes that lead to outcomes that are not ensuring that Victoria has the homes that we need for the people who want to live here.

The petition makes claims about community consultation. We did have a big debate in the Parliament about the bill, but just on the point, the bill that was before us and will be back before us again, considering amendments moved by the Legislative Assembly, has been through extensive consultation and engagement with councils, with the community and with industry groups and has been informed by the larger consultation process that was undertaken as part of *Plan for Victoria* before that. That process, indeed much of the government's policy effort and focus for the last several years, has been on how we make improvements to our planning system. I know that many of us have been involved in many consultation sessions with local councils, with community groups and with industry associations, talking about changes to the planning scheme and how we could improve that scheme. To suggest there has been no consultation with the community on how we improve the planning system in Victoria belies the reality that has existed in this state over the last couple of years.

What we have done for how this bill gets implemented, and that is critically important, is the government has committed to establishing a planning regulations advisory committee to provide advice to the government on development of the regulations and subordinate instruments required to implement the Planning Amendment (Better Decisions Made Faster) Bill. The scope of the matters that are proposed to be referred to the planning regulations advisory committee when it is established, following the passage of the bill at some point in the future, will include new regulations needed to implement the reforms in the bill, reviewing and remaking of existing regulations and codes, changes to the Victorian planning provisions as needed to implement the bill and the development of ministerial guidelines and directions to implement the bill.

So as we can see, there has been extensive consultation on the policy framework that has underpinned the government's planning reforms as part of the *Plan for Victoria* consultations – extensive consultation there. There has been extensive consultation with councils, with industry and with community groups about the scope and direction of the government's planning reforms and indeed with many of the features of the government's planning reforms undertaken over the last period, and there is a commitment to the regulation-making process and subordinate instrument process being made under the proposed amendments to this legislation through an engagement and consultative process. Fundamentally our planning system should be facilitating people having a place to live in the great state of Victoria. It should be doing so to encourage those who can help build more homes for us to do so, so that more Victorians have a place to call home in this great state.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (17:53): I am pleased to speak in support of this petition that has been put forward by Ms Lovell and all those that have signed it. I note that it is focused on the Mansfield shire, but certainly when we considered this legislation at the end of last year I did hear from a number of shires, and I think the same sentiments could be reflected across so many. I heard from Whittlesea shire, from Murrindindi, from Nillumbik, from Moorabool, from Mitchell shire and from the Yarra Ranges. This bill does present a significant overhaul of Victoria's planning system, handing broad new powers to the Minister for Planning while diminishing the role of local councils and local communities. I am surprised to hear Mr Batchelor talk about extensive consultation taking place, because that is certainly not what was reflected to me as I engaged with local councils who have been left out of these conversations. But I think it is important to consider that this legislation, when it came through in a great rush – and we did sit late into the night – is not due to be implemented until October 2027. At the time, the government rejected our calls for an inquiry to consider this legislation in more detail to ensure that local councils and community groups and planning experts get to provide evidence and share their insights into these changes, because they are significant.

The planning scheme amendments will not follow the normal tabling, scrutiny and disallowance procedures and parliamentary oversight. That will be significantly diminished or removed. Under the legislation that has been put forward, local councils and communities will be largely cut out of deciding

the opportunities for growth in their communities, and next-door neighbours in many cases will not be notified of development plans, while traditional owners will. Another issue that was raised with me was growth areas infrastructure contribution, known as GAIC, development contributions can under this legislation be used for purposes outside the area where the funds are raised. It was put to me by a regional council that have significant growth in their area. They are very concerned that those funds could go towards projects like the Suburban Rail Loop. We know the government certainly do not know how they are going to fund that project, and this legislation opens the door for that type of activity. I think it is understandable that the community, over a couple of thousand people, have signed a petition to share their concern, and that is only in one local government area. As I mentioned, so many local councils across Northern Victoria have contacted me to share their concerns.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (17:56): This is an important petition, and it reflects the deep angst in the community about the government's approach to planning – its arrogant, overweening approach, ruling councils and ruling communities out of involvement in planning. It is a shocking bill, and I can understand why so many people have signed the petition and that that has triggered debate in this chamber. Two of the members that have spoken from our side are country members, and there are clear issues from municipal associations and country shires. But city councils, city municipalities, are equally concerned, and the bill actually strips away powers from councils and communities. It is not surprising that councils as a whole across the state oppose this bill so strongly, and it is not surprising that a petition like this calling for an inquiry would be put into the Parliament in the way it has been.

We did seek to move an inquiry, and that, sadly, was defeated. Today is 4 February, yet this bill was dealt with in the first week of December. In this chamber we sat late, deep into the night, because the bill was urgent. But actually, as we sat deep into the night, it was clear that the bill could not be passed, because there were amendments and suggested amendments occurring in this chamber. Then it was to go back to the lower house, which it did this Tuesday, and they accepted it and dealt with it today. Indeed there was plenty of time to have had an inquiry, plenty of time to have held hearings and plenty of time to have heard from the community and to have improved the bill or made suggestions for improving the bill, so you have got to think: what is the arrogance of the government that they would try to block an inquiry? They tried to say it was urgent and this could not be dealt with. Of course it could have been dealt with across that Christmas period, yet their lordships, if I can describe them like that, in the lower house decided to flee early and leave early for Christmas because they did not want to wait for the amendments to come back from this chamber. That is how much urgency there was there. They put their Christmas festivities ahead of actually dealing with the bill, and the bill was clearly not urgent. Clearly government Christmas festivities in the lower house were more important than this bill.

I would say: why no inquiry? The government was afraid of the inquiry. That is why they voted against the inquiry. That is why the government did not want to have a period across December and January into this week. We could have tabled this Tuesday just gone, and that would have given plenty of time for improvement of the bill and an opportunity to make sensible changes. But of course the government did not want that. They were afraid of the scrutiny, afraid of the hearings, afraid that bureaucrats and ministers would be called, afraid that documents would be sought and afraid that the bill would be slowly and methodically dealt with by an all-party committee, a committee that had the capacity to do the work that was needed to improve this terrible bill.

In my area there are still serious issues with this bill and what it will do. The community is increasingly aware of what is going to happen, increasingly aware of the height and the density that is being proposed by government. The only reason they are taking these powers is because they want to steamroll local communities. They want to roll through those communities and change the nature of these communities forever, without consent, without a basic participatory democracy operating and without involvement of local councils. Many of the changes are made by this bill, others in other pieces of legislation and others in regulatory changes that have been made by this government. It has got a

nasty planning agenda, a planning agenda that is not delivering cheaper houses for young people and not delivering more houses for young people but is delivering destructive outcomes in local communities, where trees are being pulled out at a fast rate, where despite climate change issues they are rolling over those communities and getting a bad outcome for local communities.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (18:01): Local government authorities exist for a reason. Decisions over changes to the public built environment and private developments should be made with informed input from the local community that will be most affected by this decision. But the Allan Labor government has progressively undermined this vital democratic principle in order to assert its own total control over development in Victoria. Local councils should have the power to sensitively manage housing developments, but through this bill Labor will remove local oversight, silence community voices and instead expand ministerial discretion without accountability.

This bill will not produce better planning decisions. Despite Mr Batchelor's assurances, this bill will change the complexion of Mansfield. It will force a Melbourne-centric cookie-cutter model on rural communities that are totally unsuited for dense developments. It will allow developers to bypass local control and degrade beautiful streetscapes and local amenity that has been carefully cultivated over decades. Once green and spacious blocks are gone they will be gone for good and the open, relaxed feel of country towns will never return. Before Parliament allows these radical planning changes to pass, we should agree to the request of the petitioners and refer this bill to a committee which can thoroughly consult on these changes and make recommendations for a better set of reforms to increase housing supply in Victoria.

I would like to thank Mrs Broad and Mr Davis, who made contributions on this petition in support of the Mansfield shire's request. I call on government members and the crossbench to support the request of the Mansfield shire.

Motion agreed to.

Business of the house

Notices of motion

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:03): I move:

That the consideration of notices of motion, government business, 278 to 1216, be postponed until the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Bills

Planning Amendment (Better Decisions Made Faster) Bill 2025

Council's and Assembly's amendments

Message from Assembly relating to amendments considered.

Assembly refused to entertain the following Council amendments:

1. Clause 2, lines 2 and 3, omit all words and expressions on these lines and insert –
“(1) This Part and sections 11(2) and 11(3) come into operation on the day after the day on which this Act receives the Royal Assent.
(1A) The remaining provisions of this Act come into operation on a day or days to be proclaimed.”.
2. Clause 2, line 4, omit “of this Act” and insert “referred to in subsection (1A)”.
5. Clause 11, line 20, before “After” insert “(1)”.

6. Clause 11, after line 22, insert –

‘(2) After section 6(2)(j) of the Principal Act **insert** –

“(ja) provide that any use or development of land is conditional on the provision of an affordable housing contribution;”.

(3) After section 6(2) of the Principal Act **insert** –

“(2AA) For the purposes of section 6(2)(ja), an affordable housing contribution may be imposed as a condition on a permit if –

(a) the relevant planning scheme identifies a need for affordable housing in the area; and

(b) the application exceeds a threshold prescribed in the regulations that is expressed in terms of number of dwellings or value of development.

(2AAB) An affordable housing contribution is to be in the prescribed form, including a monetary contribution in lieu of the provision of affordable housing.

(2AAC) The regulations may prescribe the maximum affordable housing contributions that can be required under a planning scheme, including the application of differing maximums by reference to different zones and overlays.

(2AAD) If a monetary contribution is made to acquit a requirement specified in a planning scheme for the provision of an affordable housing contribution, the monetary contribution must be collected by the responsible authority for the proposed use or development of land.

(2AAE) Despite anything to the contrary in any other Act (other than the **Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006**), any monetary contribution collected by a responsible authority under subsection (2AAD) must be spent on a project to construct new affordable housing in the municipal district in which it is collected.

(2AAF) A responsible authority must keep proper and separate accounts and records of any monetary contribution collected under subsection (2AAD) and how that monetary contribution was spent on the provision of affordable housing in the municipal district.

(2AAG) The accounts and records required under subsection (2AAF) must be kept in accordance with the **Local Government Act 2020**.”.

Assembly’s amendments:

1. Clause 2, lines 2 and 3, omit all words and expressions on these lines and insert –

“(1) This Part and section 11(2) and (3) come into operation on the day after the day on which this Act receives the Royal Assent.

(1A) The remaining provisions of this Act come into operation on a day or days to be proclaimed.”.

2. Clause 2, line 4, omit “of this Act” and insert “referred to in subsection (1A)”.

3. Clause 11, line 20, before “After” insert “(1)”.

4. Clause 11, after line 22, insert –

‘(2) After section 6(2)(j) of the Principal Act **insert** –

“(ja) provide that any use or development of land is conditional on the provision of an affordable housing contribution;”.

(3) After section 6(2) of the Principal Act **insert** –

“(2AA) For the purposes of section 6(2)(ja), an affordable housing contribution may be imposed as a condition on a permit if –

(a) the relevant planning scheme identifies a need for affordable housing in the area; and

(b) the application exceeds a threshold prescribed in the regulations that is expressed in terms of number of dwellings or value of development.

(2AAB) An affordable housing contribution is to be in the prescribed form, including a monetary contribution in lieu of the provision of affordable housing.

(2AAC) The regulations may prescribe the maximum affordable housing contributions that can be required under a planning scheme, including the application of differing maximums by reference to different zones and overlays.

(2AAD) If a monetary contribution is made to acquit a requirement specified in a planning scheme for the provision of an affordable housing contribution, the monetary contribution must be collected by the responsible authority for the proposed use or development of land.

(2AAE) Despite anything to the contrary in any other Act (other than the **Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006**), any monetary contribution collected by a responsible authority under subsection (2AAD) must be spent on a project to construct new affordable housing in the municipal district in which it is collected.

(2AAF) A responsible authority must keep proper and separate accounts and records of any monetary contribution collected under subsection (2AAD) and how that monetary contribution was spent on the provision of affordable housing in the municipal district.

(2AAG) The accounts and records required under subsection (2AAF) must be kept in accordance with the **Local Government Act 2020**.”.

5. Clause 86, page 89, line 4, omit “(2)”.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, I have just seen these amendments now. They differ from what left this chamber. Is there a reconciliation available of the different amendments that were sent by this chamber and the ones that have returned?

The PRESIDENT: Can I suggest, Mr Davis, that I will call on the minister soon to move a motion around accepting the government amendments and then I will call for debate. We might be able to flesh that out during a period of debate. If the amendments have been distributed, I will call on the minister. I will just note, taking into account Mr Davis’s point of order, that any debate on the motion must relate to the amendments, not rehash the second-reading debate.

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (18:05): I move:

That:

- (1) the Council does not insist on its amendments 1, 2, 5 and 6 to this bill; and
- (2) the further amendments made by the Assembly be agreed to.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, I wonder if the minister has a reconciliation of what went over and what has come back, because it is my understanding that it is different. I think the minister might want to give some explanation to the chamber about what the amendments are and what the differences are.

Harriet SHING: Thank you for that point of order, Mr Davis. In all respects other than a further amendment to correct a typographical error the amendments are identical to those that were provided.

David Davis: Just on that typographical error, what is the nature of that error and where is that error? Can we see that in the bill?

Harriet SHING: Thank you, Mr Davis, for your inquiry. Further amendment 5 reads:

Clause 86, page 89, line 4, omit “(2)”.

That omits an error which was otherwise attendant in the amendments that were returned.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (18:07): As I understand it – and this is the explanation by the clerks rather than a note or an explanation from the government – what went over is not the same as what came back. The minister has identified one point where they claim there is a typo. To be honest, if you look at the back of the sheet there, it is pretty hard for us to work out that that is a typo from that sequence. I accept –

The PRESIDENT: This is a debate, so you can –

David DAVIS: I am happy to have some detail on that; that would be helpful. As I understand it also, from talking to the clerks rather than the government, the Assembly took the view that they did not want to accept our suggested amendments. That is my understanding. They have proposed in their

stead amendments that are identical. I think that is correct, isn't it? It would be nice if the government was able to give some explanation about why the government in that chamber formed that view rather than just leaving it –

A member interjected.

David DAVIS: I beg your pardon?

A member: Were you in the chamber yesterday, Mr Davis?

David DAVIS: No, I was not when this came through. I am not always in the chamber; that is right.

A member: It feels like it.

The PRESIDENT: Please let Mr Davis continue on his contribution.

David DAVIS: I did not know when it was coming. No-one told me, so there you are. I am trying to understand the bill and trying to acquit this properly. As I understand it, the Assembly did not want to accept amendments from this chamber and instead wanted to move amendments that are identical. That is correct, isn't it? That is how I understand it, and maybe the minister might like to reflect upon that for the chamber's benefit. I do want to say with this bill two points. I want to make a general point about the bill: that it is a disaster.

A member interjected.

David DAVIS: It is about the amendments to the bill. Some of these amendments I welcome – for example, the amendment moved by the Greens to reintroduce disallowance provisions. We strongly support that. That is a positive, and we are pleased that the lower house has agreed to support it.

A member interjected.

David DAVIS: I think it is, actually. I think it is the amendments we made in the last sitting day before we went to the Christmas break, and they went to the Assembly. The Assembly dealt with them yesterday and they have come back to us, and a number of these were dealt with at the time. So my point is that there are a number of our amendments which the Assembly has decided they will not accept, but they have made amendments that are identical in their stead. So I am making some points about this bill. We could have looked at all of these matters that are dealt with, these amendments and others –

The PRESIDENT: You need to confine your commentary to the amendments, Mr Davis.

David DAVIS: I am. I am talking about those amendments and saying we could have dealt with those through a parliamentary committee process, but the government did not want to do that, and now we are still dealing with this bill. There would have been plenty of time through that Christmas period to have dealt with these matters. I am just going to limit my comments to that, to say we will not oppose these amendments. We will allow them to pass.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (18:11): My understanding is the amendment we are dealing with here is one amendment that was not accepted by the Assembly of all the amendments that went back, and that was in relation to the affordable housing provisions, and that is the one that has come back to us because it was moved again by the government. That was on advice of the clerks in that chamber, just given the nature of the amendment. Obviously, this is an amendment – although it is now the government that is putting it forward – we warmly welcome. It is identical to the amendment we moved. The one thing I would say is that how this amendment impacts the availability of affordable community or public housing is largely going to be dependent on regulations that are yet to be developed and the government's willingness to actually use this new power, and I would really strongly urge them to ensure that the regulations they develop are meaningful and will deliver genuine new affordable and social housing and that they use this power, because we are desperate for more affordable housing and the government should be pulling every lever available. This new power is one

that housing advocates have long called for. They really welcomed it when it went through this chamber at the end of last year, and I am sure many members received very positive feedback about this, but it will only be of benefit if it is actually used as a power. So the ball is really in the government's court now should this amendment pass, but we are very supportive of this change.

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (18:13): Thank you for your comments, Dr Mansfield, and noting the work that has gone into these refinements from the Assembly, those objectives have been made clear. Referring to *Hansard* from the Assembly from last night ought to give you some measure of clarity in that regard. Again by reference to *Hansard*, Mr Davis, you may wish to acquaint yourself with *Hansard* from the Assembly as it relates to advice from the Clerk. Dr Mansfield has just taken you to that matter, and I just want to be very clear about exclusive cognisance making it not my role, then, to comment on matters as they may arise in the Legislative Assembly – you yourself are very familiar with that work – and also the role of the Clerk in that regard.

Mr Davis, on further amendment 5, which you have raised some concern about, I just want to provide you with some comfort that the omission of (2) is because the end of subclause (1) was the end of that particular amendment 5. So on that basis there was no content to be provided as a consequence of any subsection (2), and that was removed for avoidance of any doubt that there be any text missing. So, Mr Davis, I trust that that gives you a measure of comfort. Thank you to you for those lines of inquiry, which have enabled me to clear up any matters of ambiguity that may have remained for you. The government, as you would know, supported these amendments in the Legislative Council previously and continues to support the amendments being made to the Planning and Environment Act 1987 through the bill. The amendment establishes a new head of power, as Dr Mansfield has rightly pointed out, that enables planning schemes to make any use or development of land conditional on the provision of an affordable housing contribution. This is in line with action 4 of the *Plan for Victoria*, which seeks to increase social and affordable housing across the state, including through legislative reform. This just adds an additional tool to the toolbox that can be utilised to build more social and affordable homes, particularly in settings where there is uplift or an additional benefit or capacity being delivered in a given area. The details, regulations and operation of this provision will be worked through with the planning regulations advisory committee, made up of stakeholders, councils and experts who deal with the planning system every day.

I would also like to take the opportunity to acknowledge those members of the crossbench who supported this bill last year. It is a real disgrace that the opposition continues to attempt to block housing and planning reforms that will benefit all Victorians, particularly younger Victorians, accessing the housing and rental markets.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Minister, you have to keep the debate to the amendments.

Harriet SHING: The amendments make it very clear that Labor is the only major party that unashamedly backs housing supply and access for Victorians. On that basis, I want to commend these amendments as they have been returned to the Council and to note that we will continue to work with other parts of this chamber to ensure that the objectives of this bill, through amendments and through the discussion of matters such as those we have had this evening, continue to be prosecuted and acquitted in an efficient and unambiguous way.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (35): Ryan Batchelor, Melina Bath, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Gaelle Broad, Katherine Copsey, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Renee Heath, Shaun Leane, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Sarah Mansfield, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Tom McIntosh, Evan

Mulholland, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Gayle Tierney, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Sheena Watt, Richard Welch

Noes (1): Jeff Bourman

Motion agreed to.

Adjournment

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (18:24): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Prison education programs

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (18:24): (2264) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Corrections, Enver Erdogan. There is strong participation in prison education and training programs. The action I seek is an update of further information on how these initiatives are reducing re-offending and supporting people to secure stable employment when they return to the community.

Australian Motorcycle Grand Prix

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (18:24): (2265) My adjournment matter is directed to the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events. Phillip Island could lose one of the most iconic sporting events in the world, the Australian MotoGP. This event is not a novelty, it is not expendable. This event is the cornerstone of the Bass Coast economy. Bass Coast Shire Council has made this clear. It has formally reaffirmed its strong support for the MotoGP to continue beyond 2026, noting that the event delivers \$54.6 million in total economic benefit, including \$29.4 million in direct local spend, and that supports 284 full-time equivalent jobs. Yet despite this, the Labor government is allowing the event to continue to decline. In the early 1980s the site was a paddock. Through local vision and effort it became a world-class circuit. In 1989, 93,000 fans attended race day. Today attendance is falling and facilities are deteriorating, access roads are unsafe and people are beginning to not be able to access this amazing event. Riders themselves say they receive better value at Asian MotoGP events, where governments invest properly and make the supporters feel welcome.

This is not new. Victorians remember the last time the Labor government lost the 500cc grand prix. Small businesses suffered, some closed. A Liberal government fought to bring it back in the 1990s. Now history is repeating itself. What makes this worse is the government's own hypocrisy. In 2025 Labor's Victorian minister for tourism said that the MotoGP 'showcases the Bass Coast to a global audience and delivers a boost to local businesses'. The local Labor member said it is 'packing local restaurants and hotels and providing a massive boost for our local economy'.

The new owners of the MotoGP, a United States company, are watching closely. They see declining infrastructure investment, poor access and indifference. New South Wales and South Australia are waiting and already meeting with the owners. Phillip Island, and Victoria, could host its last MotoGP this coming year. This matters. Around 11 per cent of Victorians hold a motorcycle licence. This is not a niche issue, it is regional Victoria being taken for granted again. The action that I seek from the minister is this: will the government commit to the infrastructure, access and venue investment required to keep the Australian MotoGP at Phillip Island beyond this year?

Family violence

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:27): (2266) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Prevention of Family Violence, and the action I seek is for the minister to expand the Alexis family violence response model to the City of Casey. Co-responder programs involve a family violence specialist worker being present during police attendance at family violence incidents. These kinds of programs have been proven to improve the experience of victim-survivors engaging with police and also to reduce rates of misidentification of the prominent aggressor. The Alexis family

violence response model is a type of co-responder program currently operating across Prahran, Bayside, Morwell and Wonthaggi. It embeds specialist family violence workers within Victoria Police to provide immediate, coordinated support after family violence incidents. Where other approaches have failed, this program has been successful, helping people disengaged from support services and those facing repeat high-risk violence or complex mental health conditions. Evaluations on the program have found it is helping greatly to reduce family violence recidivism, increasing rates of incident reports and improving victim-survivor safety. It was great to see the government recognise the effectiveness of this program with their October announcement of a \$1.5 million investment. This additional funding will help the program expand to two new sites. The locations of these sites will be based on police advice.

With that in mind, I know many would like to see a similar program here in the south-east. Jessica Geddes of Endeavour Hills was only 27 years old when she was fatally bashed by her abusive partner in 2020. The coroner's report into her death highlighted how a police response, guided by a specialist family violence worker, may have helped her engage with service provisions and offered an alternative option for safety and support. In the City of Casey during the 2024–25 year there were 6519 family violence incidents, a 13.6 per cent increase on the number of incidents the year prior. Expanding the Alexis model to areas of highest need is just common sense. Casey is one of those areas. While I commend the government funding initiative for victim-survivors of family violence, we want to see these programs receive ongoing, sustained funding and include areas where there is highest demand. So I ask: will the minister extend the Alexis family violence response model to the City of Casey?

Retail crime

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:30): (2267) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Police, and the action that I am seeking is for him to provide me with an update on how the government has been utilising PSOs to address retail crime, antisocial behaviour and weapons offences in shopping centres. Over the summer we have police patrolling some of Melbourne's busiest shopping centres as part of a 90-day targeted police operation, which started on 8 December and will run through to 28 February. Shopping centres included in this operation include Northland, Eastland, Pacific Werribee, Bayside in Frankston, Highpoint and Fountain Gate. As well as providing extra support for retail staff in responding to incidents in the centres and stores, police and PSOs have been conducting weapons searches equipped with wands to help remove more knives from the community as well.

The active PSO program uses data and police intelligence to target areas in our communities where a more visible local uniform presence is needed. That includes train platforms, on trains, patrolling shopping precincts and other busy areas where crime is increasing, at any hour of the day. The program has been designed to ensure that PSOs are relocated from the quietest no-crime stations to areas where they are needed the most whilst maintaining an active presence at stations when and where they are needed at the most appropriate times. A \$2.3 million investment has ensured that the police operation at the busiest shopping centres does not take away from police in other areas and that needs are met through more rostered hours and the recruitment of up to 200 police reservists. This is about having the police and PSO presence where needed to tackle antisocial behaviour in particular in response to retail crime.

Indeed over summer I had the opportunity to catch up with one of my former delegates from my time at the union in one of these centres. Amongst a great conversation about all the many things, she actually raised with me the visible impact of the PSOs in her centre, what a difference they have made and what a difference they have made to how the staff feel about their safety at work, which has been very welcome feedback and feedback that I am very pleased to provide to the Parliament. I am very keen to see the results of this summer trial program and hope to see much more and continued investment as this government has been doing in working on initiatives like this which directly seek to combat crime where it is occurring in the most effective way. To reiterate, the action that I seek is

for the minister to provide me with an update on the government's successful rollout of PSOs in shopping centres in Melbourne.

Albury Wodonga Health

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (18:33): (2268) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health, and the action I seek is a full list of all the elements that have been cut, reduced or deferred from the Albury Wodonga Health hospital redevelopment compared to what was promised in 2022 and set out in the master plan at that time. What we are seeing at Albury Wodonga Health is not a single failure and not a temporary setback, it is a compounding systemic failure, one that has locked the health service into a downward spiral – and I mean downward spiral because the bed shortages, workforce distress and growing surgery waiting lists continue to erode confidence in the health service every single day.

The despair felt by this community is the result of a health minister who refuses to listen and who refuses to acknowledge the folly of an unfunded and overpromised project for the future needs of the 300,000 people served by the nation's only cross-border health service. The funding committed to a medical tower by Labor at the 11th hour of the 2022 state election was never enough. The passage of time has exposed just how inadequate it was. Instead of relieving pressure, it has entrenched it. Despite the release of the artist's impressions for the tower last week, the community is deeply worried. There are simply not enough beds being delivered. And they should be worried, because it is all there for people to see. The health service regularly starts the day 50 to 70 beds short of what they need. Recently 10 of the 12 ED beds at Wodonga Hospital were taken up by admitted patients. The ED had just two beds for an emergency.

The fear is that existing demand will overtake any new beds. Clinicians say the promised increase in beds does not stack up. I have spoken to these clinicians on multiple occasions. They are at the coalface – they know the pressures, they can see what is happening and they are very concerned for their patients. They are concerned about the paediatric ghost floor in the tower, left empty until Labor finds the money to fit it out – and we know how short money is because of the debt that is spiralling out of control under Labor. An operating theatre will be left as a shell as well. The helipad is gone. The multi-deck car park is abandoned. This is what we know. But Minister, what don't we know? What else promised on October 2022 has quietly disappeared? The relentless pressure caused by chronic bed shortages with no foreseeable end in sight has driven a collapse in staff morale. Albury Wodonga Health recorded the worst results of any public sector organisation in Victoria in the People Matter survey. 140 clinicians have formally endorsed a vote of no confidence in management. Local media reports that the New South Wales health minister has sought a 'please explain' from Victoria over internal staffing matters. Minister, this is a mess. This is how health systems fail, not suddenly but through neglect, denial and refusal to act while there is still time. It is too simplistic to point the finger at local management; the chair and CEO warned the health minister in late 2023 that the funding was inadequate. The buck stops with the minister.

Bushfire recovery

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (18:36): (2269) My adjournment this evening is for the Minister for Environment, and the action I seek is for the laws surrounding the removal of trees to be relaxed during the bushfire recovery. During the recent bushfires I travelled around speaking with my constituents to find out what their concerns were and what help they needed. Imagine my shock and disbelief when I was informed that farmers had been threatened with fines by Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action staff if they removed dangerous fire-damaged trees from their properties and fence lines. These farmers, who lost thousands of kilometres of fence line during the fires, now have the added stress of worrying about whether the fire-damaged trees are going to fall on them or their freshly erected fences. One would think that the green-and-gold warriors in shiny white LandCruisers could show a little leniency at a time like this – but no. Instead they are out there watching farmers, waiting to pounce on anyone who dares remove a dangerous tree.

Farmers are not unknowledgeable about the difference between a safe tree and a dangerous tree. They are not going to remove a tree just for the sake of it; farmers will only remove the tree that poses a threat to lives, livestock and infrastructure, so it would not be unreasonable to allow them to do the work that is needed. It seems completely ridiculous that fire-damaged trees are being removed in swathes across the roadside, but when it comes to fence lines and paddocks, they are not allowed to be touched. While I understand the need to protect native vegetation, these trees will most likely fall anyway, it is just a matter of when. Removing the unpredictability of this provides a much safer working environment for people who have already lived through incredibly dangerous conditions, with many either being CFA volunteers or staying to protect their properties and livestock with their own equipment. For the sake of common sense and safety of landholders, the action I seek is for the minister to relax the laws surrounding tree removal during the bushfire recovery.

Metro Tunnel

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (18:38): (2270) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure in the other place. The opening of the Metro Tunnel on 30 November last year was a great achievement for the state of Victoria. This project will mean that commuters on the Pakenham and Cranbourne lines, parts of which run through my constituency, are now able to enjoy a better, more frequent service on trips into the city. Turn-up-and-go services are now as frequent as every 3 minutes during peak periods on these lines between Dandenong and West Footscray. The Southern Metropolitan Region is also benefiting from the creation of Anzac station, one of the five new stations created in the inner city. Anzac station is better enabling Victorians to access important locations, such as the Shrine of Remembrance and the Royal Botanic Gardens and Albert Park reserve. It is also helping to facilitate the construction of more high-density housing in the immediate area – with the new transport infrastructure now in place, the area is better placed and better able to accommodate new residents without negatively impacting infrastructure capacity. This is responsible urban planning. In particular, a number of major build-to-rent developments in the immediate vicinity of the station are currently underway. The action that I seek is for the minister to provide my office with data regarding how many people visited Anzac station during the Metro Tunnel's summer start.

Planning policy

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (18:39): (2271) My adjournment matter is for the Premier. The action that I seek is for the Premier to take immediate action to fix Labor's major planning failures in Donnybrook. Two weeks ago I joined my colleagues Liberal leader Jess Wilson and Evan Mulholland, the Liberal member for the Northern Metropolitan Region, to meet with local representatives of the Donnybrook community groups. It was deeply concerning to hear their stories of how difficult life is on the urban fringe, in rapidly growing suburbs that have been completely forgotten by the Labor government. New residents were attracted to Donnybrook by the promise that they could live the Australian dream: a new house, easy access to public transport for school and work, green spaces, sporting fields and community facilities all close by. But instead of living the dream, residents on the urban fringe are living a nightmare under Labor's planning failures. Labor, greedy for extra tax revenue, approved thousands of new homes for the area before the necessary infrastructure had been built.

Donnybrook Road epitomises everything that is wrong with Labor's approach to planning for growth areas. It is a single-lane road – an old country farm track – that is the only road in and out of the surrounding housing estate. The road is chronically congested every morning and night, with notoriously bad traffic that traps locals and makes them late for work, late for school and late home for dinner in the evening. It should have been upgraded to a double-lane arterial road before the homes were built in order to handle all the extra traffic. But even now Labor has still not allocated funding to duplicate the road. There are currently just over 20,000 residents living in estates accessed via Donnybrook Road, but this will increase to 78,000 residents by 2041, so congestion will only get worse.

Things would not be so bad if the public transport were better, but there is no continuous shared footpath to the train station, so people from the Donnybrook housing estates cannot walk or ride safely to the station to commute. Commuters are forced to drive to the station, but there are not enough car parks, which means that they have to park on the street in the surrounding roads. When the trains do arrive, they are jam-packed, with standing room only, because Labor has not provided enough new services to cater for the growth area suburb.

Crime in the housing estates is rife, and the latest data shows that criminal incidents in the Whittlesea police service area have jumped by 19 per cent in the last year. Statistics alone cannot convey the true reality of crime. I have personally listened to many stories of families who suffered terrifying home invasions and theft from their vehicles. Telecommunications are also poor, and residents struggle with poor mobile phone and internet connections due to the lack of towers. The Premier cannot allow this nightmare to last another decade. Labor must take responsibility for its planning failures and immediately start fixing the problems it has caused.

Victorian Health Promotion Foundation

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (18:42): (2272) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health and relates to the closure of VicHealth. For 40 years the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, commonly known as VicHealth, has been a world-leading health promotion agency working to promote good health and prevent chronic disease. When it was first established, it was a world-first health promotion foundation, a step now taken by governments across the world. VicHealth has run successful initiatives to reduce the rates of drinking and smoking, encourage active and socially connected lifestyles and encourage the living of healthier lives overall. Notably, VicHealth also recognised the negative health impacts of meat consumption, recognising that one of the healthiest things a person can do is to have a largely plant-based diet. Their work recognised and strove to combat the systemic barriers to good health. This included campaigns to boost women's participation in sport and initiatives specifically targeting minority communities, all of this being firmly grounded in the understanding that health promotion works best when it is led by the community.

Despite all of this, the government is still firmly intent on scrapping it. Although this decision is guided by a desire to save money in the state budget, we know that in the long run, investing in health prevention saves significantly more than it costs. Chronic disease costs Australia about \$140 billion each year, and it is estimated that every dollar spent on health prevention results in \$14.30 in future health cost savings. This is a reckless, short-sighted move by the Victorian government that will have serious health impacts. The action that I seek is for the government to reverse their decision and to save VicHealth.

Pakenham road maintenance

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (18:44): (2273) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. The action I seek is that the minister considers immediate financial assistance to ensure local small businesses can remain open during the Big Build's Pakenham roads upgrade. On Bald Hill Road in Pakenham, small businesses are being pursued to the brink by the stage 3 Racecourse Road upgrade. According to the Big Build roads website, Bald Hill Road and Racecourse Road have remained closed since early last year. During this closure period, access to businesses has been severely restricted, forcing customers to detour via multiple side streets, with turning movements limited to left in and left out only. For many customers that means businesses are simply too hard to reach, forcing them to go elsewhere. One of the worst hit is Pakenham Bulk Foods, which has suffered an 80 per cent collapse in sales compared to February last year. That is right – 80 per cent. Right now the business can barely afford rent, with little money left for wages, stock or utilities. To make matters worse, it is also being pursued for council rate payments. In a change.org petition signed by more than 1000 people the owner Rebekah wrote:

My business, which I have poured my heart and soul into, is weeks away from closing down.

Without immediate assistance from the state government, there is a real risk that this business will close by the end of February, when the intersection allegedly reopens.

I support infrastructure, but I also support the people who fund it. I support small business owners, who take risks, who work extraordinarily hard and who are already carrying the burden of taxes and charges that keep this government afloat. For this project to retain social licence, the minister must engage directly with affected businesses and guarantee appropriate financial support to ensure they survive these works. I join my colleague local upper house member Dr Heath in urging the minister to act on this very important matter.

WorkCover

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:47): (2274) My adjournment matter today is for the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC, and the action I seek is that the WorkCover system be reformed to be patient focused and compassionate in its interactions with injured workers. As I have done in this place before today, I am sharing the concerns of an injured worker who has engaged with my office. They wish to remain anonymous, but it is important that the minister hear their thoughts. They have been injured at work and have had a terrible experience trying to navigate the WorkCover system. These are their words:

[QUOTE AWAITING VERIFICATION]

I want to speak about the hurdles faced by injured workers navigating the WorkSafe system, a system built not for the worker but for the employer. From the moment a worker creates an online account to lodge a claim, their employer and the insurer are notified, often before the claim is even complete. Anything shared with the insurer is shared with the employer. The employer chooses the agent who will 'best serve their needs', not the injured worker's, and drives the entire process, instructing the insurer on what to do and what not to do. WorkSafe itself is not customer focused. Compare it with the Transport Accident Commission – same state and same system, yet the TAC is patient focused. Why is WorkSafe so different?

There are virtually no protections for workers against employer intimidation or retaliation. Legal protections exist on paper, but there are no enforcement and no physical measures in place. Employers can turn up at a worker's home with impunity, and notifying WorkSafe about claim interference is met with silence. Workers' claims can even be denied without an independent medical examination. Is that not unlawful?

Navigating WorkSafe is a labyrinth of rules and laws. The agent handbook is effectively the Bible, but it is not written in plain English. Injured workers are expected to manage this alone, often without legal advice. In Victoria a lawyer is essential, yet most will not get involved until 130 weeks have passed and payments have ceased. The system is deliberately opaque. If it were easy, everyone would apply. WorkSafe is the only system in the world that rewards agents with performance bonuses for denying claims rather than supporting workers. This means less money is available for treatment and rehabilitation.

It is time to ask: why do we have two parallel systems, WorkSafe and TAC, in the same state? WorkSafe should be merged into TAC. We need a system that supports injured workers, not one designed to protect employers and deny claims. Injured workers deserve fairness, clarity and protection. Anything less is unacceptable.

LGBTIQA+ support

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (18:49): (2275) My agenda tonight is directed to the Minister for Equality in the other place. The energy across Melbourne right now is electric. Just this past weekend thousands of people came together for the annual Midsumma Pride March to see Fitzroy Street in St Kilda transformed into a sea of colour. It is a powerful reminder of how far we have come but also of the solidarity required to keep that progress moving forward. I want to take a moment to shout out to Rainbow Labor for their tireless work and advocacy. Their presence at the march is a strong reminder that on this side of the chamber equality is not negotiable. It was heartening to see our surf lifesavers and other emergency services groups marching as well. Seeing the very people who keep us safe standing in solidarity with the LGBTIQA+ community sends a clear message: in Victoria everyone belongs and everyone is protected.

But the celebrations are not over yet. This Sunday the heart of my electorate in Fitzroy will come alive for Victoria's Pride street party. It is a transformation that you will see along Gertrude and Smith streets. It is a vibrant day-long block party, and boy, is it fun. This event is the jewel in the crown of our inner north, and it is a direct result of this government's sustained investments in queer arts, culture and community visibility.

In a time when some of us seek to use culture wars to divide us and peddle homophobia or transphobia in our community, it is more important than ever that we stand firm in our values. We must celebrate the diversity that makes Victoria the very best place to live. The action I seek from the minister is to provide an update and information on how the Allan Labor government is continuing to support and stand with our diverse LGBTIQ+ communities in the Northern Metropolitan Region to ensure that they can live safely and full of pride.

Arts funding

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (18:51): (2276) My adjournment tonight is for the Minister for Creative Industries, and it concerns the savage cuts that he and Creative Victoria and others in the Allan Labor government have instituted across arts organisations. I am asking him to look at these and to reverse these savage and nasty cuts. It happened, to bring the chamber into the picture, in the week before Christmas. As they say, 'twas the week before Christmas, and all through the land, well, in this case there were a nasty set of phone calls that came from Claire Febey and some of the staff at Creative Victoria, and they hoed into these organisations – no written documents, by the way. Nothing was provided in writing, just 'Your funding is cut.' And guess what it is cut to? It is cut to zero. Longstanding funding for groups like the Abbotsford Convent – \$200,000 a year is what they have received since the early 2000s, and they act as a hub for a whole series of creative groups, writers, painters, musicians and others. They have facilities, but they coordinate a number of these groups and individuals that access these spots. Their funding has been cut from \$800,000 over four years to zero.

In the case of Writers Victoria, an organisation that has been funded since 1989, their funding is \$150,000 a year – \$600,000 over the forward estimates. That has been cut to zero. Now Victoria will be the only mainland state where the writers organisation in that state receives no assistance whatsoever. There was no explanation for these cuts, there were no reasons given for the cuts, just 'Your funding is cut from 1 July to zero.' Similarly, a group like Musica Viva, a very respected organisation that has been active since the 1940s and 50s providing outreach and singing and other musical training into schools has also had their funding cut to zero by the state government. They have other sources of funding, and there has been a philanthropic group that have stepped forward to assist in this particular case.

I think state government funding sometimes needs to be a little bit sharper, and in the case of Writers Victoria, we are said to be an international UNESCO City of Literature. I find that a bit odd when the state government has now cut its funding for Writers Vic to zero. These are savage cuts, nasty cuts, and the minister should reverse them.

Middle East conflict

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:54): (2277) My adjournment matter this evening is for the attention of the Minister for Police. In 2022 a young Kurdish woman named Mahsa Amini was arrested by the morality police in Iran for a violation of the hijab laws. This led to a mass movement of women called the Women, Life, Freedom movement. For simply calling for their right to live freely, many women were arrested, raped and executed. In December last year the bubbling tensions in Iran turned into what might be described as a mass uprising, with large-scale protests calling for the abolition of the Islamic theocracy and a transition to democracy. Whilst clear information is hard to determine, credible reports suggest that tens of thousands of people may have been killed in crackdowns on the protests, mostly over the course of a few days earlier this year. Victorians with Iranian heritage have been protesting in solidarity with the protest movement in Iran. In fact they are out the front of Parliament right now. A few weeks ago I met with some of these people

and listened to their stories and concerns. The key concern of the protest movement is related to foreign affairs and is beyond the jurisdiction of this Parliament.

There were, however, other concerns that are very relevant to things happening here in Victoria. I was told about examples of people being threatened, harassed and intimidated by representatives of the Iranian regime in Melbourne. This included anonymous phone calls, actual death threats and possibly stalking. These threats are not idle. Director-general of UK intelligence agency MI5 Sir Ken McCallum stated at their annual threat update last year that they had interrupted 20 potentially lethal Iran-backed plots, mostly targeting British Iranians. When people come here, make Australia their home and live peaceful lives, they deserve the same protection as anyone else from foreign adversaries. We already know that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has the means to direct attacks here, after the arson attack on a Melbourne synagogue. My request for the Minister for Police is to work with Victoria Police to ensure that security concerns of Iranian Australians are taken seriously and examine whether there can be new processes established for escalating security incidents either through Victoria Police or with their federal counterparts.

Box Hill brickworks site

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:57): (2278) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop. Last year the Box Hill brickworks site, a contaminated landfill site, was rezoned for high-density, high-rise housing. It was a surprise to many because, being a landfill site, traditionally it would be used for parkland. That is the Melbourne way of dealing with that land. Some concerns about contamination were raised. I raised this with the minister through an adjournment asking: can we please see the new environmental reports that you commissioned to justify a rezoning of this contaminated land? The minister's answer was to direct me to the Suburban Rail Loop Authority contaminated land report. I had a look at that report, and that report simply pointed back to the very same EPA report from 2019 that said that the land contains carcinogens – benzpyrene, which causes bladder and lung cancers, amongst them – and explicitly said this land should not be used without significant work and remediation. Indeed Whitehorse council has never even contemplated allowing any buildings on this site. It needs significant remediation.

As we stand now we have come full circle, because the rezoning is in place. In fact the heights of the buildings that are intended for that site have now gone from 10 to 20 stories, no doubt to pay for the level of remediation required. But what we do not have and what the community are absolutely entitled to have is what new environmental study was undertaken to justify a rezoning of a contaminated site to residential, because there has to be a new study, otherwise you must be breaching all kinds of regulatory and approval processes. I will ask the minister again. The only study that you have referred me back to was the 2019 EPA report that said, 'Don't build on it,' so the action I seek from the minister is: release or confirm if there was any environmental study taken to justify the rezoning of this contaminated landfill site and confirm whether or not you have breached any rezoning governance practice or due process if there was not one.

Energy policy

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (18:59): (2279) My adjournment matter is to the Minister for Energy and Resources concerning the imminent disconnection of compressed natural gas to a number of townships. Of the 10 regional communities impacted, the majority are within my electorate of Northern Victoria. They include Heathcote, Kerang, Maldon, Marong, Nathalia, Robinvale and Swan Hill. I recently met with the Marong Community Action Group and local residents who are very distressed. I have also heard from the Nathalia CNG Action Group, who have also expressed concern. They said residents who had connected to the CNG network awoke to the unexpected news that their gas supply was going to be shut down and the usage and supply tariffs were being increased by 50 per cent – no warning, no discussion, no communication, no compensation.

The planned disconnection of their gas supply is having significant financial and emotional consequences on local households. Last year Solstice Energy announced it would stop supplying gas

to homes and businesses by the end of 2026. This decision flew in the face of the Labor government's 2015 Energy for the Regions program, where they promised to deliver natural gas to Victoria's regions. Hundreds of residents are impacted, including families, older residents and people on fixed incomes. They are being told they must transition away from gas; the estimated cost varies, but it gets to around \$20,000 per household depending on what the needs are in that household. It is a figure that is simply unaffordable for many, particularly in this current cost-of-living crisis. Residents are distressed to find that they are expected to foot the bill themselves despite having entered into gas supply arrangements in good faith. Adding to this concern is a changing and uncertain rebate system. The rebate available is not a fixed amount set by the government but instead is based on market pricing and contractor quotes, so the rebate can vary between contractors, leaving residents with inconsistent outcomes and no certainty about what financial support they will receive. There were concerns raised about the role of state government and Regional Development Victoria, because they signed a 20-year contract for the gas infrastructure, and yet here we are. They have cut that contract short halfway through its term, leaving residents bearing the consequences. Community feedback indicates that some residents are yet to make a final decision; there has been a lot of confusion.

The action I seek from the minister is to take responsibility for the decision and urgently intervene in the gas disconnection process, provide clarity and transparency around the number of residents impacted, review the inconsistent rebate model and fully compensate residents for the cost of transitioning away from compressed natural gas. The state government committed to continuing this program in 2015, yet now they have ripped up the contract and they are leaving residents to pay the consequences.

Eastern Victoria Region schools

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (19:02): (2280) My adjournment debate this evening is for the Minister for Education, and the action I seek is for the minister to recognise the findings of the 2025 school condition report and particularly those for Eastern Victoria Region and prioritise the upgrades to schools identified as in the poorest condition. Indeed one in five public schools across Victoria are on that conditional report in poor condition. That is not an achievement that any school wants to have. Sadly, principals, staff, parents and students are dealing with substandard conditions.

The report rates school buildings from 0 to 5: a score of 3.25 or below indicates poor condition, and 3.26 to 3.36 represents average condition. Indeed two-thirds of all of the schools are average or below two-thirds. That just shows you how neglected this state has been in our education in terms of infrastructure. Nineteen of those schools in the poor condition category fall in my electorate; 26 are assessed as average. Clearly the government is not working hard enough. Schools with the lowest score and therefore the highest priority in my electorate are Lardner & District Primary School, 2.91; Lowanna in Newborough, 2.92; Omeo Primary, 3.06; Orbost Primary, 3.07; Orbost North Primary, 3.07; and Trafalgar High School, 3.07. With a score of 2.91, Lardner & District school represents the region's most urgent of concerns. If we go just beyond the poorest rating, again this is not an area where you want to be. Let us look at upgrades: Bass Valley Primary School in Corinella – beautiful little place down there; Mallacoota P-12; Traralgon Liddiard Road Primary School; Rosedale Primary School and others are in poor condition.

Minister, every single child deserves to learn in an environment that is safe, that is clean, that has windows and not leaking roofs and that is fit for purpose, yet these schools in my electorate and so many others have been neglected by this government. Every school and every child deserves that, whether they be in the public or the private sector. Minister, you need to do better: focus on those schools and prioritise upgrades.

Responses

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (19:05): Ms Ermacora raised an adjournment matter for the Minister for Corrections, Dr Heath raised a matter for the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events, Ms Payne raised a matter for the

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Minister for Prevention of Family Violence, Ms Watt raised a matter for the Minister for Equality, Ms Crozier raised a matter for the Minister for Health, Ms Tyrrell raised a matter for the Minister for Environment, Mr Galea raised a matter for the Minister for Police, Ms Lovell raised a matter for the Premier, Mr Berger raised a matter for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure, Ms Purcell raised a matter for the Minister for Health, Mrs McArthur raised a matter for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, Mr Puglielli raised a matter for the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC, Mr Davis raised a matter for the Minister for Creative Industries, Mr Limbrick raised a matter for the Minister for Police, Mr Welch raised a matter for the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Mrs Broad raised a matter for the Minister for Energy and Resources and Ms Bath raised a matter for the Minister for Education. I will refer them accordingly.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 7:07 pm.