



# **Hansard**

## **LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**

### **60th Parliament**

**Thursday 15 May 2025**



**Office-holders of the Legislative Assembly**

**60th Parliament**

**Speaker**

Maree Edwards

**Deputy Speaker**

Matt Fregon

**Acting Speakers**

Juliana Addison, Jordan Crugnale, Daniela De Martino, Paul Edbrooke,  
Wayne Farnham, Paul Hamer, Lauren Kathage, Nathan Lambert, Alison Marchant,  
Paul Mercurio, John Mullahy, Kim O’Keeffe, Meng Heang Tak, Jackson Taylor and Iwan Walters

**Leader of the Parliamentary Labor Party and Premier**

Jacinta Allan (from 27 September 2023)

Daniel Andrews (to 27 September 2023)

**Deputy Leader of the Parliamentary Labor Party and Deputy Premier**

Ben Carroll (from 28 September 2023)

Jacinta Allan (to 27 September 2023)

**Leader of the Parliamentary Liberal Party and Leader of the Opposition**

Jess Wilson (from 18 November 2025)

Brad Battin (from 27 December 2024 to 18 November 2025)

John Pesutto (to 27 December 2024)

**Deputy Leader of the Parliamentary Liberal Party and Deputy Leader of the Opposition**

Sam Groth (from 27 December 2024)

David Southwick (to 27 December 2024)

**Leader of the Nationals**

Danny O’Brien (from 26 November 2024)

Peter Walsh (to 26 November 2024)

**Deputy Leader of the Nationals**

Emma Kealy

**Leader of the House**

Mary-Anne Thomas

**Manager of Opposition Business**

James Newbury (from 13 October 2025)

Bridget Vallence (from 7 January 2025 to 13 October 2025)

James Newbury (to 7 January 2025)

## Members of the Legislative Assembly

### 60th Parliament

Member	District	Party	Member	District	Party
Addison, Juliana	Wendouree	ALP	Lister, John <sup>7</sup>	Werribee	ALP
Allan, Jacinta	Bendigo East	ALP	Maas, Gary	Narre Warren South	ALP
Andrews, Daniel <sup>1</sup>	Mulgrave	ALP	McCurdy, Tim	Ovens Valley	Nat
Battin, Brad	Berwick	Lib	McGhie, Steve	Melton	ALP
Benham, Jade	Mildura	Nat	McLeish, Cindy	Eildon	Lib
Britnell, Roma	South-West Coast	Lib	Marchant, Alison	Bellarine	ALP
Brooks, Colin	Bundoora	ALP	Matthews-Ward, Kathleen	Broadmeadows	ALP
Bull, Josh	Sunbury	ALP	Mercurio, Paul	Hastings	ALP
Bull, Tim	Gippsland East	Nat	Mullahy, John	Glen Waverley	ALP
Cameron, Martin	Morwell	Nat	Newbury, James	Brighton	Lib
Carbines, Anthony	Ivanhoe	ALP	O'Brien, Danny	Gippsland South	Nat
Carroll, Ben	Niddrie	ALP	O'Brien, Michael	Malvern	Lib
Cheeseman, Darren <sup>2</sup>	South Barwon	Ind	O'Keeffe, Kim	Shepparton	Nat
Cianflone, Anthony	Pascoe Vale	ALP	Pallas, Tim <sup>8</sup>	Werribee	ALP
Cleland, Annabelle	Euroa	Nat	Pearson, Danny	Essendon	ALP
Connolly, Sarah	Laverton	ALP	Pesutto, John	Hawthorn	Lib
Couzens, Christine	Geelong	ALP	Read, Tim	Brunswick	Greens
Crewther, Chris	Mornington	Lib	Richards, Pauline	Cranbourne	ALP
Crugnale, Jordan	Bass	ALP	Richardson, Tim	Mordialloc	ALP
D'Ambrosio, Liliana	Mill Park	ALP	Riordan, Richard	Polwarth	Lib
De Martino, Daniela	Monbulk	ALP	Rowswell, Brad	Sandringham	Lib
de Vietri, Gabrielle	Richmond	Greens	Sandell, Ellen	Melbourne	Greens
Dimopoulos, Steve	Oakleigh	ALP	Settle, Michaela	Eureka	ALP
Edbrooke, Paul	Frankston	ALP	Smith, Ryan <sup>9</sup>	Warrandyte	Lib
Edwards, Maree	Bendigo West	ALP	Southwick, David	Caulfield	Lib
Famham, Wayne	Narracan	Lib	Spence, Ros	Kalkallo	ALP
Foster, Eden <sup>3</sup>	Mulgrave	ALP	Staikos, Nick	Bentleigh	ALP
Fowles, Will <sup>4</sup>	Ringwood	Ind	Suleyman, Natalie	St Albans	ALP
Fregon, Matt	Ashwood	ALP	Tak, Meng Heang	Clarinda	ALP
George, Ella	Lara	ALP	Taylor, Jackson	Bayswater	ALP
Grigorovitch, Luba	Kororoit	ALP	Taylor, Nina	Albert Park	ALP
Groth, Sam	Nepean	Lib	Theophanous, Kat	Northcote	ALP
Guy, Matthew	Bulleen	Lib	Thomas, Mary-Anne	Macedon	ALP
Halfpenny, Bronwyn	Thomastown	ALP	Tilley, Bill	Benambra	Lib
Hall, Katie	Footscray	ALP	Vallence, Bridget	Evelyn	Lib
Hamer, Paul	Box Hill	ALP	Vulin, Emma	Pakenham	ALP
Haylett, Martha	Ripon	ALP	Walsh, Peter	Murray Plains	Nat
Hibbins, Sam <sup>5,6</sup>	Prahran	Ind	Walters, Iwan	Greenvale	ALP
Hilakari, Mathew	Point Cook	ALP	Ward, Vicki	Eltham	ALP
Hodgett, David	Croydon	Lib	Wells, Kim	Rowville	Lib
Horne, Melissa	Williamstown	ALP	Werner, Nicole <sup>10</sup>	Warrandyte	Lib
Hutchins, Natalie	Sydenham	ALP	Westaway, Rachel <sup>11</sup>	Prahran	Lib
Kathage, Lauren	Yan Yean	ALP	Wight, Dylan	Tarneit	ALP
Kealy, Emma	Lowan	Nat	Williams, Gabrielle	Dandenong	ALP
Kilkenny, Sonya	Carrum	ALP	Wilson, Belinda	Narre Warren North	ALP
Lambert, Nathan	Preston	ALP	Wilson, Jess	Kew	Lib

<sup>1</sup> Resigned 27 September 2023

<sup>2</sup> ALP until 29 April 2024

<sup>3</sup> Sworn in 6 February 2024

<sup>4</sup> ALP until 5 August 2023

<sup>5</sup> Greens until 1 November 2024

<sup>6</sup> Resigned 23 November 2024

<sup>7</sup> Sworn in 4 March 2025

<sup>8</sup> Resigned 6 January 2025

<sup>9</sup> Resigned 7 July 2023

<sup>10</sup> Sworn in 3 October 2023

<sup>11</sup> Sworn in 4 March 2025

#### Party abbreviations

ALP – Australian Labor Party, Greens – Australian Greens,  
Ind – Independent, Lib – Liberal Party of Australia, Nat – National Party of Australia

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**Thursday 15 May 2025**

**The SPEAKER (Maree Edwards) took the chair at 9:33 am, read the prayer and made an acknowledgement of country.**

*Business of the house*

**Notices of motion**

**Notice given.**

**The SPEAKER (09:34):** General business, notices of motion 56 to 83, will be removed from the notice paper unless members wishing their matter to remain advise the Clerk in writing before 2 pm today.

*Petitions*

**Victorian Fisheries Authority**

**Sam GROTH (Nepean)** presented a petition bearing 21,789 signatures:

**Issue:**

We the undersigned residents of Victoria draw to the attention of the House that proposed cuts to the Victorian Fisheries Authority will leave the state's fish stocks, marine parks and protected wildlife species virtually unprotected and vulnerable to widespread illegal fishing.

**Action:**

We, the undersigned residents of Victoria therefore request that the Legislative Assembly of Victoria call on the Victorian Government not to close 5 Fisheries Stations in Metro Melbourne or cut 73 fisheries officer's jobs across the state, severely compromising Victoria's ability to protect its marine life and enforce fishing regulations. These cuts threaten the sustainability of our commercial and recreational fisheries as well as severely impacting the protection of iconic Victorian marine species.

**Ordered that petition be considered tomorrow.**

*Documents*

**Documents**

**Incorporated list as follows:**

**DOCUMENT TABLED UNDER ACTS OF PARLIAMENT** – The Clerk tabled:

Statutory Rule 26 under the *Health Practitioner Regulation National Law (Victoria) Act 2009*.

*Motions*

**Motions by leave**

**Gabrielle DE VIETRI (Richmond) (09:35):** I move, by leave:

That this house notes:

- (1) that today is the 77th Nakba day, marking the ethnic cleansing of 750,000 Palestinians removed from their homes and 15,000 people killed on their land;
- (2) that today the Nakba continues, with Israel blocking aid and starving children in Gaza and this week declaring its intention to expel all Palestinians and permanently occupy the Gaza Strip; and
- (3) that the silence of the Victorian and the Australian governments is complicity.

**Leave refused.**

**David SOUTHWICK** (Caulfield) (09:36): I move, by leave:

That this house notes the media comments on Adam Bandt being ousted over his extremist, hateful views and cautions the member for Richmond that hating on Jews may lead to a similar outcome in 2026.

**Leave refused.**

**Gabrielle de Vietri:** On a point of order, Speaker, I take offence to the comments of the member for Caulfield and ask him to withdraw.

**The SPEAKER:** The matter raised by the member for Richmond is in relation to a substantive motion. Therefore I will have to seek advice on any offence taken. Was the member for Richmond offended by a personal remark?

**Gabrielle de Vietri:** Yes.

**The SPEAKER:** Can the member for Caulfield advise me if he referred to the member for Richmond?

**David Southwick:** I am happy to read the motion again.

**The SPEAKER:** I would like a copy of that motion, and then I will determine the outcome.

#### *Members statements*

#### **Mill Park Heights Primary School**

**Lily D'AMBROSIO** (Mill Park – Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (09:38): I was delighted to help out at the Mill Park Heights Primary School breakfast club on Wednesday 30 April. The school breakfast program, funded by the Allan Labor government, delivers healthy and nutritious breakfasts to students, ensuring that they start the day on with full stomachs and ready to learn. It was wonderful to roll up my sleeves and serve breakfast to students, with the most popular items on the menu being toast with butter and honey, and milk. I want to thank the school's acting principal Mel Lloyd and assistant principal Kate Stimpson for their wonderful work in getting so many families and students engaged with the club. I am so excited to see this program expanding to all schools in my electorate from July this year.

#### **Northern Hospital**

**Lily D'AMBROSIO** (Mill Park – Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (09:38): It was also wonderful to join the Premier, the Minister for Health Infrastructure, the Minister for Health and the members for Thomastown and Yan Yean in visiting the Northern Hospital to see the commencement of the construction of the Northern Hospital redevelopment. We are delivering this massive project. The first stage underway is the construction of a new four-storey building which will be the new home for outpatient ambulatory services, clinical and outpatient services. The second stage will deliver a brand new emergency department and inpatient unit, including a dedicated children's emergency treatment and waiting zone, new inpatient beds and a specialised mental health and alcohol and other drugs hub. This project, alongside the Whittlesea community hospital in Mernda, is so vital to continuing to deliver better health care close to home for people in the outer north.

#### **Victorian Fisheries Authority**

**Sam GROTH** (Nepean) (09:39): The Allan Labor government's reckless decision to slash funding to the Victorian Fisheries Authority by a staggering \$9.4 million is nothing short of disgraceful. Their irresponsible budget cuts mean a 50 per cent reduction in frontline fisheries officers, devastating fisheries enforcement across Victoria and leaving just 36 officers statewide to monitor our expansive and precious waterways. On the Mornington Peninsula alone, critical stations in Mornington and Queenscliff face closure, stripping local communities of vital enforcement capabilities. Port Phillip and Western Port, the busiest fishing regions in our state, will see patrols decimated, with enforcement

staff reduced from 27 to just nine officers. We will lose over 600 years of experience. Such drastic cuts effectively roll out the red carpet for illegal fishing and poaching, threatening sustainability, safety, research and local economies heavily dependent on recreational fishing and tourism. Marine parks, already suffering from over 50 per cent noncompliance in some cases, will be left even more vulnerable, risking irreversible damage to Victoria's delicate marine ecosystems. Local anglers and the commercial fishing industry, who contribute significantly through licence fees, feel rightly betrayed by this government. The Victorian opposition, in strong support of our fishing communities and environmental protections, has today tabled a petition with over 21,000 Victorians demanding these catastrophic cuts be reversed immediately. The Allan Labor government needs to start listening to Victorians.

### **Kerry Murphy**

**Mary-Anne THOMAS** (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Ambulance Services) (09:41): Kerry Murphy PSM AFSM was a towering figure in our local fire services and across the CFA. Kerry's funeral service is being held today and live streamed from the new Mount Macedon CFA station at 11 am. Kerry joined the Mount Macedon CFA in the early 1970s and served with distinction in leadership roles, including as captain and as group officer. He led during times of immense challenge, including the Ash Wednesday fires, and was instrumental in the recovery and rebuilding of our region. In 2006 Kerry was appointed chair of the CFA board. His wisdom and calm demeanour led us through the Black Saturday fires. Kerry's focus on the safety and wellbeing of CFA members was transformative and unrelenting. Kerry dedicated 50 years of his life to the CFA, and I send my sincere condolences to his wife Bernadette and son Steven, his extended family and friends and everyone in the CFA for whom Kerry cared so much.

### **Steven Power**

**Mary-Anne THOMAS** (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Ambulance Services) (09:42): Steve Power was a kind, compassionate and tireless advocate for mental health and wellbeing. As a former chair of the Macedon Ranges Suicide Prevention Action Group and a contributor to Hope Assistance Local Tradies and Youth Live4Life, Steve dedicated his life to creating stronger, more connected communities. His legacy is one of care, connection and quiet leadership. My thoughts are with Phoebe and Maggie and all who loved him.

### **Murrayville Memorial Bush Nursing Hospital**

**Jade BENHAM** (Mildura) (09:42): With less than a week to go before the budget is handed down and everyone being aware that Labor cannot manage money, I thought it vital to raise again the Murrayville bush nursing hospital and their desperate, urgent need for a new roof. It is still called the Murrayville bush nursing hospital because it was at one stage. The building itself is now actually owned by the community. In the 1980s when bush nursing hospitals and things were changing, a group of community members got together and now it is a thriving healthcare hub. Mallee Track Health and Community Service operates out of there, we have a nurse practitioner from Mallee Border Health, we have physiotherapists and social workers – all vital healthcare workers in small communities like Murrayville. They need a new roof. Guess what the cost is. It is \$250,000 – a drop in the ocean, particularly when a large portion of that community are CFA volunteers, with a truck that is quite old. But of course they are about to be stung with the emergency services volunteers tax. \$250,000 is a drop in the ocean to provide a watertight Murrayville bush nursing hospital.

### **Bonbeach Mother's Day Classic**

**Sonya KILKENNY** (Carrum – Attorney-General, Minister for Planning) (09:44): Congratulations to Hannah Wolbinski from Bonbeach, who put in a huge effort to organise and host the Bonbeach Mother's Day Classic last Sunday. None of this is possible without the generosity of so many wonderful local volunteers: Amy Dowling at the Bonbeach farmers market; our wonderful MC Jacob; Morgan Sheldon; Carolyn and Tony Ware; Mariusz Wolbinski; Greg Leatherbarrow; Emily and

Sammy Doherty; the wonderful crew from the Bonbeach Football Netball Club, Norm Butters, Harry Noble, Aaron Lowe, Sam McIlwain, Megan Folino, Paul Smith, Morgan Sheldon and Ben Dowling; as well as the schoolkids who greeted us all at the finish line, Maive, Issy, Emily and Ted. What a fantastic community.

#### **Easter egg hunt**

**Sonya KILKENNY** (Carrum – Attorney-General, Minister for Planning) (09:44): This year I held my annual Easter egg hunt. It was the biggest yet – over 1000 children and more than 13,000 eggs. So many volunteers made this possible. Thank you to the volunteers from the Frankston SES, Carrum Downs fire brigade, Carrum Downs Junior Football Club and the many, many volunteers, without whom I could not run this event. Thank you also to Woolworths Carrum Downs for donating hot cross buns and some of the eggs. Thank you to our local chocolate factory, Chocolate Grove, for helping me supply the giant egg and hamper for the lucky prize winners, and thank you so much to all of the local families for joining in and making this the best community event ever. I cannot wait to do it all again next year.

#### **Warrnambool May Racing Carnival**

**Roma BRITNELL** (South-West Coast) (09:45): Warrnambool recently hosted a magnificent May race carnival. The Warrnambool Racecourse has been home to racing since 1847. The carnival features 22 flat races and eight jumps races, including the internationally acclaimed grand annual steeplechase, first held in 1872. It remains the longest and most celebrated of its kind in the Southern Hemisphere. Visitors to South-West Coast were treated to an extraordinary experience. I would like to congratulate the Warrnambool Racing Club, the committee, the staff and the hardworking volunteers for their efforts. Police reported that everyone was well behaved, even the six protesters. The event lifts the morale of our community. Crowds of 28,000 flocked to the carnival, which injects at least \$15 million into the south-west economy over three days. The investment is spent in associated industries, such as accommodation, beverage and food, clothing, entertainment, fuel and so much more. It has a huge impact on the region's economy and boosts many local families, and racing is a significant employer in regional Victoria. Last December jumps racing was given a three-year reprieve in Victoria, allowing the carnival to proceed this year and for the next two years. Much work has occurred to improve the safety of the sport, and the community have shown their support. We need to retain this magnificent May race carnival in Warrnambool.

#### **Kerry Murphy**

**Danny PEARSON** (Essendon – Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs, Minister for Finance) (09:46): I want to also acknowledge the life of Kerry Murphy. Kerry Murphy was an outstanding public servant. He served with distinction under Labor and coalition governments, and he was an outstanding public servant because he took a risk, he was an original thinker, he got things done and he was fearless in his advocacy and with his work. This state is so much richer and better off for the billions of dollars that Kerry was involved in in terms of helping to drive that level of investment not just in big projects in Melbourne but throughout regional Victoria in his role as the executive officer of Regional Development Victoria. He was just a delight to work with. It was an honour to know Kerry. We are all poorer for his passing, but I do hope that public servants acknowledge and take note of his role and leadership and seek to emulate his performance.

#### **Essendon electorate public transport**

**Danny PEARSON** (Essendon – Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs, Minister for Finance) (09:47): I have got to say, it is going to be exciting times in the state district of Essendon. We are going to have the biggest single investment in tram rolling infrastructure since 1970. Toot, toot, get on board the G-class trams. They are going to be epic – much better than the old Zs. This is going to completely revolutionise routes 57, 59 and 82, and it is going to be amazing for our community. I cannot wait. It

was great to be out at the new Maribyrnong facility where the trams will be housed. I was there with the Deputy Premier as well as the hardworking member for Footscray. It is going to be epic.

### **Moonee Ponds Primary School**

**Danny PEARSON** (Essendon – Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs, Minister for Finance) (09:48): A big shout-out to Moonee Ponds Primary School, where we recently attended the rebuild. It is an amazing school.

### **Drought**

**Richard RIORDAN** (Polwarth) (09:48): There is a drought crisis in south-west Victoria that this government continues to turn its back on and maintain a blind eye to. It is simply not fair. At a time when this government brings before this Parliament a 189 per cent increase in fire service tax which will see literally millions ripped from country communities in south-west Victoria, this government refuses to give anything back to the people suffering drought. This drought at the moment is across a region that simply does not have long-term water supplies like other areas used to dry conditions. South-west Victoria is a food bowl for Australia, providing huge dairy output, beef, sheep, cereals and crops. The whole works is produced in south-west Victoria, and they are suffering terribly at the moment. Not since 1983, 1967, 1940 and the federation drought have such dry conditions been experienced in the region. It is hurting families and it is hurting communities, but the worst problem is that without some recognition by this state government that there is a crisis we are looking at a really long-term economic hit to the region. The reason will be that farmers are having to destock. It will take ages for them to be able to come back into production and provide food and economic output for our communities.

### **Greg Sugars**

**Anthony CARBINES** (Ivanhoe – Minister for Police, Minister for Community Safety, Minister for Victims, Minister for Racing) (09:50): The passing of champion driver Greg Sugars at the age of 40 has devastated the harness racing industry, which mourns a gifted reinsman, outstanding professional and wonderful person. Sugars passed in New South Wales last month, shattering news that was felt across the globe, having been widely regarded as one of Australia's greatest drivers after a 25-year career that boasted more than 4000 wins. Harness Racing Victoria chairman Bernard Saundry paid tribute to the person affectionately known as 'The Candyman':

We have lost one of harness racing's best ... Greg was a wonderful person and an incredible ambassador for our sport.

In all he won 64 group 1s in Australia and six more in New Zealand. His Australian record is 24,265 starts, 4028 wins, 6500 placings and more than \$38 million in earnings for connections. Prominent horsemen Craig Demmler said of his great mate:

His love for the horse was freakish, he respected everybody and he, in turn, had the respect of everyone he met.

I was represented by my office at the memorial service at the Melton harness racing track on Monday. Hundreds were in attendance. Deepest sympathies and condolences to Sugars's wife Jess, his parents Ross and Kerry, sister Kylie and a wide group of friends and admirers across our sport. Vale, Greg Sugars.

### **Simon Lund**

**Martin CAMERON** (Morwell) (09:51): The Latrobe Valley community is mourning the loss of a true community champion this week with the passing of Morwell CFA stalwart and larger-than-life personality Simon Lund. Simon dedicated 25 years to the CFA as a technical field officer and faced some of the biggest fire emergencies Victoria has ever seen head-on with just one thing in mind: the safety of his community. Tragically last year Simon was diagnosed with oesophageal cancer, which doctors attributed to his exposure to carcinogenic materials while working for the CFA, but because

Simon served as a field officer he did not fit the criteria to be eligible for compensation under the firefighters presumptive rights legislation. Incredibly, while navigating the impossible path of having a terminal diagnosis, Simon was determined to advocate for change to this legislation so that it recognises people like him. That is true to form with Simon, always looking out for others and putting them ahead of himself. I want to send my deepest sympathies to Simon's wife Tracie, their children Cooper, Matilda and Kate, his extended family and the CFA family. Simon gave his all to his community and his family, and we are poorer for his loss. Vale, Simon Lund.

#### **Williamstown electorate schools**

**Melissa HORNE** (Williamstown – Minister for Ports and Freight, Minister for Roads and Road Safety, Minister for Health Infrastructure) (09:52): Last week I was delighted to officially open the new sensory playground at Seaholme Primary School. Thanks to almost \$300,000 in funding from the state Labor government, the school now enjoys a modern and accessible play space that supports students of all abilities. It was a joy to celebrate this milestone with the students and staff at Seaholme Primary. At Altona Primary School I joined the acting principal Tim to inspect the exciting upgrades currently underway there. Backed by \$1.2 million from the Labor government, this school is undergoing improvements to fencing, landscaping and playground equipment. These transformations will benefit the whole school community, and I am looking forward to the positive impact they will have on students and staff.

#### **Williamstown electorate public transport**

**Melissa HORNE** (Williamstown – Minister for Ports and Freight, Minister for Roads and Road Safety, Minister for Health Infrastructure) (09:53): This week too, as part of major public transport improvements, we are supporting busy families and workers by delivering more frequent train services to help people get to work and home sooner. On the Werribee line that goes through my electorate this means that there will be two extra trains per hour in the peak at both morning and afternoon, which increases peak services from six to eight trains per hour.

#### **National Volunteer Week**

**Melissa HORNE** (Williamstown – Minister for Ports and Freight, Minister for Roads and Road Safety, Minister for Health Infrastructure) (09:53): Lastly, next week marks National Volunteer Week. Across the Williamstown electorate we are fortunate to have so many dedicated volunteers, from local men's sheds, Rotary clubs – including members I had the pleasure of welcoming to Parliament this week – to environmental groups and passionate community advocates and sporting groups.

#### **Nicholas Layton**

**Brad ROWSWELL** (Sandringham) (09:54): Today I would like to acknowledge Nicholas Layton, a deaf swimmer from Beaumaris whose story goes far beyond the pool. In the pool Nicholas has achieved extraordinary success, setting the deaf short-course world record in the 50-metre butterfly, winning gold at the Australian championships and earning a place on the Australian team for the upcoming Deaflympics in Tokyo. But it is his work outside the pool that truly sets him apart. As an ambassador for Deaf Children Australia, Nicholas is a passionate advocate for inclusion, showing young people that deafness is not a barrier to connection, ambition or belonging. Nicholas's dedication, resilience and advocacy work exemplify the spirit of our community and serve as an inspiration to many.

#### **Mentone Public Library**

**Brad ROWSWELL** (Sandringham) (09:54): I would also like to celebrate the 100th birthday of the Mentone Public Library. It was a pleasure to attend their centenary celebration on Tuesday 6 May and to join library president Graeme Johnstone in cutting the birthday cake. To mark this occasion the library held a writing competition that received around 200 entries and saw multiple prize winners. The Mentone Public Library has been a cornerstone of our local community for a century, and I extend my heartfelt congratulations on this remarkable milestone.

**Victorian Fisheries Authority**

**Brad ROWSWELL** (Sandringham) (09:55): Finally, I say to the Allan Labor government, in relation to their decision to cut fisheries officers in this state: don't. Simply don't. Our community is a wonderful community. Within my community there is the Ricketts Point Marine Sanctuary, a magnificent ecological and environmental asset. Cutting fisheries officers will put that at risk.

**Transport infrastructure**

**Natalie SULEYMAN** (St Albans – Minister for Veterans, Minister for Small Business and Employment, Minister for Youth) (09:55): Westies are excited for the Metro Tunnel and of course the Sunshine station superhub and the airport rail link. Earlier this week I joined the Premier and my westie colleagues to announce \$5 billion in the upcoming state budget to back these game-changing projects. It means more services, more investment and direct access to the CBD, creating more jobs in the west and of course more opportunities. I cannot wait, as a local, to see the turn-up-and-go services when the Metro Tunnel opens later this year, and I know my locals are looking forward to this. Five new stations will take locals straight to the Parkville medical precinct – to the doorstep of the best hospitals in the nation – and a world-class education at the University of Melbourne in the education precinct.

**Taylor's Road, Keilor Downs, pedestrian crossing**

**Natalie SULEYMAN** (St Albans – Minister for Veterans, Minister for Small Business and Employment, Minister for Youth) (09:56): On another matter, I recently met with the Minister for Roads and Road Safety to discuss the pedestrian crossing at the intersection of Carbine Way and Taylor's Road in Keilor Downs. I am committed to advocating strongly on behalf of my local community so that residents can get home safely from this particular intersection. A special thankyou to Matthew from Keilor Downs and all other locals who have spoken to me, have written to me and have contacted my office in relation to these concerns.

**Cairnlea bus services**

**Natalie SULEYMAN** (St Albans – Minister for Veterans, Minister for Small Business and Employment, Minister for Youth) (09:57): On another matter, I had the opportunity to raise with the Minister for Public and Active Transport the issue of more buses and better services at Cairnlea.

**Victorian Fisheries Authority**

**Chris CREWTHER** (Mornington) (09:57): I rise today to talk about two protests I have been at on the steps of Parliament this week. This morning's was on fisheries. This Labor government, to fill their budget black hole, plan to gut Victorian Fisheries Authority fisheries offices and officers. The member for Nepean sponsored a petition that has over 22,000 signatures. We need to protect our anglers as well as our environment and our fisheries. We have a number of people here in the chamber today. We have Charlie Cooper, a retired fisheries officer, and Linda. We have Paul Millar, an active fisheries officer and in fact the longest serving officer in Victoria, at 44 years. Their jobs need to be protected. We need to protect their work and to protect our important fisheries and our environment.

**Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund**

**Chris CREWTHER** (Mornington) (09:58): As well, earlier this week I joined so many people to support our CFA and farmers and others regarding Labor's proposed increased tax, on which they plan to sit potentially until very late tonight to ensure that farmers will have to pay potentially 189 per cent more in taxes. This is when they are facing drought across Victoria. I went to my grandfather's funeral on Monday this week, and at that funeral they talked about the fact that he was a farmer in 1967 and had to struggle through that drought. Imagine his situation if he had to pay all these taxes that have to be paid by farmers now. We have to stop these taxes. Labor need to manage the budget better and not – *(Time expired)*

**Richard Wootton**

**Steve DIMOPOULOS** (Oakleigh – Minister for Environment, Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events, Minister for Outdoor Recreation) (09:58): I rise to condole Reverend Richard Wootton AM. Richard was a minister of the Uniting Church in Australia. He married Betty, a nurse, in 1955. After training as a plumber in Bendigo he received the call to become a minister and trained at Ormond theological college, Melbourne University. He first worked at the Ballarat and Macleod Presbyterian churches. Richard, Betty and the family went to Korea as missionaries in 1964. He worked for five years in the industrial mission and utilised his plumbing and engineering skills to help build hospitals. This involved human rights work right through his career, including at the African National Congress in South Africa, at SWAPO in Namibia, and in Palestine, Latin America, Korea in particular and with the Tamil community. He was an extraordinary human being. Richard was instrumental in bringing Nelson Mandela to Australia in 1990. More recently, when I got to know him, he had lived in Carnegie for 30 years with his family. His wife, Betty, passed away in 2020. Richard was the most endearing, intelligent human I have met. He was always open for a conversation, an extraordinary intellect and a very, very good man. I want to extend our condolences to Richard's children Peter, Janet and Mark and their families. I want to extend condolences to his church, to close friends including the Kilgour family, and to every other neighbour and friend of his in Carnegie and the local community.

**Kew electorate funding**

**Jess WILSON** (Kew) (10:00): Labor's 11th budget will be handed down next week, and I am seeking a fair share of funding for the electorate of Kew. Firstly, many of our local schools need upgrades. It has been 80 years since Kew East Primary School received any significant funding for capital works. Canterbury Girls' has had no substantive investment in decades, having seen one of their walls fall down. Enrolments have nearly doubled at Balwyn Primary, but facilities have not been upgraded. Kew High needs the dark and dated classrooms in their main building replaced, and the next phase of Chatham Primary's master plan remains unfunded. It is not just our schools. Road safety in Kew continues to be neglected. I feel like I am a broken record with the number of times I have written to the minister and raised these issues here, but Labor still ignores our community. Hundreds of residents have signed the petition for a pedestrian crossing on Barkers Road. The intersection of Willsmere Road and Earl Street is in desperate need of a pedestrian crossing. Glenferrie Road and Cotham Road is another dangerous intersection that I have raised to no avail. School students in our community continue to be put at risk on our roads. I have also asked the minister to improve accessibility on our tram routes, on the 48 and 109, again with barely a response. Finally, I hear constantly from residents and traders that they are feeling unsafe in our community. We need to see an investment in our frontline police force next week in the budget. Labor will use this budget to make sure that they fund the things that Victorians do not need. Get your priorities right.

**Copperfield College**

**Natalie HUTCHINS** (Sydenham – Minister for Government Services, Minister for Treaty and First Peoples, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence, Minister for Women) (10:01): Last week I visited Copperfield secondary college, Sydenham campus, and what a great experience I had seeing the maturity and changes in the school leaders there as we did a quick tour of the school and popped into a few classrooms. I got to see the humanities teachers in action with their new democracy in action program that they are running with the children. I also listened to the views of year 9 students, who talked about their current projects and expressed a desire for more performing arts spaces. Can I thank the humanities teachers Paul Singh and Ms Taylor Van Orsouw on supporting students in teaching that program. I also want to thank the Delahey senior principal Michael Gruis, who is doing a great job in the leadership there, and it is good to see that the female student leaders have recently participated in a program called Be Bold Be Heard, a program that they are partnering on with Geelong schools, which is aimed at empowering teenage girls to set goals and providing them with a platform to become future leaders. This was awesome to see in action and to see the change the girls are already making in improving the participation rates in sports for girls.

**Ripon electorate education**

**Martha HAYLETT** (Ripon) (10:03): Over the past year I have been meeting with 11 extraordinary young people from across Ripon. From Ararat to St Arnaud and Bung Bong to Miners Rest, they have formed the first ever Ripon youth council. Aylah, Valerie, Jacinta, Angelica, Elizabeth, Ben, Alex, Rosie, Lily, Ashley and Dusty Raiyn have written me this speech:

Speaker, the Ripon Youth Council wants decision-makers to know what the education system is like for kids today in rural Victoria.

Every day we see the impact of the teacher shortage.

Many of us must take online classes and incur extra fees, making us feel isolated and unsupported.

Our schools rely on substitute teachers, wasting valuable class time when we should be learning the curriculum.

We see brand-new teachers struggling and experienced teachers who feel like they can't retire.

These shortages mean we don't get to enjoy the full extent of our education.

Leonardo da Vinci said, "study without desire spoils the memory, and it retains nothing it takes in."

If we had more passionate, skilled, and supported teachers, they would teach us the things we need to know.

We want to leave school being equipped for life.

To feel capable getting a job, doing our taxes, being financially literate, and having healthy, consenting relationships.

And we want guidance on transitioning to uni, TAFE and the workforce.

And how to move out of home and support ourselves to live the lives we desire.

**Langwarrin Community Centre**

**Paul MERCURIO** (Hastings) (10:04): I had the great pleasure of going to the Langwarrin Community Centre to look at their upgrades currently underway and, importantly, to look at the beginning of the kindergarten that is being built onsite. It will be absolutely fantastic when it opens later this year.

**Anzac Day**

**Paul MERCURIO** (Hastings) (10:04): On another matter, I would like to thank members of the Somerville Business Group and Somerville Business Collective for raising the funds for the sound system for this year's Somerville Anzac morning ceremony. As always, it was a very moving morning.

**Mornington Peninsula Shire Council performing arts development grant**

**Paul MERCURIO** (Hastings) (10:05): On another matter, I am bitterly disappointed with Mornington Peninsula Shire Council's decision to cut all funding for the arts, including the performing arts development fund, which I set up. The fund aimed to help young emerging artists get a leg-up and have a go. Now, thanks to their decision, they will not.

**Western Port Community Support**

**Paul MERCURIO** (Hastings) (10:05): On another matter, I would like to thank Minister Staikos for coming out to Hastings to meet with a couple of different groups but also to come shopping with me. We picked up donated goods from our local Woolies and dropped them down to Western Port Community Support, a fantastic organisation that we could not do without in our electorate.

**Western Port Football Club**

**Paul MERCURIO** (Hastings) (10:05): On another matter, I dropped into the Western Port Football Club's training session in Bittern the other day to talk about the club's aspirations for the coming season and the fact they have a couple of spaces left for their under-17s team. I also did a hammy.

### Connective Tissue Disorders Network Australia

**Paul MERCURIO** (Hastings) (10:06): On another matter, I am extremely excited to be hosting the Connective Tissue Disorders Network Australia in Parliament this morning. It is the beginning of a very long overdue discussion, and I look forward to everyone being there.

### Geelong Mother's Day Classic

**Chris COUZENS** (Geelong) (10:06): On Sunday I had the pleasure of welcoming participants to the 2025 Mother's Day Classic Embrace and Honour walk in Geelong. Hundreds of people turned out to embrace those living with or impacted by cancer and to honour those we have lost. It was a privilege to meet with the coordinating committee to hear from them, these courageous, determined women, about their experiences as cancer survivors. A huge thankyou to Albane Mahaut, Rosa Kure, Sarah Chandley, Isia Foy and Sophie Harris for their inspiring work. Since it all began in 1998, the Geelong community has donated millions of dollars for lifesaving breast and ovarian cancer research. These funds have allowed researchers to investigate how to better detect, treat and prevent the diseases, but there is still a long way to go. Breast cancer is the second-most diagnosed cancer in Australia, with one in seven women diagnosed in their lifetime. Tragically, the five-year survival rate for women diagnosed with ovarian cancer is 49 per cent, and there is no early detection test. Every day in Australia 12 people die from breast or ovarian cancer. One death is too many. Listening to these incredible women talk about the challenges they faced – the struggle of caring for their children whilst going through treatment and how for some their partner had to leave their employment to become the primary carer, causing financial hardship – I was so taken by their willingness to share their experiences.

### International Nurses Day

**Pauline RICHARDS** (Cranbourne) (10:07): Last Monday was International Nurses Day, and I would like to take the opportunity and indulgence of thanking all the nurses in my electorate but also the nurses who care for my mother in Nazareth House. She has extraordinary care. We are very fortunate to have such extraordinary clinicians in Victoria.

### *Business of the house*

#### Standing and sessional orders

**Mary-Anne THOMAS** (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Ambulance Services) (10:08): I move:

That:

- (1) So much of standing and sessional orders be suspended so as to allow on Tuesday 20 May 2025, following the introduction and motion for the second reading of the Annual Appropriation Bill:
  - (a) the Minister moving the second reading to retain their right to speak (for 15 minutes) on the question later in the debate;
  - (b) Jaclyn Symes MLC, Treasurer, under s 52 of the *Constitution Act 1975*, be permitted to attend the House for the purpose of giving a speech of unlimited duration in relation to the Annual Appropriation Bill.
- (2) A message be sent to the Legislative Council informing them that under s 52 of the *Constitution Act 1975*, approval has been granted for Jaclyn Symes MLC, Treasurer, to attend the Legislative Assembly on Tuesday 20 May to give a speech on the Annual Appropriation Bill.

In moving this motion, I will reflect that I am a person that normally does not really welcome those from the other house into this place. I think that this is the people's house and that we are the engine of government here in the Legislative Assembly. The house of review does its job, but seriously we are the people on the ground every day responding to the needs of our constituents. However, in this case, I want to make an exception because I do very much look forward to welcoming our Treasurer, a member for Northern Victoria, the Honourable Jaclyn Symes from the other place to come here next Tuesday to deliver the Allan Labor government's budget for 2025–26. I reflect that this is an event

that last happened some 15 years ago when a former Labor Treasurer, the Honourable John Lenders, came to this place to deliver the budget, so it is not without precedent.

We look forward, as I said, to welcoming the Treasurer to this place. She will deliver a much-anticipated budget. One thing you can be sure of is that it will be a Labor budget, and that means it will be grounded in the values of our great movement, which are always about looking to the people of Victoria and the things that matter most to them and ensuring that we are meeting the particular needs of people. At this time we know that, as a consequence of a range of global events and so on, the cost of living is an issue that is impacting Victorians. I do look forward to the Honourable Jaclyn Symes from the other place appearing here next Tuesday.

Many words have been spilt in the setting up of this motion. The Manager of Opposition Business and I have had many conversations about this – like, a lot of conversations about this – and I need to point out that this is absolutely no reflection on the Manager of Opposition Business, who is just doing her job. But part of her job is managing the massive ego of the member for Brighton, the Shadow Treasurer. The Shadow Treasurer went out to the media the other day saying he wants a time fixed in this motion for him to speak. I am trying to work out on what basis he is desperate to have this time fixed for him to give his reply. I can only think it is because he is going to live stream it on LinkedIn. I do not know, but that is what I have been thinking.

Anyway, we are not doing that, because quite frankly the member for Brighton is the member for Brighton and he will have his time. He can get up here. He can deliver his much-anticipated, in his own mind, response to the budget once it has been delivered. I might say also on this that I have reached an agreement with the Manager of Opposition Business, in a very mature way, that we will find an opportunity for the member for Brighton to deliver his response without it being interrupted. However, I do point out, as I have done to the Manager of Opposition Business, and she is very aware of this, that whether or not the member for Brighton's speech in reply is interrupted is entirely a matter for those on the other side of the house. If they choose to do a whole lot of performative stunts in the morning, then that may well chew into the time that the member for Brighton has to speak and it might mean that it abuts lunchtime.

But as I said, the decision about how that speech is delivered is one that is wholly in the hands of those on the other side, so there is zero requirement for this motion to deliver anything for the member for Brighton in terms of fixing a time for him, because quite frankly, as I said, it is up to them when he speaks. They could do what others have done. If he was really, really feeling as confident as he would like us all to think, why doesn't he just stand up straight after the Treasurer? I mean, really, show us what he is made of. He will get the budget. Apparently he is a really smart guy. Can we just be clear: we know that speech is already written, right? We know it is already written. We know it has been practised in front of his mirror already a million times. He has probably already done the video. It is probably ready to go. It is probably at post-production as we speak.

I, for one, am very much looking forward to welcoming our Treasurer, a member for Northern Victoria. I might say, as the member for Macedon, that she is an upper house member representing our district, an extremely, extraordinarily hardworking member both as a local representative and indeed as the Treasurer. I am reminded that when the Treasurer was appointed to her role, the member for Brighton took it upon himself to say that it was outrageous that our state was being led by two out-of-towners. He derided the Premier and the Treasurer as out-of-towners, because apparently regional Victorians are not able to lead the state. That tells you everything about what the Liberals think about country Victorians. No wonder the member for Ovens Valley is sitting here shaking his head, because he knows full well what the Liberals really think of country Victorians. The member for Brighton told us they are out-of-towners, and as a consequence not worthy of holding leadership positions in this state. That is absolutely shameful. I very much look forward to welcoming the Treasurer to this place next Tuesday to deliver an Allan Labor government budget – a budget that will, as I said at the very beginning, be founded in the values that drive our great movement, because we know what we believe

in. We know why we are here, we know who we represent and we know what Victorians need, and that is what our budget will respond to. I commend the motion to the house.

**Bridget VALLENCE** (Evelyn) (10:15): What a performance there. Talk about being performative – I think the Leader of the House outdid herself there. At the outset, in her remarks in relation to this motion that she has brought before the Assembly in order to bring the Treasurer, Jaclyn Symes MLC, from the Legislative Council into the Assembly to deliver a budget, the Leader of the House said that this, the Assembly, is the people's house and she is reluctant to have anyone from the Council come into the people's house. Clearly she does not think Jaclyn Symes is a person of the people. I have to agree with her on that point: Jaclyn Symes is not a person for the people. This Treasurer is clearly not one of the Victorian people. She is totally out of touch with the Victorian people. In the last budget debt was skyrocketing to \$188 billion. I hate to see what it is going to be in next week's budget. There will be cuts to services, cuts to jobs and cuts to public sector workers. I mean, this Labor government has forgotten its core constituency, the workers, and has the highest taxes in the country.

This is a motion that says so much about this desperate and tired Labor government. Whilst we accept that there have been some very rare occasions in the past when such motions have been introduced, they are extremely unusual. They are unusual because they demonstrate to us that neither the Premier nor any of her ministers on this front bench in the Assembly are willing to put their hand up to introduce what we all know will be a horror budget next week. Not the Premier and not a single minister in this place, in the Assembly, wants to take part in this horror show. Instead, the Premier is going to drag down Jaclyn Symes from the upper house – and probably drag down Jaclyn Symes's reputation in doing so – drag down the Treasurer here to take all of the blame, to cop all of the heat and all of the flak for the horror show of a budget that we will be seeing next week. You can kind of almost feel sorry for the Treasurer, almost.

But we ask ourselves: why doesn't the Premier have the guts to introduce the budget herself? Is it because she does not know much about economics and economic principles, or is it because she does not want to be speaking on what she knows is going to be a dismal, devastating, horror budget? It is going to be brutal on Victorians this budget. We all know it. This Treasurer has already foreshadowed cuts – cuts to jobs and cuts to public sector workers. There are many throughout the public service across all sectors and all portfolios who are very, very nervous. You have got to ask: why doesn't the Premier stand up and deliver the budget to all Victorians? Why won't the Premier be accountable to Victorians for her budget? This ultimately will be her budget. What is the Premier afraid of? More debt, more taxes, more cuts to services and more cuts to jobs. It is pretty weak. It is pretty weak that the Premier cannot do that herself in this chamber. I would have thought she would love the opportunity, but clearly not. You would think that surely the Premier would show leadership in this time of economic uncertainty and take the challenge full on, stand at the dispatch box, stand right here before us and deliver this budget that this government is responsible for, look Victorians in the eye and talk about how she is leading Victoria to the highest debt in the country, the highest taxes in the country and job cuts that we know are coming. As Premier she is ultimately responsible for every decision in her government, in this tired Allan Labor government. That is why the Premier should be the one delivering the budget, not dragging the Treasurer from the Council. As the Leader of the House said, she is not really one of the people. We know that.

One of the first acts of this Treasurer has been to introduce a new emergency services levy on all Victorians. The Premier is dragging the Treasurer from the Legislative Council. I guess if this motion gets through and the Treasurer does come to deliver her budget speech in this chamber, perhaps while the Treasurer is down here she can explain in the people's house why one of her first acts of Treasurer was to introduce this terrible, devastating emergency services levy, this emergency services tax on all Victorians, hurting farmers in the worst possible time, in a time of drought, the farmers who put food on our table. It is hurting renters through increases for residences and hurting manufacturers who make the products here in Victoria by a 64 per cent increase to the emergency services tax for them. It is a

189 per cent increase, the emergency services tax for farmers. Seriously, this is all that Labor treasurers do. All that Labor treasurers know how to do is spend more of Victorians' money and tax them more for the privilege. It is disgraceful.

You would think that the number one priority as Treasurer would be to put more money back in the pockets of Victorians, but we all know that next week we are expecting to see more taxes under this Allan and Andrews Labor government. Remember back in 2014 when the promise from the then Premier, the promise from this Labor government, was no more taxes. That was a 2014 election promise, no more taxes. Well, 10 long years later they have introduced 60 new taxes, hurting Victorians, causing a cost-of-living crisis for Victorians. It is absolutely shameful. I know that what every member on this side of the chamber, the Liberals and the Nationals, wants to see for Victorians is lower taxes. We want a government that cuts waste, that is financially competent, that spends Victorians' money wisely and that provides tax relief to Victorians at a time that they need it. But what Labor treasurers do, all they do, is race to impose. It is very lazy. All they do is say, 'Goodness me, we want to spend, spend, spend – spend more money than we actually have, spend well beyond our means,' and expect businesses to cop the heat for it. They tax businesses more, which makes it harder for businesses to operate and employ people, and their simple and lazy answer is to tax Victorians more.

Under the Allan Labor government they have had a record tax haul. It will be interesting when the Treasurer does come down to give her budget speech that already before the budget speech we know that Victorians are paying a hefty price with the Labor government hiking taxes in a cost-of-living crisis, collecting a record \$31.4 billion in taxes last year, the highest amount ever assessed in a financial year by the State Revenue Office. That is the highest amount the SRO has ever collected in taxes. It is a record tax haul under this Labor government. The government has pocketed \$9.6 billion in payroll tax, \$1.3 billion more than the year before; an additional \$1.1 billion under the COVID debt levy payroll tax; and a massive \$10.8 billion in taxes imposed on Victorians already under financial strain. Property owners and rental providers paid the government \$5.9 billion in land tax in 2023–24, an increase of over half a billion dollars from the year before, plus an additional \$1.2 billion in COVID debt levy land tax holding, totalling over \$7 billion going into government coffers.

The revenue from the fire services property levy increased by \$47 million. That increased when it was the fire services levy, and now the Labor government wants to introduce a whole new tax called the emergency services levy. It is trying to pull the wool over Victorians' eyes by telling the SES that it will provide more money for the volunteer SES services. They have not quarantined this. They have no intention of quarantining the emergency services levy for volunteers and for frontline emergency services workers. They anticipate taking \$2.1 billion additional from this tax, and the Treasurer's departmental officials have said that this will not be quarantined for volunteers. They have said they cannot say how much money our CFA and SES volunteers will get. But what they have confirmed is that it will go to inner-city, back-office public service agencies that have never been funded through a tax or a levy before. It is quite shameful.

I went through that record tax haul under this Allan Labor government. And yet, despite the record tax haul, in the December midyear budget update the Labor government shows that it is still running at a \$3.9 billion deficit. They cannot manage money, and Victorians are paying the price. What does the Treasurer, on her first day, do? It will be interesting to see if she has the guts and the gumption to refer to the emergency services tax in her budget speech, because as I mentioned before, one of her first disgraceful acts as Treasurer was to whack our farmers with a 189 per cent increase. We are going to lose these farms. I have the privilege of representing the Yarra Ranges and Yarra Valley. We have wonderful farmers out there, some of the finest producers that produce for our domestic market, some of the finest produce that we export. Our cherries, our strawberries, our apples, our wines – which everyone love – come from the Yarra Valley. But a lot of these farms have already said they do not think they will survive. That will be on the shoulders of this Labor government. That will be the legacy of this disgraceful, devastating, financially incompetent Labor government.

That is what Labor treasurers do. Labor treasurers just tax more. Victorians are going to be slugged with this massive tax – over \$600 million just in the next year. In their sneaky way, they are going to ask councils to collect this tax, and they know that councils will cop the heat. When people see their rates notices skyrocket, when manufacturers, farmers and renters see their taxes increase on their rates notices, they will contact their councils and councils will have to deal with a state tax that is going to hurt all Victorians. This Labor government has been totally disingenuous when it comes to this being a volunteer fund. They have told volunteers that they will be exempt from this emergency services tax, and nothing could be further from the truth. The Department of Treasury and Finance officials confirmed that volunteers will still have to pay this tax up-front. They are asking volunteers to do this work and they are still demanding volunteers pay this up-front and then fill out some paperwork for a rebate later. I mean, what guarantee do you think they are going to get that the State Revenue Office will actually get around to refunding these hardworking volunteers? These volunteers go to the danger and protect our communities 365 days of the year. We owe them a debt of gratitude, and what does the Labor government give them? It whacks them with a massive tax. It is absolutely disgraceful. It is going to destroy our state.

It will also be interesting to see the Treasurer when she comes into this chamber to deliver her budget speech – we can ask her about her cut squad. Remember back in February the Treasurer announced she was going to cut 3000 public sector jobs – 3000 Victorians she is going to sack – so it will be interesting to see how much more she has to say about that, when the Treasurer comes to the people's house. As the Leader of the House said, this is the people's house, and we know that this Treasurer is not a woman of the people. She is out of touch with the people, and it will be interesting to see if she has the temerity to come and tell all Victorians in the Assembly how many public sector workers she is going to put out of a job. These job cuts are coming from, we already know, the Victorian Fisheries Authority. They were out on the steps of Parliament protesting against this disgraceful Labor government this morning. The Victorian Fisheries has been decimated by job cuts, and we know that that is going to have consequences. We are very concerned about what will happen and potential illegal activity that may happen when it comes to fishing, because these Victorian Fisheries officers are being cut, being slashed by this Labor government. Where else is she going to be cutting these jobs?

I actually feel sorry for the Minister for Finance, who is not in the chamber at the moment. We have got the Premier, who is dragging down the Treasurer from the Legislative Council to come in and give her budget reply. I look across at a number of ministers who sit here in this chamber already, but the Premier either has not been able to find any one of the ministers who sit in this chamber that she has the confidence in or is too scared to give them the platform for them to be the Treasurer here. Why isn't the Deputy Premier the Treasurer? Is it because the Premier is too worried about giving him more of a platform, too worried about the Deputy Premier having too much of a platform and actually showing her up on his economic credentials, which the Premier clearly lacks?

Why is the Minister for Finance not the Treasurer? Deputy Speaker, you may recall – I am not sure if you were in the seat at the time – that we had the Minister for Finance come in here yesterday. I feel sorry for the Minister for Finance because I do think that he thought he would be the Treasurer when the former Treasurer Tim Pallas resigned. I think everyone anticipated that the current Minister for Finance Danny Pearson would actually be the Treasurer and he would be having his time in the sun, that he would be delivering this budget. I can only imagine the Minister for Finance is probably a little bit relieved that he does not have to deliver this horror budget next week. But we did have the Minister for Finance come in here yesterday, and he regaled us with his knowledge about the WorkCover scheme, told us how he had saved the WorkCover scheme – although it was broken under his watch – and about the methodical work and dedication. WorkCover was working, and how dare we question anything about the WorkCover scheme that he admitted was fundamentally broken under his watch, that he admitted was financially unsustainable last year.

It was quite the show. I think it was a bit of a 'Look at me, I could have been the Treasurer. I'm already in the Assembly, and we would not have to move this motion.' The Minister for Finance was basically

putting on this grand show for his colleagues in a final attempt to hopefully be able to deliver the budget, because the Premier will not do it, and if we do not get the Treasurer coming from the Council, he would be able to come in off the bench. You would only need to ask him. The Minister for Finance would be able to recite the budget from cover to cover, I am sure. I have seen it in the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I am sure he would love the opportunity to do it in here in a budget speech. He would regale us with Keynesian economic theories, and to be honest it would have been quite the show. I would have quite liked to watch that.

I think the Premier should just relent and let the Minister for Finance have his moment, don't you agree? I think that the Premier should just let the Minister for Finance have his opportunity to deliver the budget here in the chamber. It is such a shame that the Premier has overlooked the Minister for Finance, because I quite like the Minister for Finance. He is a nice guy, and unfortunately the Premier totally overlooked him for the role. Clearly no-one else on these benches had the requisite credentials to be the Treasurer in this Assembly, and that is why we have this motion before the house today.

On this side of the house we care about fairness. We believe in a fair go all round, and we consider that if the Treasurer wants to be here in this place at a set time on a set day, as a matter of fairness that same courtesy should be provided to the Shadow Treasurer for his budget reply. The Leader of the House has agreed – I do appreciate the Leader of the House putting on the record our agreement – that the budget reply will occur on 27 May and it will occur in the morning. The Leader of the House has given me an undertaking that it will happen on 27 May in the morning and with no interruption but unfortunately has flatly refused to include these details in her motion. To ensure all Victorians get to hear the truth about Labor's horror budget and what an alternative Battin Liberals and Nationals government can offer, we will move an amendment to this motion to allow the same courtesy to be afforded to the Shadow Treasurer to deliver his budget reply without interruption. Without further ado, I move that the motion be amended as follows:

After paragraph (1), insert '(1A) So much of standing and sessional orders be suspended so as to allow that, once the lead speaker for the Opposition has begun to speak on the second reading of the Annual Appropriation Bill, any interruptions of business are delayed until the speech has concluded.'

I move that amendment, and I commend that amendment, because it is in the spirit of running this chamber appropriately. It is simple and easy for everyone. It will make a lot of sense to amend this motion to include that. I think it is important for the Treasurer to have the opportunity to come in and provide her budget speech without interruption, and it is the same for the Shadow Treasurer. It is in the spirit, as I say, of this Parliament and for the benefit of the Victorian people that we all serve in this Parliament to ensure that the Shadow Treasurer is afforded the same.

I do understand that the Presiding Officers have arranged a function in Queen's Hall at a very similar time to when we expect the budget reply to be handed down. I think that might be an oversight or potentially a scheduling issue that the Presiding Officers may want to contemplate, because I think Victorians deserve to hear from the Treasurer, and Victorians equally deserve to hear from the alternative Treasurer. This government likes to talk a big game about integrity, about decency and about fairness. They will be showing none of those things if they do not come in and sit in this chamber and listen to what the Shadow Treasurer has to say about Labor's dismal, devastating and horror budget. It really should not be a big deal. We know at the Commonwealth level the Shadow Treasurer is always afforded a set time and day to deliver their budget reply. Why can that not happen here in Victoria? It is very, very simple. I commend the amendment to the house.

**Iwan WALTERS** (Greenvale) (10:38): I rise to speak in favour of the unamended motion that the Leader of the House has proposed today, but I want to acknowledge the contribution of the member for Evelyn, who I think could give some lessons to US Senator Cory Booker in filibustering to get 23 minutes out of that. I listened very carefully. It was not clear to me until about minute 19 that the opposition are in fact not going to support the motion but move an amendment.

I want to come back to the member for Evelyn's contribution and her suggestion that somebody on the floor of this house could just deliver the budget. The reality is that, notwithstanding the fine work of the Australian Republican Movement, Victoria is a subsovereign jurisdiction that is part of a constitutional monarchy, and the King's vice-regal representative Professor Margaret Gardner, the Governor of Victoria, has commissioned Jaclyn Symes MLC to be the Treasurer of Victoria. Section 52 of Victoria's Constitution Act 1975, which is alluded to in the Leader of the House's motion, makes very clear that any responsible minister of the Crown who is a member of the Council may at any time, with the consent of the house of which he or she is not a member, sit in such a house for the purpose only of explaining the provisions of a bill relating to or connected with any department administered by him. It does not actually say 'him or her', so there is a bit of an oversight in the constitution there, but it makes very clear that there is a provision whereby a treasurer who happens to be a member of the Council can indeed come onto the floor of this place and deliver the budget, contrary to the Manager of Opposition Business's suggestion that any minister could pop up and say, 'I am the Treasurer' and deliver the budget.

It brought to mind Spartacus, with ministers just popping up saying 'I am the Treasurer' 'No, I am the Treasurer' and offering to deliver the budget on the actual commissioned Treasurer's behalf. The reality is, therefore, that this is an entirely appropriate motion. There is, as the Leader of the House made very clear, ample precedent, with John Lenders having been the Treasurer between 2007 and 2010. I believe that was the first time that a member of the Council had come down, at least in Victoria's modern form of representative government, to deliver a budget on the floor of this place. There is ample precedent, as there is indeed in other jurisdictions. Reading a report from the Speaker at that time, Judy Maddigan, the measures by which Mr Lenders was able to come down to deliver the budget in the Assembly were based upon a New South Wales model, so there is clearly precedent in other state and territory jurisdictions across the Commonwealth.

I think the Manager of Opposition Business is right about some jurisdictions. Clearly in the federal Parliament there is no provision for a member of the other place, of the Senate, to come onto the floor of the House of Representatives to deliver a budget. The Commonwealth constitution – I think section 53, but I will need to check – makes it very clear that appropriation bills must be introduced in the lower house, so in that context there would need to be a minister representing the Treasurer on the floor of the House of Representatives, which is why, as far as I am aware, there has never been a Treasurer of the Commonwealth who has been a member of the Senate, though many ministers of finance have been. But we are not the Commonwealth. We are the state of Victoria, and a provision does exist in our own constitution – section 52(1) – that makes it very possible for a Treasurer who is a member of the other place to come down here and to deliver a budget.

I was listening very carefully, and I was wondering if there were some objections that were more grounded in constitutional theory or whether having a minister come down from the other place is a threat to the principle of bicameralism, but none of those were forthcoming. We had instead a bit of debate between the Leader of the House and the Manager of Opposition Business about whether this is the people's house or whether that is the people's house. But unlike other jurisdictions in the Commonwealth like the UK, we do not have an unelected upper chamber. We clearly have a chamber where members are elected at the same general election as those of us here are, admittedly on a different and much, much bigger ballot. But nonetheless they are a representative chamber – I am loath to say it, but I think it is true. We do not have a system in this country or in this jurisdiction, as I say, where those in the upper house are unelected. The Treasurer is a fantastically hardworking member for Northern Victoria, as indeed she has been in so many portfolios as part of this government, leading substantive reforms and now having the opportunity to deliver a Labor budget that will have an operating surplus and be part of this government's commitment to the Victorian people.

I am looking forward to the budget and to the budget replies from those opposite, because I have listened in the time that I have been a member of this chamber, and without anticipating debate around the budget itself, budgets are statements of political intent, of government priorities. We have seen

very clearly over the last 10 years, in contrast to the term of government that came before, that Victoria has some of the highest population growth of any jurisdiction in the OECD, an issue that is reflective of Victoria's dynamism and desirability as a place to live and to do business but in a sense a factor over which the Victorian government does not have unilateral control. Clearly population growth is primarily a federal government responsibility insofar as it is connected with migration settings, international students and other things for which the federal government has primary competence. But in that context, governments at a state level, which are charged with providing the basic services that Victorians rely upon – health, education, transport, infrastructure and those fundamental building blocks of what makes a community special – then have a binary choice. You can seek to invest to make sure the quality of life for Victorians continues to improve, or you can sit back and do nothing and not build schools and not invest in productive infrastructure, which is exactly what happened in this state between 2010 and 2014, when not a single school was built. As a consequence of that, if you sit back and do nothing, the quality of life for Victorians diminishes. So you can either invest in productive infrastructure that strengthens and grows the economy while simultaneously making the quality of life for Victorians better or sit back and do nothing.

What I have reflected upon with previous budgets and budget replies is that those opposite decry every single budget spending measure as not being enough and as not doing enough in their communities – as not building enough ovals, as not building enough new intersections and as not building enough schools or hospitals – yet at the same time decry every revenue measure as being too much. Something has got to give in that equation, and it is the challenge of a party that seeks to be an alternative government: you have to reconcile those things. If you are not going to support revenue measures and if you are going to seek additional spending on every measure, what gives? I look forward to the debate that will ensue as a consequence of this motion being passed and to hearing more from the Shadow Treasurer, the member for Brighton, who has just entered, and his colleagues as to how they will front up to Victorians and be clear about what they are going to cut and what they are going to diminish in terms of service provision and delivery.

I look forward to the Treasurer coming down to this place, as a consequence of this motion being passed, and talking about how this government will continue delivering the infrastructure and services that people in my community rely upon. Previous budgets have delivered stage 2 of Greenvale Secondary College, which has just opened, a \$22.38 million project that means that young people in my community have access to a world-class secondary education in their own suburb, and projects like Mickleham Road stage 1, a \$220 million project that has been delivered by this government.

**Bridget Vallence:** On a point of order, Deputy Speaker, I understand there has been a little bit of latitude, but clearly the member is not referring to the narrow confines of the motion whatsoever. I would ask you to ask the member to come back to the motion.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** It is fair to say that from the lead speaker this debate has been more wideranging than most nomadic people on our earth. If the member could come back to the motion, it would be appreciated.

**Iwan WALTERS:** I will, and I understand why the Manager of Opposition Business would not want me to talk about the fantastic investments that this government has made across Greenvale and that have made a difference to the lives of people in my community – roads, hospitals and schools, the things that make a difference. They are sick of having those opposite tear them down. It is why the Liberals got a primary vote, I suspect, of 15 per cent in my area at the federal election.

**Will FOWLES (Ringwood) (10:48):** I did not know that this particular motion was going to be coming into the chamber today, and I listened with great interest as the member for Evelyn waxed lyrical for near on half an hour on a matter that perhaps ought not warrant that much of this house's time. I want to thank the member for Greenvale for alerting the house that the budget is apparently going to deliver an operating surplus. I remain to be convinced of whether that is done by dint of accounting fiction or by genuine structural reform to the budget. I do wish to make a few comments

in particular about the amendment moved by the member for Evelyn, because it does provide that standing and sessional orders be suspended to allow the lead speaker for the opposition to speak without any interruptions and that any business be delayed until that speech has concluded.

We recently saw in the United States Cory Booker, a fine senator, speak for a very, very, very long period of time as an exercise in railing against the somewhat fraught presidency of Donald Trump. Were the member for Sandringham still the Shadow Treasurer I do not think I would be quite as vexed by the possibilities brought about by the amendment moved by the member for Evelyn, but with great respect to the member for Brighton, who is in the chamber, he is not immune to the possibilities of a good stunt. My fear is that he might very well speak for 24 hours and keep us all here through the day, into the evening and overnight.

**Bridget Vallence:** On a point of order, Deputy Speaker, I am not seeking to interrupt, necessarily, but I just want to educate my parliamentary colleague that the Shadow Treasurer, under the standing orders, can only speak for as long as the Treasurer's speech takes. If the Treasurer seeks to speak for 24 hours, then the Shadow Treasurer, I am sure, will be happy to do so.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** The member for Evelyn will resume her seat. That is not a point of order, and I think you know that.

**Will FOWLES:** That might very well be the case, except of course that the standing order to which the member for Evelyn refers is suspended by dint of this motion, because this motion allows that the standing orders be suspended to allow that:

... once the lead speaker for the Opposition has begun to speak on the second reading of the Annual Appropriation Bill, any interruptions of business are delayed until the speech has concluded.

If the member for Evelyn wants to amend her amendment to reflect the undertaking she has just given to the house, I might very well withdraw my objection to it. But I fear we are treading into dangerous territory, because if ever there was a member prone to a good stunt, it might very well be the member for Brighton. That is okay; you are allowed to attract attention to your cause using stunts. We saw a member in the other place yesterday reading a speech from a roll of toilet paper and another stunning intervention from the person who purports, in that place, to call himself the member for Ringwood. These things happen. People do stunts. They dream up these reasons to do it. But I will draw the house's attention to the Geneva Convention against torture. In particular the definition of 'torture' is:

... any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person –

for specific purposes, such as intimidation, by –

... a public official or other person acting in an official capacity.

There you go. The Geneva Convention against torture might very well apply here, because we might well be subjected to 24 hours of the member for Brighton speaking at great, great, great length under the scope of this motion and inflicting any amount of severe pain or suffering and seeking to intimidate, by a public official. The Geneva Convention against torture mediates against this amendment to the motion, and I suspect the house ought also to disregard this amendment to the motion. I do not think we want anyone in this place speaking for hours and hours and hours on end.

If the member for Evelyn wants to amend her amendment to reflect the principle she has just outlined, that the response to the budget only be the length of the lead speaker on the budget, then I would be happy to support that motion. It would speak to the fairness of having a budget speech and a reply speech, and I do not think, frankly, that many fair-minded Victorians could object to it. But what I do not want to see cracked open here is an opportunity for the member for Brighton to do a Cory Booker and keep us and the staff and everyone else here overnight, well into the following morning and perhaps all of the following day. Whilst it would be newsworthy, it would be an egregious waste of the resources of this place and of our collective time. He might very well end up giving that speech to

an empty chamber, but nonetheless he would be keeping many staff here, even if not all MPs, were he to walk that path. It is with that that I conclude my comments and urge members to vote against this amendment, unless the member for Evelyn sees fit to make the amendment reflect her words as made by way of a pseudo point of order earlier in my contribution.

**Anthony CIANFLONE** (Pascoe Vale) (10:54): It is with really great pleasure that I rise to support the motion put by the very hardworking Leader of the House, the member for Macedon, who is doing an outstanding job in leading the proceedings in this chamber. It is a motion that will provide for the upper house member of the Legislative Council Treasurer Symes, who I have had the pleasure of knowing for a very long time, to come and deliver her first budget as the Victorian Treasurer. It is our 11th budget as a Victorian state Labor government since being elected in 2014, and I look forward to it as the member for Pascoe Vale, Coburg and Brunswick West for many reasons. I know that, just like the previous Labor budgets we have been introducing through this chamber prior to my time and subsequently, it will be a budget – unlike those opposite are claiming – that is all about jobs, a budget that is all about education, a budget that is all about health and wellbeing –

**Bridget Vallence**: On a point of order, Deputy Speaker, given the amount of time and that the member's leader says she cannot foreshadow what is in the budget that is next week, this is a very narrow motion. I would ask you to ask the member to come back to the narrow confines of the motion and be relevant.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER**: I do not uphold the point of order, because this debate has not been narrow-ranging from the offset. I would encourage all members to stay close to the topics that are in the motion and not go into specifics about a prebudget speech.

**Anthony CIANFLONE**: I just find it absolutely astounding, with the greatest respect, that every time on this side of the house we start talking about things like jobs; schools, kinders and hospitals; upgrading our transport system; taking real action on climate change, which is a real thing, believe it or not; action on social justice; prevention of family violence; and all the things that matter to Victorians – cost of living – the opposition get up and use another procedural excuse or reason –

**Bridget Vallence**: Deputy Speaker, the member on his feet is defying your recommendation to not foreshadow what is in the budget. He is also attacking the opposition. There are a bunch of points of order we could raise. But really, on relevance, this is a very narrow procedural motion and he is straying from that and seeking to foreshadow what is in next week's budget – trying to take the thunder from the Treasurer, perhaps?

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER**: Again, this debate has been wide on both sides of the table. I would ask the member to keep his contribution to the words that are in the motion. Context is acceptable.

**Anthony CIANFLONE**: Deputy Speaker, I always welcome your guidance. Along with the key policy priorities that the opposition do not want to talk about, I just wonder why the Shadow Treasurer has not spoken on this motion. The Shadow Treasurer, whom we heard about from the Leader of the House earlier on at the start of this debate, is now in the chamber. He is staying silent. He is staying very quiet. But we know he has been making a lot of noise in the lead-up to this motion being moved.

**Bridget Vallence**: Deputy Speaker, I would like to bring your attention to the state of the house.

**Quorum formed.**

**Anthony CIANFLONE**: Great to have a quorum back in the chamber for this riveting contribution. I thank the member for Evelyn for bringing a bit of an audience to the chamber, because the point I was making was that we have heard the member for Evelyn, the member for Greenvale and the member for Ringwood but we have not heard the Shadow Treasurer speak on this motion. We have not heard the Shadow Treasurer get up on his feet and talk to this motion. In fact they have moved a reasoned amendment to give him dedicated time as part of his budget reply. I will tell you where

there will not be a quorum, or barely a quorum: when the Shadow Treasurer gets up to give his budget reply speech. They will be lucky to have a quorum with the way the party room is going at the moment.

This motion that the member for Macedon has moved as the Leader of the House will provide for Treasurer Symes to introduce her first budget as Treasurer. She will be the second Treasurer from the upper house, as far as I am aware, in the history of Victoria, which was formalised as a colony way back in July 1851 – the first Treasurer from the upper house who introduced or led a budget process as Treasurer having been none other than previous Labor Treasurer John Lenders. At the time of that process and that debate – and the opposition were making a bit of noise and hoo-ha around that time as well – it was very clear that, as the member for Greenvale put very, very well, there was no constitutional impediment in Victoria to a Treasurer from the upper house coming to the lower house to introduce and progress appropriation bills or relevant budget bills. Do not just take my word for it – I would encourage others to take the word of then Shadow Treasurer, still member for Rowville, who is in this chamber in this current Parliament. He said at the time, in an *Age* article of 3 August 2007:

Ministers should be controlling their own legislation and especially something as important as (budget) appropriations.

In other words it should be the Treasurer coming into this chamber to introduce the bill and progress the bill that they are the lead minister of. We have heard from the member for Evelyn: ‘Why isn’t the government appointing another minister or another MP or backbencher potentially to introduce the bill? Why isn’t it the Minister for Finance or this minister or that minister?’ Well, I will tell you something: we are a government of substance and action, and this is an opposition about nothing. It is an opposition about nothing, just like the show about nothing. In the show about nothing you had George Costanza going around pretending, as Art Vandelay, to be the architect, to be the marine biologist, to be everything and anything under the sun. But he was nothing, just like the show and just like this opposition is nothing. They mean nothing. They are irrelevant. If that is the best they can grab on to, I mean, God help the Victorian people if they were ever to get back the reins of power.

They are a Liberal opposition that are obsessed with procedures. We have got another reasoned amendment; they love their reasoned amendments. The member for Evelyn has moved another reasoned amendment to give the Shadow Treasurer, who does not want to speak on this motion, unlimited time, like Cory Booker, to do a massive filibuster – which I do not reckon the member for Brighton would have the stamina to do, by the way, no chance. But it is also in the upper house – David Davis, the Leader of the Opposition in the upper house, is obsessed with moving procedural motions, using crucial, precious time in the chamber to talk about procedural changes, about document release and all these technical things that people in the public do not care about. We as a government always use our matters of public importance to talk about things that matter, like cost of living, and at the same time David Davis moves motions that are just irrelevant – absolutely irrelevant. They are obsessed with their own internal procedures as well. We have to acknowledge the fact that this is as far as I am aware the first political party in Victoria that has gone on to have members of the party sue each other and take each other to federal court, which should not happen.

**Bridget Vallence:** On a point of order, Acting Speaker, again, this is a very narrow procedural motion. The member has strayed well and truly outrageously beyond what was contained within here. He may be performing again, but all this Labor government is doing and all he is doing right now is delaying a vote on the Treasurer coming in to deliver her budget speech. Are they worried – their horror budget? Come on.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Juliana Addison):** I ask you to provide succinct points of order. Yes, I do believe the Deputy Speaker said as wide as nomadic people, but if we could refer in the last six seconds – go, please, member for Pascoe Vale.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** They should see an astrologist, just like Sussan Ley – (*Time expired*)

**Daniela DE MARTINO** (Monbulk) (11:05): Sorry; I jumped up in surprise. I did think there might be a further contribution from those opposite. I was anticipating that because I was anticipating the Shadow Treasurer making a contribution on this motion, given that obviously an amendment has been put forward by those opposite. The Shadow Treasurer must feel quite passionately about this to amend our motion, and I did expect a contribution. To be quite honest, I was looking forward to it; I thought it would give me quite a bit of material to respond to.

Nevertheless, what I would like to address, in speaking in support of the motion put forward by our wonderful Leader of the House, is the fact that this is actually going to be an historic moment by allowing the first female Treasurer of this state to deliver her budget. On this side of the chamber we ensure that our women have a voice in this place, and we will ensure that those from the other chamber, when required, have the opportunity to do so – in this case it is the Treasurer, to deliver her budget here in the house, where it belongs. It will be delivered by the person in charge of it; that is precisely why. The member for Evelyn, the Manager of Opposition Business, did posit the questions: ‘Why isn’t the Premier going to deliver this? Why isn’t the Minister for Finance going to deliver this?’ It is because it is not their budget, it is the Treasurer’s budget – to be delivered here.

And there is precedence for it. On 6 May 2008 John Lenders from the other place delivered his budget in this place. There was a little bit of argy-bargy on the other side of the chamber. There was definitely form; the member for Rowville was one of those who was getting a little bit het-up about it. Nevertheless, it happened, and then it happened for the following budgets that were delivered by Mr Lenders. So there is precedence for the budget to be delivered by a Treasurer from the other place. This is what we are debating today. It is incredibly important. As I said, and I will note it again for *Hansard* and those in the chamber, our first ever female Treasurer in the state of Victoria in our wonderful history is going to deliver her budget – and rightly so.

I applaud the fact that this will be happening right here. I am looking forward to listening to the Treasurer and her contribution, and I certainly hope that those opposite will give her the respect that she absolutely deserves.

**James Newbury** interjected.

**Daniela DE MARTINO:** I have got some interjections from over there. I cannot quite hear what is going on. The member for Brighton is interjecting, but the member for Brighton could have an opportunity to actually put forward what he wants to say and have it recorded in *Hansard*. Instead, there are interjections. It is unparliamentary to take interjections, so I will not be doing that. It is interesting because the member for Brighton, we know, clearly does not like people being from out of town in positions of power. That has been made evidently clear. At least we are working on making sure that someone from the other place will be having their moment in this place, and that is a good thing. I think we can all agree on that.

I was listening to the member for Greenvale, and I have got to say I always feel like my IQ increases when I listen to the member for Greenvale. I feel like a little sponge just trying to soak up all the intelligence and the knowledge and the wisdom and the history that emanates from him. It was really interesting to learn a bit about our constitution and section 52 of the Victorian constitution, which does precisely allow for the Treasurer to come into this place and deliver her budget. I think it is a good thing for us all to know that – that this is not something we have just conjured up. We are not going off piste in doing this; we are absolutely following our constitution and precedents in the Victorian state Parliament. That is a good thing for us all to know. And it was quite interesting to hear about the federal constitution being a little bit tighter than that. That was quite interesting.

I was listening with great interest to the member for Pascoe Vale speaking with his usual passion about all the benefits that our budgets, thus far and into the future, deliver for the state of Victoria. I am looking forward to it, because I know that we have worked incredibly hard as a government here for the past 11 years to ensure that Victorians get a fair go and that they enjoy the best of what is on offer

out there. We work incredibly hard to make sure that education is the best it can be. We heard yesterday from the Deputy Premier talking about the statistics of Victoria in this nation when it comes to education. We have so much to be proud of, and I know that in the budget that comes along there will be more wonderful things for our schools and for our children, along with health, along with jobs and along with transport. We have got such a record to be proud of. I cannot wait to hear what is coming. I am really looking forward to it. I did note the Manager of Opposition Business talking down the budget, because they like to talk down the state of Victoria quite often, which is very, very disappointing. It is not a good thing to do, especially if you want to be running the state eventually one day. Talking it down is never a good thing to do. It is not smart, it is not clever; it is just opposition for the sake of opposing, and that is really disappointing. It is quite shameful. I have to say I did have a bit of a chuckle when I heard the member for Pascoe Vale talking about the show about nothing. I look forward to seeing the Shadow Treasurer's contribution, for which we now have I believe some kind of time. That is the amendment to the motion that has been put forward by them:

So much of standing and sessional orders be suspended so as to allow that, once the lead speaker for the Opposition has begun to speak on the second reading of the Annual Appropriation Bill, any interruptions of business are delayed until the speech has concluded.

I wonder how long they will go for, because there are only so many times you can stamp your feet, shout loudly and say that you do not like something, and they are often the tantrums that we see in this place. I am interested to see if any policies might emanate from those opposite, because there is an absolute lack of them, and that is interesting.

**A member** interjected.

**Daniela DE MARTINO:** Nuclear power, sorry. There is nuclear power; that is right. I wonder what the position on that is nowadays, because I know the Leader of the Opposition has kept schtum about his position on it, waiting for the fallout – there is a pun – post election to see which way the wind might be blowing and whether or not it would have radioactive waves going with it. It will be interesting to see if anything comes from the Shadow Treasurer's contribution – of substance. That is the key word here. Will anything of substance come forward? Will we have any idea if they have a vision for the state, or is their only vision to talk down this government, talk down the state, oppose everything we put forward, because that is pretty much how it goes. I have done the count. I did it only a few sitting weeks ago. Five times they have agreed to our government business program in my entire time in this chamber. In over 2½ years they have agreed to our government business program five solitary times. That is one handful. We have not even made it to the second hand. It is a little bit disappointing, because we have had a number of sitting weeks in that time – I am estimating, because I have not counted exactly – but probably about 35 or thereabouts. That is a pretty low hit rate when it comes to supporting good things happening. Anyway, moving on from there, this is a motion. I am supporting the original motion as put forward by the Leader of the House:

That:

- (1) So much of standing and sessional orders be suspended so as to allow on Tuesday 20 May 2025, following the introduction and motion for the second reading of the Annual Appropriation Bill:
  - (a) the Minister moving the second reading to retain their right to speak (for 15 minutes) on the question later in the debate;
  - (b) Jaclyn Symes MLC, Treasurer, under s 52 of the *Constitution Act 1975*, be permitted to attend the House for the purpose of giving a speech of unlimited duration in relation to the Annual Appropriation Bill.
- (2) A message be sent to the Legislative Council informing them that under s 52 of the *Constitution Act 1975*, approval has been granted for Jaclyn Symes MLC, Treasurer, to attend the Legislative Assembly on Tuesday 20 May to give a speech on the Annual Appropriation Bill.

I am really looking forward to the historic moment, to being a part of that and sitting in this place when our first female Treasurer delivers her first ever budget. It will be a moment for the history books, make no mistake. There is no more appropriate place for that to occur than here, and there is no more

appropriate person to deliver it than the Treasurer herself – not the Premier, not the finance minister, not any other minister of the Crown. As wonderful as they all are, as hardworking as they all are, as incredibly competent and fabulous as they all are, the one person who should be delivering this budget is the Treasurer, without question. I really do look forward to being here in this place and being one day able to tell my children, maybe even great-grandchildren, that I was there when it happened. I commend the motion to the house.

**John LISTER** (Werribee) (11:14): It gives me some pleasure to speak on the motion moved by the Leader of the House, because I think it is important for the functioning of this house to be able to hear from those who are responsible for those departments when it comes to creating things like our budget. There has been a lot of discussion around precedent. This is not something that has happened regularly before, but it has happened before in this place – we have mentioned Mr John Lenders back in 2008. That feels like a lifetime ago for some of the youngest members in this house, but 2008 was one of the times when we saw this happen. It is also not something unusual for parliaments in the case of our cousins over the Tasman. Tasmania has also done it. As long ago as 2007 they had their upper house Treasurer Michael Aird deliver their budget in the lower house.

The motion is quite clear. It asks that Jaclyn Symes MLC, Treasurer, under section 52 of the Constitution Act 1975 – which I will speak to in just a moment – be permitted to attend the house in relation to the annual appropriation bill. The member for Greenvale took us through a little bit of the Constitution Act, but there is something I want to reflect on regarding some of the challenges put forward by the member for Evelyn when it comes to the question, ‘Why doesn’t the rest of the frontbench present it?’ Why doesn’t the Premier do it? Why doesn’t this person do it? Why doesn’t that person do it? It is pretty clear in section 52 that this power and this arrangement come about only for explaining the provisions of any bill relating to or connected with any department administered by him – it is a bit unfortunate, the anachronistic wording of the constitution, but we know it is interpreted to mean ‘any person’ and that it is referring to any department administered by them. The Department of Treasury and Finance, which prepares the appropriation bill, is administered by the Treasurer. I think it is particularly important to hear from the Treasurer, especially when it comes to something as important as our appropriation bill.

I am looking forward to seeing a budget, which we have seen in the budget outlook. I know we have had a lot of discussions about the need to be confined to the wording of the motion, so I will talk about the appropriation bill but also the budget outlook which led to this appropriation bill. I am looking forward to seeing that operating surplus, and I am looking forward to seeing the ways that we are going to continue to deliver for Victorian families, working families, in our schools, in our hospitals and when it comes to major infrastructure, because these are the things that matter to the people that have put us here in this house and the people who have put those in the upper house as well. They are an elected chamber. This is not the House of Lords we are talking about, this is the Legislative Council, which is duly elected by the people of Victoria. I am looking forward to seeing a budget that delivers on these different things, because I think what has been clear to me in this whole debate is that this is a relatively straightforward procedural motion to make sure that the person responsible for the preparation of the appropriation bill gets the opportunity to speak in Parliament. I think it is a little bit disappointing that we are now at 11:20 in the day and we are still discussing this, and we have had this amendment put forward in order to make it even more complex, when we could be talking about those really important pieces of legislation that we are bringing forward to make a difference to the lives of Victorians.

I have been shocked by many of the anachronisms of this place, no more shocked than seeing those opposite when it comes to these sorts of things. We are following that set standard that is put forward in the constitution. I will briefly speak to the amendment put forward by the member for Evelyn, and I note the member for Brighton, despite being the key beneficiary, has still not spoken to this amendment. I reflect on this amendment and the fact that our motion has a precedent in this place. It also has a precedent in other Commonwealth parliaments. I would like to see them – and if the

opposition would like to respond to this, I would appreciate it – point to a moment when something like this has happened in this place, where the lead speaker for the opposition has been able to delay any interruption of business until their speech has concluded. Our motion has precedent and is grounded in the constitution, but this amendment is a self-serving opportunity for the member for Brighton to grandstand. We know those opposite and their mates in Canberra and their Liberal mates like lunches.

*Members interjecting.*

**John LISTER:** Yes, their very few mates in Canberra. They like lunches, and this amendment would push back lunch, which I am okay with – I will have a few snacks in the morning and make sure we can get through a busy morning, because it is an important morning. But we know that the Liberals like lunches, so much so that they like those lunches for bosses – that policy they put out where they were going to give so much of an incentive for lunches for bosses. Here we go. Righto, here is another anachronism.

**Michael O'Brien:** On a point of order, Acting Speaker, for the love of God make it stop, please.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Juliana Addison):** Which point of order are you referring to?

**Michael O'Brien:** Can the member please be vaguely relevant to the motion before the house?

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Juliana Addison):** It has been a very wideranging debate, but I ask the member for Werribee to continue with his contribution focused on the motion at hand.

**John LISTER:** I think it is relevant to the motion, because when we look at the way that the day will run it does go to lunch and I was discussing the issue of lunches. Something this appropriation bill will make sure that we continue to deliver here in the state of Victoria is not lunches for bosses, like those opposite want to see, but things like breakfast clubs and lunches for schoolkids in our state schools. That is what I am looking forward to discussing on the day. I am not looking forward to seeing grandstanding from those opposite just to make some kind of point and to get their grabs for their Facebook pages and put it all around and have some other thing that they put up that chews up more of the algorithm. I think it is a bit rich for those opposite to dictate who in cabinet should be responsible. Those opposite are eating themselves alive when it comes to who is in charge. We have a responsible cabinet government. We have our Treasurer that prepares this appropriation bill, and we want to make sure that they get the opportunity to speak in this house.

**James Newbury** interjected.

**John LISTER:** He is very loud for someone who did not have a chance to speak on his amendment. We are delivering for working Victorians. We have had a few directions from the Speaker about the range of things that we can speak about with this bill, but there are some things that we have already foreshadowed that will be in this appropriation bill which are out in the public domain which I do want to speak to. One of those really important things is our upgrade to Sunshine station. That upgrade to Sunshine station will unlock that western corridor, meaning that we can put more services through and we can deliver on more upgrades to our western rail services. It was something that was under threat of being cut by certain political persuasions in the federal Parliament wanting to cut it. And where were they going to put that money instead? This also goes to appropriations. They proposed to put that money into roads in the south-east. Now, do not get me wrong; they might need that support. I am all for supporting all parts of our community, but to rip something out of the western suburbs and send it to the south-east while they stand out there on pre-poll with their brethren talking about how the west is neglected – they neglect to even propose anything for the western suburbs.

As much as I oppose this amendment by the member for Evelyn, having a little bit more time might give them another chance. They have had two chances in six months – two elections in six months in the western suburbs – to perhaps outline their alternative for how they are going to support the west. I think it is a pretty sad indictment when we see that every time they come up with this line of 'neglect'

they neglect to put forward any alternatives. If they want to be the alternative, and if they want to have the alternative Treasurer, as they keep calling the member for Brighton, speak for longer and interrupt lunch, they need to put it up. They need to tell us what it is, because in the end the people of the west and the people of Victoria are going to make that decision, but we also need to make sure that while this side is well and truly in government – so much so that we take over most of the house's seats – we follow good process and we bring in the minister responsible for preparing the appropriation bill and the minister responsible for the department that prepares that appropriation bill. Might I say she is our first female Treasurer, which is a pretty monumental thing. We are following good process, but at the same time we are not supporting the anachronism of those opposite, who choose to waste time in the house with these sorts of amendments rather than letting us get on with good procedure and good government. We have had so much time in this house to be debating some of the important things for the people of the western suburbs and for the people of the regions, and yet we are here debating this absurd amendment from those opposite.

**Assembly divided on Bridget Vallence's amendment:**

*Ayes (26):* Brad Battin, Jade Benham, Roma Britnell, Tim Bull, Martin Cameron, Annabelle Cleeland, Chris Crewther, Wayne Farnham, Sam Groth, Matthew Guy, David Hodgett, Emma Kealy, Cindy McLeish, James Newbury, Danny O'Brien, Michael O'Brien, Kim O'Keeffe, John Pesutto, Richard Riordan, Bill Tilley, Bridget Vallence, Peter Walsh, Kim Wells, Nicole Werner, Rachel Westaway, Jess Wilson

*Noes (51):* Juliana Addison, Jacinta Allan, Colin Brooks, Josh Bull, Anthony Carbines, Darren Cheeseman, Anthony Cianflone, Sarah Connolly, Chris Couzens, Jordan Crugnale, Lily D'Ambrosio, Daniela De Martino, Steve Dimopoulos, Paul Edbrooke, Eden Foster, Will Fowles, Matt Fregon, Ella George, Luba Grigorovitch, Bronwyn Halfpenny, Katie Hall, Paul Hamer, Martha Haylett, Mathew Hilakari, Melissa Horne, Natalie Hutchins, Lauren Kathage, Sonya Kilkenny, Nathan Lambert, John Lister, Gary Maas, Alison Marchant, Kathleen Matthews-Ward, Steve McGhie, Paul Mercurio, John Mullahy, Danny Pearson, Pauline Richards, Tim Richardson, Michaela Settle, Ros Spence, Nick Staikos, Natalie Suleyman, Meng Heang Tak, Nina Taylor, Kat Theophanous, Mary-Anne Thomas, Iwan Walters, Vicki Ward, Dylan Wight, Belinda Wilson

**Amendment defeated.**

**Motion agreed to.**

***Bills***

**Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025**

*Second reading*

**Debate resumed on motion of Danny Pearson:**

That this bill be now read a second time.

**Bridget VALLENCE** (Evelyn) (11:32): I rise to speak on the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025, which seeks to make several changes to the operation of the emergency services superannuation scheme, the ESSS, by making amendments to the Emergency Services Superannuation Act 1986 (ESS act). Whilst we may consider this bill to be somewhat vanilla in nature, I think everyone in this chamber agrees that superannuation is increasingly becoming an incredibly important entitlement to all employees and a very valuable asset relied on to help many fund their retirement. With that in mind, we have spent considerable time reviewing this bill and the impact that it will have on members of the scheme, and I do thank the minister and his office for arranging a briefing on this bill and responding to the number of questions that we did have about the measures proposed in this bill. I do thank them for their time. I am grateful to the minister's office for their responses and the information that they provided, which I did find very useful. As part of my consultation I also engaged with a number of key stakeholders about their feedback on the changes,

and I thank them for taking the time to do so, including the Super Members Council, the Association of Superannuation Funds of Australia, the Police Association of Victoria, the Australian Education Union, the Victorian Ambulance Union, the Community and Public Sector Union and the Rail, Tram and Bus Union. I hope I have not missed any of the stakeholders that I engaged with there.

As some members may be aware, the ESSS was originally established for the purposes of providing superannuation benefits to our Victorian emergency services employees, such as Victoria Police, Fire Rescue Victoria and Ambulance Victoria, and may I take this opportunity again in this chamber to acknowledge the outstanding service of our emergency services personnel. They do a tremendous job protecting our community in what can be very challenging and confronting circumstances in many cases. We do thank our police, our firefighters, our ambulance workers and our paramedics for everything that they do for our community.

The scheme also benefits teachers and many other public sector workers. Some members may be aware that as a consequence of amendments made back in 2005, the former State Superannuation Fund (SSF), which had been in operation since 1925, was closed and all its assets and liabilities were transferred to the ESSS. The SSF had contributing members from the Victorian public service, the teaching service and other participating agencies. As a result of various legislative amendments over preceding decades, the ESSS is now responsible for administering a number of other public sector superannuation schemes, including the transport scheme, the Metropolitan Transit Authority scheme, the Melbourne Water Corporation scheme, the Port of Melbourne Authority scheme and the parliamentary contributory superannuation scheme. The ESSS now currently has around 124,500 members and holds over \$37 billion in defined benefits and accumulation superannuation assets. Given the quantum of these superannuation entitlements and the importance of superannuation, especially to those who are impacted by the bill, the coalition has carefully considered the measures contained in this bill.

This bill seeks to make a number of changes in relation to how members can manage their superannuation contributions and in particular makes significant changes to the composition of the Emergency Services Superannuation Board. Importantly, it should be noted by members that this bill is not a result of any independent review or public consultation. Rather it appears the amendments contained in this bill are purely the result of internal discussions between the government and the board. The coalition considers the measures contained in this bill to remove directly elected board representatives from the board to be inappropriate and believes this should be reinstated. We consider that members of publicly funded superannuation schemes should have the ability to directly elect representatives to the board, as is the current position, and we will move amendments accordingly here and in the Legislative Council. I will do that a little bit later in the debate.

However, before going to these aspects in detail, I think it is appropriate that we first consider what the bill seeks to achieve, and secondly, consider the current state of unfunded superannuation entitlements for Victorian public servants – a point of considerable concern. Firstly, the bill seeks to make seven key changes, including providing a 90 per cent superable salary policy for executive officers and other contract employees who are contributors to the Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme; increasing the number of times contributors to the Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme can change their contribution rate each year; increasing the period of time in which a spouse, following the death of a contributor to the Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme, may apply to become a member of the ESSPLAN scheme; reducing the size of the Emergency Services Superannuation Board from 12 to 10 members; abolishing the requirement for State Superannuation Fund members to elect representatives to sit on the Emergency Services Superannuation Board to represent them; requiring board representatives of State Superannuation Fund members to be nominated by unions rather than being elected by members of the State Superannuation Fund; and abolishing the position of deputy board member for the Emergency Services Superannuation Board.

I propose to first address the government's proposed amendments that are non-contentious and seek to make positive changes for contributing members. In terms of the superable salary, clause 3 of the

bill seeks to legislate a previously declared government policy. In 2022, several years ago, the government made a decision to allow the superable salary for new emergency services executive officers and other contract employees who are members of the ESSS defined benefit fund to be set at a rate of 90 per cent of their remuneration, subject to a minimum amount. Executive officers are those senior employees whose terms and conditions of employment are stipulated in a contract of employment with a total remuneration package and are not covered by an enterprise agreement. For example, deputy commissioners and assistant commissioners of Victoria Police are considered executive officers. All operational employees of Victoria Police, Fire Rescue Victoria and Ambulance Victoria are eligible to join the ESSS defined benefit fund. Members have the option of contributing at either zero per cent, 3 per cent, 5 per cent, 6 per cent or 7 per cent. Contributions are based on a percentage of the member's superable salary. A superable salary is a member's gross salary excluding any allowances. Naturally, a member's contribution rate will impact the retirement benefits they ultimately receive.

Before the 2022 policy decision, the prevailing method of determining superable salary was grandfathered for existing emergency services executive officers while providing them with the ability to opt in to the new arrangements for both past and future service. This policy was initially implemented informally by notifying employers of the new superable salary policy, but the government is now proposing to formalise this policy in legislation to ensure that it applies consistently to all relevant members of the ESSS. In terms of contributions, currently under section 20A(4) of the ESS act, members of the ESSS can only change their contributions rate once a calendar year and may only do so after giving two months notice in writing to the ESSS. The current process is very prescriptive and was likely imposed when IT systems and resources were limited. Clause 10 of the bill will remove this limitation and allow members to vary their rate of contribution in accordance with a policy to be determined by the board. The bill provides the policy must allow the rate of contribution to be varied at least once a calendar year. Consequential amendments are also proposed to the State Superannuation Act 1988 and the Transport Superannuation Act 1988 to enable SSF members to also change their rate of contribution more than once a calendar year, subject to policy to be determined by the board. These amendments will allow members to better manage their superannuation and personal finances, so this is a positive change, and it will give members more control of the management of their superannuation, which we do support.

In terms of spouse accounts, currently under section 21JA of the ESS act, following the death of a member, a spouse has the ability to become a member of the ESSS accumulation scheme. However, the spouse must make an application in writing within three months of the death of the member. The ESSS has indicated it has received some feedback from members' spouses, in particular widows, that the three-month period is not long enough to make this application, and the bill seeks to amend this provision by extending the period in which a spouse can apply to become an ESSS member to 12 months. This change is designed to support non-member spouses during a time of grief and potential trauma after a loss. We support this amendment because it provides additional time to a spouse to consider how they wish to arrange their financial affairs after the death of their spouse. We consider this another positive change because it will provide potential members of the scheme with more flexibility and opportunity to access benefits of the scheme.

Now to the proposed changes to reduce the size of the board and remove democratically elected SSF board members: we consider clause 4 of this bill constitutes the most contentious issues included in this bill. Currently under the ESS act the board consists of 12 members that are appointed by the Governor in Council. The composition of the board today is selected as follows: six board members nominated by the minister and six directly elected by members of the schemes. Of those six elected by members, one is elected by Victoria Police members; one is elected by Fire Rescue Victoria members; one is elected by Ambulance Victoria and department of environment, land, water and planning members; and three are elected by members of the SSF.

The government argues that this arrangement is consistent with the Commonwealth superannuation legislation, which generally requires equal representation of employees and employers on superannuation trustee boards. However, as noted in the recent Senate report into improving consumer experience, choice and outcomes in Australia's retirement system, there has been a marked shift towards superannuation boards consisting of more independent directors to improve governance and accountability. The Australian Prudential Regulation Authority, the Australian Institute of Company Directors and the Productivity Commission have all called for the equal representation model to be reformed and advocated for a model where independent directors have a much bigger presence on superannuation boards. Research has shown that independent directors protect against conflicts of interest and protect against the influence of vested interests and certain stakeholders interfering in the management of funds.

Currently, under the Commonwealth Superannuation Industry (Supervision) Act 1993, a representative of a trade union is not considered to be an independent member. The government also argues the size of the current board is larger than what is considered optimal. To address these issues, the bill seeks to reduce the size of the board from 12 to 10 by reducing the SSF-elected member positions and government-nominated positions by one each. Since the SSF is closed to new members, active SSF members now represent around 11 per cent of the SSF's total membership. Now, of the three SSF board positions, there are currently two SSF members sitting on the board who both have education and teaching backgrounds. With the proposed changes in this bill, the new breakdown of the board composition would be five board members nominated by the minister and three being directly elected by members of the scheme – so one being elected by Victoria Police members, one being elected by Ambulance Victoria members and one being elected by Fire Rescue Victoria and Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action members – with the remaining two SSF members being appointed by declared unions. This proposed change is the most troubling aspect of the bill, removing the democratic right of SSF members to elect their own representatives to the board and letting the minister just appoint a union to do that instead.

As I have referred to, SSF board representatives are currently directly elected by active members of the SSF, and as the minister himself noted in his second-reading speech, this representation ensures the board can make decisions informed by the valuable lived experience of elected members. If the minister himself considers it is preferable for the board to make decisions informed by the lived experience of elected members, then why is this government seeking to strip these members of their right to elect their members to the board? The government argues that because of the diminishing number of active SSF members it has become more difficult to recruit suitable new candidates, resulting in vacancies that cannot be filled. This argument deserves further interrogation against the facts. As at 24 February 2025 there were 61,180 members of the SSF. Of this amount, 6629 are considered to be active members. An active member is a member who is still employed and still eligible to receive superannuation contributions. Active SSF members make up 20 per cent of all active members that currently contribute to a defined benefits scheme administered by the ESSS, and there are currently 34,177 defined benefit scheme active members in total.

Instead of SSF representatives being directly elected by their peers, the government wants to remove this democratic representation and replace it with a process where certain declared unions will instead nominate these board representatives. The bill does not include any specified process as to how a union will become a declared union under this bill. Rather, the bill only provides the minister may, by notice published in the *Government Gazette*, declare a union as having the power to appoint members of the board. There does not appear to be any sound basis for the removal of the democratically elected representatives of SSF members to the board, and the government's arguments appear to be full of falsehoods – the main argument being it is too difficult to find people to fill these positions. Currently of the three board positions reserved for SSF members, two are filled by SSF members, as I said, with teaching and education backgrounds. If the proposed amendment in this bill to reduce the composition of the board from 12 to 10 is passed with SSF representation reduced from three to two board positions, there will be no vacancies in respect of SSF representatives. Currently the board only has nine out of

12 members sitting, and of the six positions reserved for government appointment, it has only got four members sitting, with two vacancies to be filled. The government presently has more vacant seats on the board than SSF members.

The amendment also runs counter to the minister's admission in his second-reading speech that elected representatives help ensure the board can make decisions informed by the valuable lived experience of elected members. The proposal to remove the power from SSF members to directly elect their representatives to the board is an affront to democratic principles of representation. As the government's own statement of compatibility, which accompanied the introduction of this bill, recognises, the removal of democratically elected representatives to the board engages section 18(1) of the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006, being the right to participate in the conduct of public affairs directly or through freely chosen representatives. The statement of compatibility goes on to state the amendment:

... may be regarded as a limitation on this right, as they can no longer take part in a process which relates to the composition of a Board that makes decisions about a group of members in society.

The government argues this limitation is justified on the basis that it will avoid representative imbalances and vacant positions, which have the effect of disenfranchising members, but this justification is false for a few reasons. First, the representative imbalance will be cured as a result of reducing the board's composition from 12 to 10 members, with the SSF members having one less representative, and secondly, there will be no vacancies for SSF members as a result of the reduction in board members. This proposed amendment also takes away an important democratic right without any substantive reason, other than it is administratively inconvenient for the government.

The ability to directly elect representatives to the board of management, especially those responsible for administering billions of dollars in entitlements, should be jealously guarded. Given there remains a pool of over 6600 eligible members to act in these two positions it is somewhat difficult to accept that none of these members would be willing to accept the role. There is also a complete lack of clarity and transparency as to how a union will become a declared union. Under the proposed changes there has been no information provided by the government as to what process will be followed or what factors will be taken into account when the minister makes their decision. Given the ESSS is responsible for over \$37 billion in member assets and benefits, the highest standards of probity are required in relation to how persons will be selected to make decisions about the management of these funds.

When I asked during the bill briefing if there had been any consultation with SSF members about the proposed changes to board representations, the response from the minister's office and the departmental officials was no; there was no consultation with SSF members about removing their democratic right to elect members to the board. However, the officials did indicate that the ESSS had undertaken some market research with members on this issue. It really remains unclear what this market research consisted of. In addition, when I asked if an independent review had been undertaken in relation to these proposed changes, officials at the bill briefing advised that the Department of Treasury and Finance had undertaken a desktop review and the ESSS had provided feedback. As you can see, the government has failed to make a sufficient case as to why SSF members should no longer be directly elected as board members. We should not be disenfranchising SSF members from their ability to vote, especially in the circumstance where there has been no consultation with them about these changes. In these circumstances there is no reason to move from a directly elected model to one where a declared union is able to appoint their preferred union hack. As such, in accordance with standing order 64(1) I advise the house of amendments I am proposing to this bill, and I ask that they be circulated.

#### **Amendments circulated under standing orders.**

**Bridget VALLENCE:** Under these proposed amendments that we are circulating now in the chamber the coalition will be seeking to reinstate the status quo and allow SSF members to directly

elect their representatives to the board, rather than declared unions. We consider that the voices of SSF members, such as teachers, should be heard. Again, we consider that SSF members, such as teachers' voices, should be heard and respected by Labor, not disrespected and not allowed to be silenced because of reasons that amount to no more than an administrative inconvenience for this Labor government. We consider that SSF members are in the best position to advocate for their interests at the board level and should not have this right taken away, especially when the government has failed to engage in any consultation about these changes.

I wish to turn to the troubling situation of unfunded superannuation under the Allan Labor government. It is an important topic to discuss, and it is why we consider having democratically elected representatives on the ESSS board so crucial. Victoria's current unfunded superannuation liabilities, which are owed to current and former Victorian public servants, are at crisis point. Back in 2000 the then Bracks Labor government committed to fully fund the liabilities of the SSF by 2035, which is only 10 years away. It was proposed that liabilities would be fully funded by virtue of the government making annual top-up payments from the Consolidated Revenue Fund. In June 2022 the current Minister for Finance, in his capacity as Acting Treasurer, approved a payment of just over \$1 billion to meet the SSF liabilities. However, this Labor government has now engaged in what can only be described as economic vandalism by reducing payments to fund these liabilities, which has only left SSF members' retirement savings less secure and subject to even greater financial uncertainty.

Under Labor's 2022 financial statement this Labor government, which is supposedly fighting for workers, proposed to defer making superannuation top-up payments to the tune of an incredible \$3 billion across the forward estimates. This is \$3 billion of public sector workers' retirement savings that this Labor government is refusing to put aside to secure the financial future of these workers. It begs the question: why is this Labor government refusing to fund these public sector workers' superannuation entitlements? The answer is clear: because this tired Labor government has lost complete control of Victoria's economy and has left Victorians' financial position in ruins. The fact the Labor government is now refusing to pay \$3 billion in superannuation entitlements to Victorian workers tells you everything you need to know about how toxic and destructionist this government has become. The fact this Labor government has stooped so low as to avoid paying Victorian workers their retirement savings is an utter disgrace.

How can this Labor government look Victorian workers in the eye and tell them that they will always protect them when at the same time they are taking money out of the retirement savings to cover up the massive budget blowouts and disasters that they have created and overseen on every single Big Build project in the state. Public sector workers would be really concerned to learn of this. This Labor government has lost all credibility with its core constituency – workers – because they would rather deny paying superannuation to public sector workers than be up-front and transparent with all Victorians about the economic disaster that Victoria is facing. This is a government that will stop at nothing in order to cover up and hide its economic mismanagement and incompetence.

What is worse is the Department of Treasury and Finance warned the Labor government that the dire consequences of this economic vandalism will cost Victorians. In a ministerial brief, which sought the Assistant Treasurer's approval to rip out \$3 billion in superannuation top-up payments, the Department of Treasury and Finance warned:

... the deferral of payments will significantly increase the superannuation top-up payments that are required beyond 2026–27. This is primarily due to the loss of investment earnings on the \$3 billion that would otherwise have been paid to ESSSuper over this period.

It is truly extraordinary. This Labor government's own Treasury has told it that it will lose millions of dollars in investment income by refusing to make these top-up payments to public sector superannuation entitlements. In fact the Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) has found that this policy will increase net debt by nearly \$883 million.

The financial incompetence of this Labor government is breathtaking. Not only is this Labor government refusing to pay superannuation entitlements to Victorian public sector workers, it is also penalising all Victorians. Refusing to make these top-up payments means that none of the interest or earnings from these payments will be realised and banked. This means that not only are Victorian public sector workers being denied their superannuation savings by Labor but Victorian taxpayers will be forced to pay more because the government will lose all the investment income these payments would have generated if they had been paid as originally planned. It is clear that this Allan Labor government is drowning in debt and cannot even afford to pay the most basic expenses, including the superannuation entitlements of Victorian public sector workers. It is shameful.

Sadly, this story only gets worse. Right now on the PBO's website it states that in order for Victoria to meet its commitment to fully fund its superannuation liabilities, it will need to make a contribution of at least \$2 billion a year. The PBO has also stated that when analysing the impact of the \$3 billion deferral:

... increased borrowings ... will be required by future Victorian governments to fund additional superannuation contributions ...

and

... higher investment is required to replace the lower returns resulting from lower superannuation asset balances ...

In a nutshell, the PBO has found that this Labor government will be forced to borrow even more money if there is to be any hope of fully funding these superannuation liabilities for public sector workers by 2035. This position is totally unsustainable, and this position is totally unacceptable. The fact that this Labor government will be forced to borrow billions of dollars to simply pay its superannuation liabilities just demonstrates how financially reckless and incompetent this Labor government is.

The government's own budget papers paint an even more depressing picture. In the budget update released in December last year the total budgeted superannuation liability was \$17.1 billion for the 2024–25 financial year. However, incredibly, the midyear budget update revised that figure up to \$18.4 billion by the end of the 2024–25 financial year. Instead of paying down Victoria's unfunded superannuation liabilities to public sector workers, Labor is revising the liability up by over \$1 billion. The situation only gets worse over the forward estimates. The budget update estimates that unfunded superannuation liabilities will again increase, to \$18.7 billion by 2026–27. Rather than paying down Victoria's unfunded superannuation liabilities, as this Labor government promised to do, the liabilities keep increasing across the forward estimates. This just represents another broken promise amongst the litany of previous promises made and then broken by Premier Jacinta Allan and her tired Labor government. With the state budget due next week, one can only hope that the Treasurer is listening and addressing this deeply concerning situation of unfunded superannuation liabilities for public sector workers under this Labor government. It is imperative that the Labor government take urgent steps to address this unfunded superannuation liabilities mess that has happened on their watch. Quite frankly, our hardworking public sector workers, our hardworking emergency services workers, our frontline workers, our teachers and our public sector workers in other agencies are expecting to be secure in retirement, and they deserve better from their government, not Labor's financial and economic vandalism. I commend the Liberals and Nationals amendments to the house.

**Iwan WALTERS** (Greenvale) (12:01): It is a pleasure to rise again to follow the Manager of Opposition Business and shadow minister. I do so to speak on the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. I will delve into the substance of my contribution shortly, but I just want to address some of the issues that the shadow minister raised that I think lie behind her amendments, which I will not be supporting. She made a broad point about the unfunded superannuation liabilities of public sector workers. As a general rule, they occur as a consequence of the residual defined benefit dimensions of superannuation and really speak to the rationale for why Paul Keating, Bill Kelty and

others in the 1980s brought about those titanic changes to our retirement income system to move away from a defined benefit system to a defined contribution system. Fundamentally, a defined benefit predicated system of superannuation could only be available to a relatively small number of people in our society and in our economy: generally, higher-paid professionals – those in the kinds of public service roles that we are talking about today. The changes that were made in the 1980s were profoundly democratising ones that made an immense difference to our retirement income system and made superannuation accessible for all Australians. I will return to those comments shortly.

The other dimension of the shadow minister's contribution that I particularly want to pick up on is her suggestion that the amendments to the Emergency Services Superannuation Act of 1986 (ESSA) to remove the requirement for State Superannuation Fund representatives on the board to be SSF members and instead to vary their selection process such that they are nominated by unions rather than elected by members of the SSF was some kind of massive abrogation of workers rights and democratic norms and principles. By contrast, I would suggest that in fact there are an inadequate number of SSF members to render an election viable and that the arrangements that are proposed by this bill would render the governance arrangements of the ESSS analogous to other industry funds. I do wonder whether the opposition's opposition to those measures is less a consequence of a commitment to democratic norms and more a consequence of that traditional Liberal–National opposition to the very concept of industry superannuation that the potentially not re-elected member for Goldstein was so voluble in his opposition towards in his previous term in Canberra.

As the first speaker subsequent to the minister on our side on this important bill, I will just return to the headline of the bill, which is to ensure consistency in the application of the 90 per cent superable salary policy to Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme members; to assist members in managing their superannuation and personal finances by enabling more frequent contribution rate changes, as the shadow minister pointed out; to better enable non-member spouses of members who die to access the ESSS plan scheme membership during their time of grief; and to make changes to the membership of the ESSS board for efficiency and appropriateness, as I have already alluded to, in light of the current membership arrangements.

Like the shadow minister, I want to acknowledge the immense contribution of those for whom this scheme exists – our public sector workers in Victoria, emergency services workers and teachers in large part. As a former teacher and a member of one of the inheritor schemes that the ESSS is part of, I am deeply appreciative of the work that they do every day. I am conscious that our emergency services, particularly our professional firefighters, remain in the electorates of Kalkallo and Greenvale working very hard to respond to bushfires. At this time of year it is extraordinary that we should have grassfires and bushfires in areas like Kalkallo, Bulla and Greenvale, but nonetheless the vagaries of climate mean that those hardworking emergency services workers are still out there doing their work of protecting our communities.

In some respects it is anomalous that the Victorian Parliament retains legislative competence for matters relating to superannuation given the federal responsibilities for regulating super and our broader financial system. I certainly welcome the appointment of the new Minister for Financial Services and Assistant Treasurer in the Federal Parliament, who I know will do a magnificent job stewarding this system. But it is important to ensure that our hardworking emergency services workers, for whom the Victorian government is responsible, are able to have fair and decent arrangements for their superannuation to ensure that they have a dignified and comfortable retirement.

That leads me to the initial part of my contribution, which was about the reforms that the Labor government in the 1980s brought about in this country, which were world leading in many respects and have brought about a complete transformation of our retirement incomes system. I think I have talked in this place a little bit before in the context of similar bills about the evolution of retirement incomes policy in Australia and elsewhere, from the Bismarck pension arrangements that were brought in the then newly unified Germany in the 1870s to the People's Budget of Lloyd George in the UK in 1908–09 where the first old age pension provision was brought in but in a very limited way

for those over 70 at a time where very few people did in fact live that long – it was an inherently piecemeal system.

In our own country the Fisher government from 1908 to 1915 implemented a number of reforms, including sickness and old age pension, but until the 1980s our retirement income system remained a real patchwork of public and private provision, with superannuation really being confined, as I said earlier, to high-income occupations and to a number of public sector roles. It was in that context, broadly speaking, a defined benefit system which could not be universalised and could not be democratised, because the tax treatment that was afforded to those private superannuation arrangements was fundamentally unaffordable at scale. As we have heard from the shadow minister, even the residual tail of defined benefit contributions, again at scale, creates problematic liabilities for governments.

Superannuation, though, as envisaged by Paul Keating and Bill Kelty in particular – and I think they do deserve credit as architects of that scheme – remains one of the most significant legacies of that era of reform in politics in Australia, along with social policies like Medicare, the floating of the dollar and the reduction of tariff barriers to open up the Australian economy and make it genuinely internationally competitive. It remains one of the most salient legacies and most important legacies of that era. The reason why I think it is so important is that it enabled Australians, irrespective of their occupation and their income level, to have confidence that they would be able to have a retirement that was predicated upon a decent income and a decent standard of living. Along with voluntary savings, including those who already had superannuation and the age pension, the universal pension, compulsory superannuation is an immensely important pillar of our retirement income scheme and is really the envy of so much of the world.

The shadow minister talked about the unfunded liabilities that government has in the context of superannuation. The challenges that governments in Europe in particular have as a consequence of unfunded pension liabilities are gargantuan. They are one of the primary reasons why those economies have been underperforming in recent years. The significant public contribution that is required to fund those liabilities, taking really from the present generation and from future workers to give to the past, is creating all manner of demographic challenges and economic justice challenges. Superannuation in Australia has simultaneously deepened the available pool of capital domestically, funding infrastructure across Australia but also enabling Australians, irrespective of their class and their income, to have a stake in the productive infrastructure of our country, while simultaneously exporting capital to the world in a way that was inconceivable in the 1980s. I could go on about superannuation, and I will at a later date. I commend this bill to the house.

**John PESUTTO** (Hawthorn) (12:11): I rise to speak in relation to the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. I want to remark at the outset that the shadow minister has moved amendments, and I certainly recognise and support those amendments and her explanation of many of the technical changes, a couple of which I want to talk about. But I will in my remarks talk about the broader context in which the government is mismanaging the obligation it took to the 2022 election, the commitment it gave to the Victorian people at the 2022 election, to fund on a consistent basis the unfunded superannuation liabilities going forward. I will talk about that a bit more.

As for the changes in the bill that deal with enhancing the rights of spouses to access entitlements under superannuation policies, of course we support those. This is an important scheme. It not only provides for the material needs of people who are to benefit under the scheme but also is a scheme about emergency services generally. We have seen this week just how important our emergency services personnel are in our community. I know, Acting Speaker Farnham, you and others in this house were honoured to be able to speak to many of our emergency services personnel on the steps on Tuesday when they came here clamouring for justice and fairness in relation to the government's draconian and punitive changes to the funding of various emergency services. I hope the government takes their cries for help on board, but I doubt it. I do not think they will. It was moving to hear of the plight of many of those people, who are struggling not only with drought but with having spent so

much over recent summer months dealing with bushfires, and to see them actually come down here to fight for the respect that we have heard members opposite talk about.

Members opposite have talked about respecting our emergency services workers and the sector generally, yet we have a government that came to office again in 2022 with a commitment that it would fully fund the unfunded liabilities of the defined super schemes by 2035. And what did it do? It is a familiar story. After the election, after having won, it then turned around and said it was going to kick the problem of funding the commitments it made prior to the election down the road. So \$3 billion in funding has been booted to after 2027. That might have given the government some immediate fiscal relief from having to find the funds, amidst all the chaos of their budget mismanagement, to actually fund those commitments of a billion dollars a year starting in 2023, but what it will mean is that there will be billions of dollars more required to revisit those payments after 2027, and it will be closer to \$5 billion rather than the \$3 billion that we are talking about now. The government might say, 'Well, that's \$2 billion.' They do not get out of bed for a blowout of less than \$10 billion these days – that is what they are used to – but it means a lot to Victorian taxpayers and against the broader budgetary context we find ourselves in as a state. Just this year this government – the worst performing in our state's history – has to find \$52 billion to fund existing debt and then another \$72 billion for new debt. All will have to be borrowed at higher bond rates. When interest rates were low, the government was able to borrow at about 3.6 per cent on average. The bond rate as at September last year was predicted to go up to 4.8 per cent. Over a small amount of money that might not seem like a lot, but when you are talking about borrowings for existing and new debt of around \$124 billion – and that was last year, who knows what it is now; we will look at the budget papers next week – that is a massive extra expense. When the government kicks the problem down the road, that is what it is doing to taxpayers. It is imposing on taxpayers more and more of a burden.

But we have heard this story before, just this week. In fact this week might be called the 'Labor week of kicking problems down the road', because we saw earlier this week, and I talked about it yesterday, \$2.4 billion cut from the government's commitment to fully fund its share of the Gonski commitments to our government schools. The government claims to be leading the Education State, but it is the worst offender when it comes to low-balling, nickel and diming, its commitments to government schools in this state. It is kicking the problem down the road – if it ever gets there. In 2031 it says it will fully fund the \$2.4 billion that it should be funding now and in the next year and the year after that, but it is not going to do that. It is kicking the problem down the road, just like it is doing now with superannuation. Having made the promise, it is now breaching that faith with the Victorian people. If it was never going to be able to do it, why promise it? If you could not do it, why promise it? It lied over Gonski. It lied over superannuation. It lied over the Commonwealth Games. The list goes, so when I hear members opposite talk about their commitment and showing respect to and for our emergency services workers, isn't the best way to demonstrate that respect to actually fully fund your commitments? That is what you could do. We all understand the importance of superannuation, and we all understand the problems of balancing intergenerational equity. But what this government seems to have a blind spot for is intergenerational equity. It wants to excuse its own poor performance and just push it down the road. We see it time and again, portfolio to portfolio.

As to the changes in the bill, I do want to address one particular part of the bill which the shadow minister did address at the length. I just want to make a couple of observations about it. The shadow minister pointed out rightly that the rights of active members of the State Superannuation Fund are going to be extinguished – their right to directly elect their representatives to the board. The government says by rejoinder, 'Well, there are only 6000 active members on the books. There are 124,000 members, so there is no real need and no real justice to be served in retaining elective rights for those 6000-odd members of the fund.' As if it is a problem that there are not enough members. But I point out to those opposite that they seem to miss the fact that even in their own party they seem to have a familiarity with the idea that a small number of people who are unelected can make decisions on behalf of thousands of Labor Party members around the country. They do not seem to have a problem with it when it comes to their own party. This idea that you can simply wipe away the rights

of members of the State Superannuation Fund because there are not enough of them, I have got to say, does not seem to strike the note of fairness I would have expected.

We are talking about the entitlements of superannuation fund members to have a say over their own future, and I think it is a fair point that the opposition makes that there is no real case for abrogating that right when today there are so many convenient ways for groups of people to cast elections in very different organisations. Digital platforms now are innovative. They are very flexible, and with an elective pool of about 124,000 and an active pool of about 6000, whichever way you choose to look at those numbers there is no reason why you cannot retain the elective rights of those members to be able to choose who their representatives are going to be. The question becomes: if you want good governance, then what is to be gained in abrogating those member rights in favour of nominated unions and not in favour of truly independent directors? That would be better. If you were to remove these rights in favour of independent directors on the board, then maybe you could make that argument. I still think it is preferable to retain the elective rights of members of the fund, but to simply say that unions, who are nominated and favoured by the government, are going to be given as of right the ability and an entrenched position of preference in the system makes no sense to me. It is not right and it is not just.

Superannuation funds now, like all other funds under management, are under enormous pressure to deliver consistent returns for members. In an environment that is globally uncertain, it is very difficult, even for conservative funds and products within funds that are conservative. You have to be extremely careful. You need the best and the brightest on the board. You need the best and the brightest on the executive teams of these superannuation funds. I just do not think this government gets it. It has got its priorities wrong when it comes to protecting the rights of members of the State Superannuation Fund in particular, and it certainly has got its priorities wrong when it thinks it can simply walk away and abandon commitments it made prior to the last election to ensure that those unfunded superannuation liabilities will be met in a fair way.

**Nina TAYLOR** (Albert Park) (12:21): It is a pleasure to rise to speak on this bill. I do want to reiterate that Labor will always protect and strengthen workers superannuation, because we do firmly believe it is within our core values that workers who have – in particular, but not only – protected us in terms of our health or our safety on so many fronts have a dignified retirement. That is certainly the ethos behind this particular fund. I should say that Emergency Services and State Super was created almost 100 years ago in recognition of people who safeguard the safety, health and wellbeing of Victorians. What do I mean? Members are those who are at the centre of our community, including police officers, firefighters, paramedics, teachers and support workers. We are tremendously grateful for the incredible work that they do, and that I suppose is a driving force behind making sure that this fund is managed in a way that reflects what one expects in a modern environment in terms of the way funds are managed. Bringing this fund into where we are in the modern era is certainly very, very important, as is futureproofing the fund so that it can endure appropriately.

I do want to pick up on some of the issues raised quite rightly. That is the point of the debate we are having now: to make sure that we have absolute clarity about our firm and unrelenting commitment to supporting the workers who will be, in due course as they retire, seeking the funds to which they have rightly contributed. I just want to pick up a particular point that was made by the member for Hawthorn, who said that the commitment to fully fund the unfunded super liability was made in 2022 and that we backtracked in 2023. I do want to remind the chamber that it was actually in the year 2000 that the Bracks Labor government committed to fully funding the liabilities of the State Superannuation Fund (SSF) by 2035. For the benefit of the chamber we should be very clear that it was a Bracks Labor government that did that and not a Kennett government, for instance. I should say that this is being achieved by way of annual top-up payments that are made under section 90(2) of the State Superannuation Act 1988, and we continue to make payments into this fund. I would hate for there to be any unnecessary fear or scaremongering among those who do subscribe to this fund. Let it be clear that we are fully committed to this fund – and have been, dating back to 2000 and the Bracks

Labor government. I just want to be really clear on that point because I think there were various conclusions drawn in the chamber that were not actually correct or fair, and we will certainly always back our workers.

There were some other points raised regarding reducing the number of directors from 12 to 10. It is being done, I should emphasise, in a way that ensures equal representation of employee and employer members of the board, as was required by the Commonwealth Superannuation Industry (Supervision) Act 1993 – that those elements are retained. The size of the current board is larger than is considered optimal, which can lead to inefficient decision-making. I have to say, from my own experience when I was initially doing my practical legal training, it is widely acknowledged – and I can reflect on this too – that the optimum size of a board is between 8 and 10 directors. So I do not think there is anything to be concerned about in reducing it from 12 to 10, factoring in the manner in which this is being conducted, which is very transparently and appropriately and in line with current Commonwealth legislation as well.

I should say the bill will reduce the number of members on the board representing SSF members from three to two, given the SSF schemes are closed to new members and SSF members are declining. I think that is a really important point here. We know that the overall number of SSF members is declining simply because for that part of the scheme they are approaching retirement, so we do have to futureproof the scheme. There is nothing underhanded here. We are being very up-front for the benefit of the chamber but, more broadly, for the benefit of the members most of all so they know exactly the reason why and what is driving these changes. Certainly we are making sure that there is representation with relevant experience. Of course they need to have relevant experience, as board members should have, such that active, deferred and pensioner members can have their interests adequately represented on the board, remembering that those members will want to have – and I think again I am being up-front – their values represented on that board. There is nothing controversial about a union representative who has to represent the members and therefore is accountable to those members as well.

I used to work in a union, and I can tell you union members do not hold back. They speak their minds, as they should. So if you are thinking that they are just saying, ‘Yes, sir. No, sir,’ that is not how it works in a union, and neither should it. I am reflecting very candidly. They are up-front and are certainly very forward and generally speaking pretty articulate, I should say, in what they want and what they believe is fair and proper. So rest assured that having their values represented will be important to them nonetheless, let alone to us in terms of the way that we are transacting this bill and ensuring that this very important union and obviously the funds that lead to dignity in retirement are reflective of the incredible work that the members that are represented will have done, those that have already contributed to the future for our great state of Victoria.

Reflecting more broadly on superannuation, we have to admit it is very much backed in by the Labor government, because whenever we see conjecture or any undermining of even the premise of superannuation it generally – and I think it is without controversy to say this – comes from the opposition and I expect probably even more so federally. Way back when, I did some work over in Sweden when I was in my early 20s, and there I was actually shocked, even relative to us, that other students in their 20s would talk about plans for their retirement. They were not about to retire, but it was inherent culturally for them to be thinking about it, planning ahead and contributing to their retirement as soon as possible to make sure that they had the dignity of retirement. Why am I making that comparison? I am saying there is nothing outlandish here about us embedding firm principles, modernising the way that this fund is being managed and ensuring that it is futureproofed, that it can endure appropriately and that we are backing the payments, as I said, which was the promise that was made back in 2000 by the Bracks Labor government. Backing in our workers and making sure that they do have dignity in retirement is a fundamental premise. It is fundamental, I think, for a Labor government, but it is also fundamental in a civilised society.

Reflecting on way back when – as I said, that was many, many moons ago; I was much younger then – and thinking where the mindset was in Sweden at that time, you can see that we are firmly embedded in a place that actually makes good sense, and there is nothing extreme or outlandish about that in terms of backing superannuation into the future forevermore. I certainly commend the various changes here, and I have not even spoken to various other changes – pragmatic elements for spouses of members who have passed to ensure they have more time to be able to join the fund when they are going through a grieving process. There are a number of very practical elements that will be transacted, I have no doubt, even further than my learned colleagues have already said. The fundamental premise is we will always protect and back our workers. The underlying purpose of the bill is to strengthen this superannuation scheme.

**Tim McCURDY** (Ovens Valley) (12:31): Acting Speaker Farnham, it is a delight to see you in the Chair – a fresh, youthful face like yours. It really is truly a pleasure. I also rise to make a contribution on the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. I commend the member for Evelyn for her comprehensive contribution and obviously the textual amendments to restore the provisions requiring State Superannuation Fund members to be elected as representatives to the board. That would ensure members retain their right to elect their representatives instead of them being union appointments. I note that the member for Hawthorn in his contribution touched on this as well, as will I. He spoke about fairness and making sure there is fairness in representation, and that certainly sums up what needs to occur there.

We know that the bill makes seven key changes. It provides a 90 per cent superable salary policy for executive officers and other contract employees who are contributors to the Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme. It also increases the number of times contributors to the Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme – I will call it the ESSS – can change their contribution rate each year. I think that seems fair; I do not have any problems there. It will increase the period of time in which a spouse – as the member for Albert Park was just talking about – of a contributor to the ESSS, following their death, can apply to become a member. Again, I think anything in this space that can help a family who has had a death of a spouse with the security of the family and financial arrangements – anything that can improve those in those circumstances – is a step forward and a terrific thing and we need to make sure that we can put that in place. With a tragedy like that obviously the financial security and future security of the family needs to come first, and this allows for that.

The bill also reduces the size of the Emergency Services Superannuation Board from 12 to 10 members, which I will touch on a bit later as well, and it abolishes the requirement for State Superannuation Fund, SSF, members to elect members to sit on the Emergency Services Superannuation Board to represent them. As mentioned in my opening remarks, it requires board representatives of the State Superannuation Fund to be nominated by unions rather than being elected by members of the SSF, and I think that is quite unfair, as the member for Hawthorn said. There is a lot of money involved here – I think \$37 billion, by memory. That is a lot of money to be having without representation by SSF members but rather by union representatives. It also abolishes the position of deputy board member of the Emergency Services Superannuation Board.

The ESSS is made up of 124,000 members from across the Victorian public sector, mostly from the emergency services – the ambos, Victoria Police and our fire services – services that we certainly respect on this side of the chamber. We want to make sure that opportunities for superannuation and flexibility in superannuation are fit for them because they do an outstanding job, our frontline services, and we appreciate the work they do. As I said, this is more about giving them the flexibility that they need for them and their family members. Although many of the changes in this bill are mostly housekeeping, as a result of internal discussions between the government and the board of the ESSS, it seems that once again it has tried to slip in this bit about union representation. That is familiar to us. It does happen as a regular occurrence. There is always something in legislation that is a little bit tricky, something that looks after their mates, and I think that is the one that happens to be in this particular bill. There is always one. The changes to the legislation around the election of representatives to the

state super board is another example of the government taking away the voice of the people and looking after their mates, and I think this should be called out. It needs to be called out. As I say, the member for Hawthorn has mentioned it as well.

And where was the consultation for the SSF members? Where was the discussion and the engagement with the very people whose superannuation makes up the money in this fund? We need transparency, and it is appalling by this government – again, the lack of transparency about the consultation or the lack thereof with SSF members. Given that the ESSS is responsible, as I say, for \$37 billion in member assets and benefits, the highest standards of probity are required to make sure that the people that are selected to make decisions about the management of these funds are there, rather than the appointments by the union members. In addition, when asked if an independent review had been undertaken, officials at the bill briefing advised that at the Department of Treasury and Finance, the DTF, a desktop review had taken place. When we talk about transparency or the lack thereof it is here again in this bill.

The proposed changes will take away the democratic rights of members to decide who is on the board and handling their retirement savings. This is people's futures, and Labor is once again playing political games with the \$37 billion for retirement planning. We have seen how Labor manages money, and I would not want them to be in charge of my superannuation, that is for sure. Even the government themselves have conceded that these changes will be a limitation of the right to participate in public affairs – in the statement of compatibility – and to me that is a fair admission. Victorians are demanding transparency from the government, yet we continue to get more and more smoke and mirrors and deceit with the backroom deals like this and so-called reviews that cannot be scrutinised by the people or even this Parliament.

The bill makes a variety of other changes that will update and modernise the ESSS, including allowing members to change their rate of contribution in a simpler manner as well as extending the period that a spouse or widow can become a member of the ESSS from three to 12 months. Again, that is a positive step forward. The government also seeks to reduce the size of the ESSS board from 12 to 10, as I mentioned earlier, represented by five board members, which I accept, nominated by the minister; three elected members – one each from VicPol, FRV and Ambulance Victoria; and two SSF members. Unfortunately, due to the changes that I highlighted before, this may be two union reps with no ties to the SSF, and that is a concern. This is an appropriate reduction in the number of board members. I do not have a problem with that, as the Commonwealth Superannuation Corporation manages far more super schemes and only has nine board members – so I do not see a problem in the amount of board members.

Overall the bill is largely not controversial, apart from that one section I have spoken about, bar those changes to the democratic rights of SSF members, and as such the opposition is seeking to amend the bill. As I said, the member for Evelyn spoke very confidently about this bill and how these changes will be able to support and make genuine legislation better. Very rarely do we see in this house that the government want to listen to anybody else but themselves, and then time and time again we see bills come back to this chamber – after three months, six months and even longer – because they have not got it right. I certainly implore the government to consider these amendments, because sometimes they are not the font of all knowledge, and I think it is really important that they look further afield to understand how a bill can be better. They have been in government for a long time now, and too many times we see these bills come back to this place because they did not get it right. I certainly encourage the government to consider this amendment by the member for Evelyn. With those comments I commend the bill to the house.

**Chris COUZENS** (Geelong) (12:40): I am pleased to rise to contribute to the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. I want to start off with a bit of the history of compulsory super, which was a game changer for workers in our country. Introduced in 1992 by the Keating Labor government, it was about addressing retirement income challenges so all working Australians had the opportunity to access super. The Keating government wanted to ensure that working Australians had

retirement savings to reduce the reliance on the age pension. Back in 1992 I was a very young community worker on a low wage. I am not going to talk about my age, but I was pretty young.

**A member:** You still are, Chris.

**Chris COUZENS:** Thank you. As a delegate in my workplace I was also a strong union campaigner that actively campaigned for that universal system. I think it was a great example of the labour movement working together. The unions ran a strong campaign, and I do remember how excited the workforce that I was in was about this significant change. It meant that there was a major shift from those who could afford to pay for super to all working people, to ensure that they could afford to have the benefits of a super account in their retirement. This was a really significant change for working people in this country, including in Victoria.

This bill improves the administration and governance of the state's public sector superannuation scheme to meet the evolving needs of modern-day members. Labor will always protect and strengthen workers superannuation because we believe all workers should have a dignified retirement. That was something that we really saw back in 1992. Since then there has been tinkering around the edges and there have been some changes, particularly around the retirement age, but fundamentally working people have access to super on their retirement, and that is a significant thing that was changed in 1992 and remains to this day. We created the current public sector superannuation scheme, the Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme (ESSS), to provide our emergency services workers and others in the defined benefit scheme with a financially secure retirement. That was what it was all about.

These workers are our ambos, our police and our firefighters, who every day put their bodies on the line to protect us. They deserve to know that when they retire we will have their backs and ensure that they can live a dignified life and that their families will be supported. These workers have given so much to so many in our state. That is what the Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme does, and it is why it is vitally important that we continually improve and modernise the scheme. Thousands of emergency workers are relying on it to be there for them when they need it in retirement. I note that those opposite mentioned that this is some sort of burden on the state. For me, this is about respecting our workers and acknowledging the contribution that they have made in their working lifetime to keep Victorians safe. We should always have that at the forefront of our mind. That is their role every single day; they are out there in our communities keeping our communities safe. Whether it be the ambos or the firefighters, no matter who it is, they should be looked after in terms of their retirement and this fund. The bill, whilst largely administrative in nature, will ensure that ESSS can continue to provide the services its members deserve and that reflect the modern ways members interact with the super fund.

This bill, the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025, will amend the Emergency Services Superannuation Act 1986, the State Superannuation Act 1988 and the Transport Superannuation Act 1988 to increase the number of times members of the Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme, the new scheme and the Transport Superannuation Fund can change their contribution rate each year. Amendments to the Emergency Services Superannuation Act 1986 will also legislate the 90 per cent superable salary policy for executive officers and other contract employees who are members of the Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme. It will allow spouses, following the death of a member, a period of up to 12 months in which to apply to become a member of the ESSS accumulation arrangements, the ESSPLAN scheme, and reduce the size of the Emergency Services Superannuation Board from 12 to 10 members. It will remove the requirement for the State Superannuation Fund representatives on the board to be SSF members, vary their selection process such that they are nominated by the representative unions rather than being elected by members of the SSF and abolish the position of deputy board member.

The superable salary provides the basis for determining both defined benefit superannuation contributions and benefits paid to members. In 2022 the superable salary policy was updated for new emergency services executive officers and other contract employees who are members of the

emergency services defined benefit scheme. The policy indicated that superable salary would be determined as 90 per cent of executive and contract workers' total remuneration package (TRP), subject to a minimum of the highest non-executive salary. While this policy was initially implemented informally by notifying employees of the new superable salary policy, it is now proposed to enshrine this policy in legislation to ensure it is applied consistently in the future.

The bill amends the definition of 'salary' in the Emergency Services Superannuation Act so that for a contributor engaged in a contract of employment their salary for the purposes of superannuation is equal to 90 per cent of the TRP or the highest non-executive salary, whichever is the greater. The bill proposes to amend the State Superannuation Act 1988, the Transport Superannuation Act 1988 and the Emergency Services Superannuation Act 1986 to increase the number of times members can change their contribution rates each year. Currently, members of the emergency services defined benefit scheme, the new scheme and the Transport Superannuation Fund can only change their contribution rate once a year.

Labor's commitment to fully fund the State Superannuation Fund is really significant. Prior to 1995 the state adopted a pay-as-you-go approach to funding the State Superannuation Fund. This meant that benefits were only funded as they became payable, not as they accrued, which resulted in a significant underfunded superannuation liability. In 2000 the Bracks Labor government committed to fully funding the liabilities of the SSF by 2035. This is being achieved by way of annual top-up payments that are made under section 90 of the State Superannuation Act 1988. The Allan Labor government continue to make progress on this commitment, and we are on track to fully fund the state's unfunded superannuation liability by 2035.

Victoria Police are there for Victorians at all hours of the day and in all weather, and we cannot thank them enough for their service. Of course they are part of this fund. Every day Victoria Police officers put their lives on the line to ensure the safety and wellbeing of others, and their contribution to our community cannot be overstated. The Allan Labor government thanks our hardworking police officers and their families for their service and commitment. We have made record investments of more than \$4.5 billion in Victoria Police to deliver Victorians the modern world-class policing services they deserve. This bill is really important to ensure that we do continue to provide that superannuation benefit to our emergency service workers.

**Peter WALSH** (Murray Plains) (12:50): I may not always agree with the member for Geelong, but can I actually commend her for her comments about the universal compulsory superannuation scheme. I think that has been a game changer, as she said, and something that has changed retirement plans for all Australians. When people are young, they do not think they are ever going to get old, and they do not think they probably need super in their early years either, but it is amazing if you look at the accumulation figures if you start work young and you keep accumulating how big a difference it makes, as the ads on the telly say. You actually have quite a nest egg when you go to retire, so it has been a great thing that has been done.

One of the things with superannuation is that it is important – and it is particularly a federal issue more than a state issue – that they do not meddle with the rules around it too often. It destroys confidence in superannuation. I think the Commonwealth has made some substantial changes around the taxation of superannuation funds, and particularly self-managed superannuation funds, that have actually destroyed some of the confidence in investing in superannuation, because they put caps on it and increased tax rates on it that mean that people who have made long-term plans are now finding they are paying a lot more tax than they ever thought they would around it. But this bill before us does not make a lot of significant changes that would change the day-to-day lives of any of the workers that contribute to this particular fund.

I would like to focus on the issue that the member for Evelyn actually has an amendment on, and that is around the appointment of the board to this particular fund. I think having a democracy where the members of a fund can actually elect the board members is important to maintain, and that amendment

achieves that. To give the minister the power to effectively, through the *Government Gazette*, determine which unions actually appoint some of the members to this board and the power to veto those and ask for names to be resubmitted I think actually flies in the face of a democracy. Members actually have a right to choose who they have on their superannuation board. This is the retirement nest egg of all these people – the 124,500 members of this fund. Those people who were elected to that board have a very big responsibility, a grave responsibility, to maximise the returns out of that fund, because by maximising the returns out of that fund they actually increase the retirement nest egg for everyone. If they make bad decisions about investments, that costs the fund, and although it is a very large pool and a very large number of people, it still has an impact on people's retirement nest eggs.

This effectively says half the board members are going to be appointed by the minister as the notional employer of all these people compared to other super funds, where there are actually industry employers on industry superannuation funds because they are the employer. The government is not necessarily the best manager in the world of money, and I think they need to seed that board with people that have experience other than those that the government would appoint and others that the unions would appoint. I think it is important that the members actually have a say. They may end up being the same people at the end of the day, but it is important the members actually have a say in doing that. I would urge those on the other side to give serious consideration to the member for Evelyn's amendments so that that is actually put in place. I would have thought those on the other side that speak about democracy and speak about unions having elections for union positions would support the fact that there is actually a vote from the members of these funds for those board members who are going to be representing them through that particular issue. It is also interesting that in some ways, as I started to say, this legislation prescribes the way a union is going to be designated to be the body that appoints members to the board. I would have much preferred to see that in legislation.

You may have heard me speak a number of times about enabling legislation versus prescriptive legislation. This is another example where we have enabling legislation that sets up a process that never comes back to the Parliament to be scrutinised. It is done by the relevant minister making a determination. It goes to the Governor in Council on a Tuesday morning, it is published in the *Government Gazette* and that is the end of it. If the government is so committed to having a prescribed union appoint these people, that union should be prescribed in the legislation so this house can scrutinise it – so we can make comment on it and so those on the other side can make their comments on whether they think that is the most relevant union to do that. Why do we have to continually have legislation that just puts in place a framework which is then a *fait accompli* by a minister and the Governor in Council? I think, as a principle of legislation, we are not only here as parliamentarians to help our constituents in our respective electorates, we are also legislators, and that is our responsibility when we come to this place. I think it is important we actually have legislation that has the details in it so we can scrutinise that legislation rather than effectively have a process where a respective minister can make a decision and it goes to the Governor in Council, the four ministers on rotation for that particular Tuesday morning sign off on it, it is published by the end of the week and it never comes back to this place. I find that system very wrong as a legislator and someone who takes this whole process very, very seriously.

The main point of contention in this legislation, as I see it, is the appointment of the board positions and how that is done. Whether you have a board of 12 people or whether you have a board of 10 people, it is just conjecture about what is the most effective number. I think the most effective number on boards, from everything I have read, is either nine or eleven. I think if you have less than nine – and you should have an uneven number; you should not have a rounded number for a board. But if you are going to have seven, it is probably a bit small if you have got a couple of difficult people on that board.

**Tim Richardson** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Wayne Farnham):** Member for Mordialloc, you are not in your correct seat.

**Peter WALSH:** It is wrong to respond to interjections, but 15 is far too big for a board. All the stuff I have read and all the stuff that the Australian Institute of Company Directors talks about suggests that nine or eleven is probably the most effective number for a board. If you go any smaller, you run the risk of a particular personality dominating that board far too much. But I suppose it just shows the member for Mordialloc's inexperience with boards, that he would make a flippant interjection like that. I have taken the bait and run with it as well, but that is fine. But it is serious. We are talking about a board that is going to have some \$37 billion worth of investments to manage. That is a big responsibility. I know it is just noughts and big projects that they manage, but if they have a particular big project that goes bad, that actually impacts everyone's retirement nest egg. That is why it is so important this board actually does its job. We all see the competition between the for-profit sector in superannuation and the industry funds in superannuation, and we see the ads on telly about which is better and which is not better. There is competition in the superannuation industry for people to choose where they actually put their investment. If you start paying superannuation as an 18-year-old or a 20-year-old when you start working and you are retiring in your mid-60s to 70s, that return on investment year on year on year on year makes a huge difference to how much money you will retire on.

**Mathew Hilakari** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Wayne Farnham):** The member for Point Cook will come to order.

**Peter WALSH:** I am not going to pick and choose which is the best super fund; that is for people to make their own choices about. But I think I would support the member for Evelyn and her amendments, and I urge the government to actually seriously consider making sure that the members that are paying into this super fund – the members that actually will get retirement benefits out of it in the long term – have a say as to who is on the board representing their interests, given that the government already gets to appoint the other half of the board. I commend those amendments to the house.

**Sitting suspended 1:00 pm until 2:02 pm.**

**Business interrupted under standing orders.**

### *Members*

#### **Minister for Transport Infrastructure**

#### *Absence*

**Jacinta ALLAN** (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:02): I wish to advise the house that for the purposes of question time today the Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs will answer questions for the portfolios of transport infrastructure and public and active transport. And on your indulgence, Speaker, I would like to wish the Attorney a very happy birthday.

### *Questions without notice and ministers statements*

#### **Suicide prevention**

**Brad BATTIN** (Berwick – Leader of the Opposition) (14:03): My question is to the Premier. Suicides in Victoria have increased from 676 in 2021 to 777 last year. Despite this, \$173 million in suicide prevention measures are at risk of being cut in next week's budget. Will the Premier guarantee not one cent will be cut from suicide prevention in Victoria?

**Jacinta ALLAN** (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:03): In thanking the Leader of the Opposition for his question, can I say this in general in terms of answering any question regarding the budget that will be handed down in this place by the Treasurer next Tuesday: the budget will be detailed to the house next Tuesday. I want to be absolutely clear that, unlike some on that side of the house, we will never

cut into frontline workers. We will not cut into our nurses, teachers, police or child protection workers. Let me be clear: we will be investing every dollar where it matters most to working people and their families. What I will say in regard to the reference to mental health programs is that it would be very concerning for the Leader of the Opposition to continue this pattern of questioning and to use programs – which on an annual basis, a triennial basis or over a four-year period are to be considered by government in the usual way – to cause fear and concern amongst vulnerable Victorians. That would be deeply disappointing.

The Leader of the Opposition referenced data from 2021. In 2021 we received the landmark royal commission report into mental health, a royal commission that was only called because Labor governments recognised that it was a system that was not working for people with mental illness, it was a system that was not working for their carers and it was a system that needed reform. We are going about investing in that system. Billions of dollars have been invested in that system; that includes investment from the mental health levy that those opposite opposed. Those opposite opposed that investment in mental health.

**Bridget Vallence:** On a point of order, Speaker, the Premier is debating the question. It is a very narrow question: will the Premier guarantee not one cent will be cut from suicide prevention programs? I ask you to ask the Premier to come back to that very narrow question.

**Mary-Anne Thomas:** Speaker, on the point of order, I have lost count of the number of times that you have counselled the Manager of Opposition Business not to use points of order as an opportunity to ask the question again. The Premier was not debating the question at all. She was answering the question and quite rightly pointing out that those on the opposite side voted against and did not support the mental health levy.

**The SPEAKER:** Order! I also counsel the Leader of the House about longwinded points of order. I do not uphold the point of order on this occasion.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** It was only Labor that committed to implement each and every one of those royal commission recommendations – the Liberal Party did not – and we will continue to implement those recommendations. More importantly, we will continue to invest in the workforce, invest in rebuilding the system and invest in supporting people with mental illness and their carers, who deserve that focus and support.

**Brad BATTIN** (Berwick – Leader of the Opposition) (14:07): Since 2020 family violence incidents have increased by 12,275, a 13 per cent increase. Despite this, over \$44 million of family violence programs are being put at risk of being cut in the upcoming budget because of Labor's financial mismanagement. Will the Premier guarantee to not cut one cent from family violence measures in Victoria?

**Jacinta ALLAN** (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:07): Again, the reason why we can talk about the family violence royal commission is because a Labor government called it, and a Labor government is implementing each and every one of those recommendations, which, once again, those opposite did not support. We have invested more than \$4 billion in family violence prevention and support programs. We are proud of that investment and will continue to build on that investment. I think I went to this yesterday. On Saturday, Speaker, when you and I stood in Bendigo with victims, women who are victims and survivors of family violence, we understood keenly why it is so important to invest, to stand alongside them and to believe them and to not play political games like those opposite are doing here today. Victims of family violence deserve to have us standing with them and supporting them.

**Bridget Vallence:** On a point of order, Speaker, it was a very narrow question about \$44 million being cut from family violence programs. I ask you to ask the Premier to come back to that very narrow question.

**The SPEAKER:** The Premier, I think, has concluded her answer.

**Ministers statements: energy policy**

**Lily D'AMBROSIO** (Mill Park – Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (14:09): I am pleased to report to the house on how the Allan Labor government is helping to slash household energy bills, delivering cheaper renewable energy and helping families move to more energy-efficient homes. Victorians overwhelmingly rejected the Liberal–Nationals nuclear future. They rejected a future with more coal-fired power for longer, a future managing toxic nuclear waste and a future of skyrocketing power bills. Our government will never build nuclear reactors here in Victoria. Instead, we are helping families right now to make the switch in their homes away from expensive gas appliances to cheaper-to-run electric ones. Right across our state our programs are slashing energy bills for families, and they are telling us this in their living rooms. With the member for Melton we met with Joan and Ben; with the member for Ashwood, Jenny and Russell; with the member for Northcote, Jan and Daisy; and with the member for Pascoe Vale, Michael and Anne. These people and many more told us the real difference our programs and supports are making to their lives right now and to their bills, saving thousands to install a new appliance and then saving every day on their energy bills. Do you know what else they told us? That nuclear was not for them, because they know it would cost them a packet, it would be decades away and it is bad for the planet. They were very unhappy to hear that the Victorian Leader of the Opposition was keeping the door open on nuclear during the recent campaign – because he is a weak leader without a backbone.

**Bridget Vallence:** On a point of order, Speaker, not only was the minister saying very baseless, personal reflections, ministers statements are not a time and opportunity to attack the opposition.

**The SPEAKER:** Order! I remind the minister about attacking the opposition. Come back to the ministers statement.

**Lily D'AMBROSIO:** I was reporting on the views of Victorians, who really were very amazed by the Victorian opposition leader's views. Absolutely I think some people will be very sorry now to have kept the door open on nuclear, because Victorians hate it. We are absolutely on the side of hardworking Victorians, helping them today with their energy bills, and that is exactly what we will continue to do.

**Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund**

**Danny O'BRIEN** (Gippsland South) (14:11): My question is to the Premier. Danny is a farmer from Clunes. He is facing a deepening drought, falling stock prices and now a \$4000 increase in the bill he must pay under Labor's emergency services tax. Why must Danny and millions of Victorians like him pay the price because Labor cannot manage money?

**Jacinta ALLAN** (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:12): I strongly disagree with Danny, the Leader of the National Party, in his characterisation in that question. We have invested strongly in rural and regional Victorians. We have invested strongly in our emergency services, and we will continue to do so. The reason why we need to bring more investment into our emergency services is because more is being asked of our emergency services – more than ever before. The frequency of the fires, the floods and the storms is seeing more and more demand being put on our emergency services. If I remember correctly, over this summer period the communities around Clunes were also subjected to fire risk as a result of fire in that landscape over that summer period, putting their properties at risk and putting their livelihoods at risk, which is why we need to invest in our emergency services.

**Danny O'Brien:** On a point of order, Speaker, on the question of debating, the Premier seems to misunderstand that the concern from people like Danny is not about supporting the emergency services; it is why a whole lot of government agencies are now being moved across to this levy and Victorians are being double taxed for them.

**The SPEAKER:** Order! The Premier was not debating the question. The Premier was being relevant.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** The Leader of the National Party also referenced the difficult experiences that are being felt by our primary producers in many parts of regional Victoria at the moment as a consequence of drought conditions – significantly less rainfall on average. That is really putting pressure on our farmers and primary producers, which is why the Minister for Agriculture and I –

**Jade Benham** interjected.

**The SPEAKER:** Member for Mildura!

**Jacinta ALLAN:** will have more to say soon about the support we are going to provide to farmers and primary producers. I remember a different time, though. I remember a different time for the community of Clunes. I remember a time when the community of Clunes had their train line closed down by the National Party. I remember a very different time.

*Members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER:** Members will be removed without warning.

**Bridget Vallence:** On a point of order, Speaker, the Premier is debating the question. Danny from Clunes is being slugged additional tax, and I ask you to ask the Premier to come back to the very narrow question.

**The SPEAKER:** I do ask the Premier to come back to the question.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** For communities like Clunes, they know that it is Labor governments that will invest in them – invest in their schools, invest in their hospitals. And I will tell you what we also have to do: we have to reopen those train lines that the National Party closed down.

**Danny O'BRIEN** (Gippsland South) (14:15): Labor's new tax will slug every home owner in the state, every renter, every business owner and every farmer extra on what they pay now. The tax is opposed by farmers, volunteers, every council in the state and career firefighters, among others. Why won't the government listen to Victorians and scrap this tax?

**Jacinta ALLAN** (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:15): As is so typical from the National Party and the Liberal Party, that question is littered with deceit and deception, and I will go through the ways.

**Kim O'Keeffe** interjected.

**The SPEAKER:** The member for Shepparton can leave the chamber for half an hour.

**Member for Shepparton withdrew from chamber.**

**Jacinta ALLAN:** This levy is a levy that has existed since 2012. To say otherwise is just deceptive. To also say that our emergency services –

**Danny O'Brien:** On a point of order, Speaker, on the question of relevance, if the Premier thinks this has been there since 2012, why are we debating new legislation for it?

**The SPEAKER:** There is no point of order.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** The Leader of the National Party asked about listening to Victorians. Well, we have. That is why we are making sure the emergency services like the SES, who protect us in those difficult circumstances, are being provided with the support that they need.

**Jade Benham** interjected.

**The SPEAKER:** Order! Member for Mildura, this is your second warning.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I say this: what is the alternative proposition being put by the Liberal and National parties if they oppose this position?

**Ministers statements: women's health**

**Mary-Anne THOMAS** (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Ambulance Services) (14:17): I rise to update the house on the Allan Labor government's commitment to the health and wellbeing of all Victorians. Year on year we have increased the funding that we deliver to our health services. We have opened and upgraded hospitals right across our state, and we have built our workforce – in fact it has grown by almost 50 per cent since we came to power. We will always back our healthcare workers, because that is what Labor does. Our government is transforming the way in which women's health services are being delivered here in Victoria, with new services being opened right across the state, because we respect women, we listen to them, we believe them and we act on their concerns. I am proud of services in Epping, Frankston, Geelong, Ballarat, Horsham, Sunshine, Ararat, Bendigo, Broadmeadows, Wyndham Vale and Shepparton, just to name a few of the places in which these new services are operating. We are pleased to have a partner in Canberra when it comes to meeting the healthcare needs of all Victorians but women in particular. We believe and care for women dealing with issues like perimenopause, menopause, PCOS, endometriosis, prolapse, incontinence – all these issues that were never spoken of prior to our government taking these issues up. Victorians know that they can only trust Labor and that in fact they cannot trust the Liberals when it comes to the delivery of health care. Why can't they trust them? Because their actions tell us. Every time they have had the opportunity, they have cut, they have closed and they have privatised. I might point out also that when it comes to women's reproductive rights –

**Bridget Vallence:** On a point of order, Speaker, the member on her feet knows that her ministers statement is not an opportunity to attack the opposition. I would ask you to ask her to desist from doing so.

**The SPEAKER:** I ask the minister to come back to her ministers statement without attacking the opposition.

**Mary-Anne THOMAS:** I was only comparing and contrasting. Let me say this: Victorians know, whether it is Dutton or Battin, that they cannot be trusted with the delivery of health care.

**Land tax**

**Brad BATTIN** (Berwick – Leader of the Opposition) (14:19): My question is to the Premier. Angie Romas has run his steelwork, sandblasting and painting business for more than 20 years. Mr Romas is looking at closing his business after his land tax bill spiked from \$8700 to more than \$203,000 in the past decade. He has raised these issues with the Treasurer but is yet to receive a response. Why is the government's only plan for the economy to close businesses and axe the jobs of their hardworking employees through these stifling taxes?

**Jacinta ALLAN** (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:20): In thanking the Leader of the Opposition for his question, it is interesting to note that the Leader of the Opposition is not proposing an alternative to how we collect revenue in this state. While we are hearing a lot about the alternative proposals that might be coming from the Shadow Treasurer, I do wonder if we have been given a sneak peak at what is going to come. The revenue that is collected through this mechanism goes directly into supporting our teachers, nurses, police and child protection workers.

**Jade Benham** interjected.

**The SPEAKER:** The member for Mildura can leave the chamber for half an hour.

**Member for Mildura withdrew from chamber.**

**Jacinta ALLAN:** If the Leader of the Opposition has an alternative proposal to this revenue mechanism, we look forward to hearing it, because the alternative will just be all about cuts. When it comes to supporting businesses, we will continue to do that – for example, through increasing the payroll tax free threshold to \$1 million, up from \$700,000 from two years ago. We are constantly

looking at ways that we can adjust the settings to provide support to those great small and medium-sized businesses that make up the engine room of our economy. We are providing them with support through TAFE –

**Brad Battin:** On a point of order, Speaker, in relation to relevance on this, we are talking about a business whose tax has gone from \$8700 to \$203,000. The collection of tax should this business close will be zero – nothing coming in. It is time that the government started to support these small businesses rather than taxing them out.

**The SPEAKER:** Order! The Premier was being relevant to the question that was asked.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I was just making the point exactly about how we are providing support to small businesses through that payroll tax free threshold. We understand that there is a need to continue to invest in those frontline services, and that is why the revenue that is collected through these mechanisms is directly invested in our teachers, nurses and police.

**Brad BATTIN** (Berwick – Leader of the Opposition) (14:22): Mr Romas’s tax bill has increased by 2300 per cent. He asked the Treasurer:

Why are business owners being extorted to pay for major projects and debt the state government has incurred ...

It is a good question. Premier, why are honest manufacturing businesses and their hardworking employees paying the price for Labor’s financial mismanagement?

**Jacinta ALLAN** (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:23): The Leader of the Opposition is wrong. What we have seen is that business investment in this state has been increasing – the highest in the nation, 3.7 per cent. Indeed I gave this data yesterday for the benefit of the Leader of the National Party. We are creating jobs in this state. We are supporting businesses – small, medium and large – to help them employ skilled workers through our investments in TAFE. I say this clearly: the alternative put forward by the Leader of the Opposition was all about cuts – cutting into airport rail, cheering on the federal Liberal Party while they announced his policy, his commitment to cuts. He did not even have the courage to stand in front of that press release that was put out by his federal colleagues announcing his cuts to airport rail. We will continue to invest in our frontline services and continue to look at where we can provide that economic support to our great business community.

### Warrnambool May Racing Carnival

**Anthony CARBINES** (Ivanhoe – Minister for Police, Minister for Community Safety, Minister for Victims, Minister for Racing) (14:24): While some are still stuck at the barriers and other past frontrunners have somehow been banished to the pastures, I just want to say that I spent May in Warrnambool at the iconic May Racing Carnival with 30,000 of my closest friends and racegoers. The May carnival is one of the biggest multiday events. I want to make sure that the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events knows that it is one of the biggest events in the country. We saw some 30,000 people at Warrnambool and the south-west coast across those three days. Over 80 per cent of those visitors are from out of the region, and they come and spend their hard-earned in Warrnambool and the south-west coast. Not only that, we know that \$15 million in economic activity has been generated for Warrnambool and the south-west coast, a significant contribution to the local economy there.

I want to give a shout-out to the hospitality workers, to the small businesses that put out the welcome mat there, to member for Western Victoria Region Ms Ermacora and also to the member for Tarnet, who did their bit to support the south-west community across the races. We saw a great performance from Duke of Bedford, who backed up in the Grand Annual after winning the Brierly. It was a very exciting few days, and can I say also that it goes to the broader contribution that racing makes here in Victoria. The Allan Labor government knows that when you are backing racing in Victoria, you are backing racing jobs – 35,000 jobs in racing across our state. Nine thousand of those jobs are in regional

Victoria. When we back racing, we invest some \$72 million in the Victorian Racing Industry Fund and \$15 million in our Major Racing Events Fund. That makes sure we continue to invest in racing, racing people and the racing jobs that make a massive contribution to our state – a \$780 million investment in economic activity across Victoria. That is what our government invests in. We will back racing and back racing jobs across our state.

### Suburban Rail Loop

**Darren CHEESEMAN** (South Barwon) (14:26): My question is to the Premier. With the federal election now out of the way, are there any remaining impediments to delivering the Suburban Rail Loop?

**Jacinta ALLAN** (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:27): In answering the member for South Barwon’s question, we are very pleased to have a partner in Canberra in the Albanese Labor government on the projects that Victorians want and need, and that includes, yes, the Suburban Rail Loop. It includes the North East Link, where there is huge construction going on right now; support for that vital rail link to Melbourne and Victoria’s airport; and that big investment in Sunshine station that does not just unlock a train line to the airport, it unlocks more train services to the west. It unlocks the connections for the country train services from Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo to travel through Sunshine and connect into the city or into the airport as well.

In terms of what that means, to have a partner in Canberra, historically it has been a little unusual for this house to talk about having a partner in Canberra, because for 10 long years, cheered on by those opposite, the Liberal Party consistently and constantly duded Victorians from getting their fair share of infrastructure funding. We did not hear boo from a goose from those opposite when Peter Dutton and their federal Liberal colleagues were ripping money out of Victoria. And if you go back to those earlier questions about how governments invest, well, we have had to do it alone on so much here in Victoria – on the Metro Tunnel project, opening later this year, a full year ahead of schedule. The Sydney Metro was 50–50 with the federal Liberal Party – Melbourne Metro, zero. Even worse than that, it was minus \$3 billion, because the federal Liberal government, cheered on by Victorian Liberals, took money out of the Melbourne Metro project. West Gate Tunnel, level crossing removals – time and again Victoria had to go it alone because the federal Liberal Party, cheered on by the Victorian Liberal Party, did not give Victorians their fair share of infrastructure funding. So we will work with the federal Labor government. The federal Treasurer has already indicated, as have a number of other federal ministers, how this is a project worth investing in because it is the project that our city needs.

If you want to sit back and watch congestion grow, then you do not invest in the Suburban Rail Loop. If you want to deny kids the chance to go to Monash University on the train, then you do not invest in the Suburban Rail Loop. We are building the Suburban Rail Loop. We have a partner in Canberra in the Albanese Labor government. The alternative was ripping money out of this project, ripping away those jobs and ripping away those opportunities to continue to support our growing city and state.

**Darren CHEESEMAN** (South Barwon) (14:30): These big infrastructure projects are not only important for getting people around Melbourne but also important for unlocking future housing. Why is this important for Victorians?

**Jacinta ALLAN** (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:30): It is no surprise to those of us on this side of the house to hear the guffaws and the derision from those opposite when it comes to a question on housing, because we saw just yesterday in the Legislative Council that the Liberal Party could not run into the place fast enough to vote against the building of more homes. They could not get into the house fast enough to vote against building of more homes around the 50 train and tram activity centres, which is exactly where you want more homes built – close to great public transport, close to jobs, close to the schools that we have invested in in those communities. If you are a young Victorian, you saw very clearly who was on your side and who was not. You saw that very, very clearly. We will continue to build –

**Richard Riordan:** On a point of order, Speaker, on relevance, the electors of South Barwon clearly would get no benefit from that member's statement. The Premier was not relevant.

**The SPEAKER:** There is no point of order.

**Ministers statements: education system**

**Ben CARROLL** (Niddrie – Minister for Education, Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC) (14:32): I am proud to be part of a government, the Allan Labor government, that backs students, supports hardworking families and strengthens our school communities. It was an honour to join the Premier with the Minister for Community Sport this morning and the member for Footscray at Maribyrnong Secondary College. On a note for the hardworking member for Footscray, it was wonderful to learn about her father, Mr Ross Hall, who was a former school captain of the college and a champion rower, and to know what he would be thinking now to see how we are doing the Education State in Footscray, with his daughter there as a local member. He would be so proud of the member for Footscray, because what it means is we are investing in real cost-of-living support for families.

Today with the Premier, the minister and the local member we announced how we are extending and upgrading our Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund. We are adding another \$152 million to this fund. It has already supported 2 million students from the neediest backgrounds for things since we introduced it in 2015. This will add another 200,000 students to it. More than that, we are also changing the eligibility and increasing the size of the fund. Parents of a child at primary school get about \$150, and it is about \$350 for secondary. It will now be up at \$400 each for primary and secondary from next year. That will also allow parents to target that funding to the student, sometimes a year 12 or a year 7, to make sure it goes to the student that has the most expensive type of event they want to do. This is real cost-of-living support provided by the Allan Labor government. Whether it is the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund, whether it is Smile Squad or whether it is the free breakfast program, all these programs and initiatives show Labor values and how we are getting on with it.

The real thing for the member for Brighton will be: is he going to back in cost-of-living support, or is he going to walk away from it? We know the Allan Labor government is on the side of – *(Time expired)*

**Taxation**

**James NEWBURY** (Brighton) (14:34): My question is to the Premier. This government has imposed 60 new or increased taxes. These include taxes on emergency services, GP payroll tax, land tax, schools tax and a death tax. Despite this, the government has cut \$2.4 billion from education, cut Victoria Police, cut road maintenance, cut fisheries officers and cut Parks Victoria – 60 new or increased taxes and cuts to core government services because Labor cannot manage money.

**The SPEAKER:** Member for Brighton, what is your question?

**James NEWBURY:** I will start from the start. It was obviously not theatrical enough.

**The SPEAKER:** I have the document in front of me. There is no question. I would ask you, without repeatedly questioning me, to ask the question, and not from the commencement of your question.

**James NEWBURY:** I would be delighted, Speaker. Are there 60 new or increased taxes and cuts to core government services because Labor cannot manage money?

**Jacinta ALLAN** (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:36): No.

*Members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER:** The Minister for Consumer Affairs can leave the chamber for an hour and a half. Attorney-General, just because it is your birthday does not mean you will not get kicked out.

**Minister for Consumer Affairs withdrew from chamber.**

**James NEWBURY** (Brighton) (14:36): Premier, why will net debt continue to rise despite 60 new or increased taxes and cuts to core government services?

**Jacinta ALLAN** (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:37): Newsflash for the member for Brighton: the Treasurer is going to hand down the budget next Tuesday.

*Members interjecting.*

**Jacinta ALLAN**: No, you are right. The Leader of the Opposition has said he will go line by line with his senior frontbenchers through the budget, and that is where we will see the commitment that can only be found under Labor governments, who continue to invest in frontline services and continue to invest in what matters most to working people and families. I know you are very excited. There will be a bit of pressure on you next Tuesday as you go line by line through the budget. We will be handing down a Labor budget that invests in those frontline services that Victorians rely on.

### **Ministers statements: cost of living**

**Jacinta ALLAN** (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:38): Over the course of this week we have been focused on what matters to working people and Victorian families, with a commitment to supporting them with the services they need and real and meaningful cost-of-living support for families and for children. Let us go back to Monday, when a number of us were at Sunshine station with the members for Werribee, Kororoit, Melton, Point Cook, Laverton, Sunbury and Footscray, the Deputy Premier, the Minister for Small Business and Employment, and the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. We were all there announcing our Labor government's commitment to airport rail, to Sunshine station and to more services that will run on the Metro Tunnel when it opens – the Metro Tunnel only delivered by a Labor government – and additional services on the Craigieburn line, the Upfield line, the Sandringham line and the Werribee line and also in Gippsland and in Seymour. Then on Tuesday I was with the Minister for Police and the Minister for Corrections, investing in more prison beds and more prison officers because we have put community safety first. Yesterday I was with the Attorney-General and the Minister for Planning, focusing on building more homes by extending the off-the-plan stamp duty concession because we know it makes homes cheaper to buy for buyers and easier to build for builders. Then this morning, as the Deputy Premier has outlined, the Deputy Premier, the member for Footscray and I were at Maribyrnong College, a great government school, investing in families who need support the most to make sure their kids do not miss out on that great school camp or excursion. I was with the Minister for Community Sport, investing in those strong Get Active Kids vouchers, which mean kids are on the field, not left stuck sitting on the sidelines because they cannot afford to get out on the field. That is what we will continue to focus on: investing in those things that matter to families.

### *Constituency questions*

#### **Brighton electorate**

**James NEWBURY** (Brighton) (14:41): (1120) My constituency question is to the Premier. When will a further consultation session for the Bayside major activity centres occur, given the only consultation session was filled to capacity shortly after being announced? Despite the consultation session not being properly advertised and no mapping being released, the community is being asked to give feedback on the government's proposed changes to our community without any detail. But what is worse is the consultation session was filled very shortly after being announced. An online session was capped at 1000, and over recent days many members of our community have been unable to join that consultation session, which just goes to show that the session is nothing more than a sham – no mapping, no places. I call for further community consultation sessions.

#### **Wendouree electorate**

**Juliana ADDISON** (Wendouree) (14:42): (1121) My constituency question is for the Minister for Children in the other place. Minister, how is the Ballarat early parenting centre supporting families

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with children from birth up to four years in my electorate of Wendouree? The Grampians early parenting centre was officially opened to families on 14 May 2024, a year ago yesterday, so a very happy first birthday to our EPC. I want to thank the incredible multidisciplinary Grampians Health team, including a nurse unit manager, registered nurses, midwives, maternal and child health nurses, play therapists, early parenting practitioners, psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers. Importantly, I want families from across Ballarat to know that they can self-refer to the EPC using the online form. They can also be referred there by their GP or maternal and child health nurse. Our EPC provides a home-like atmosphere where families can participate in programs. Happy birthday.

### **Murray Plains electorate**

**Peter WALSH** (Murray Plains) (14:43): (1122) My question is to the Minister for Health and is in regard to the Victorian patient transport assistance scheme. When will patients start being reimbursed their costs within her department's six-to-eight-week promised time? Regional Victorians travel in good faith to medical services, and they expect to have their costs paid in a reasonable time. We are constantly getting people into my office, and from the feedback from other members here we are all getting people coming in, saying they are waiting months. One particular business in Mildura that helps fund these people is out of pocket over \$100,000 and still waiting for a \$250,000 payment. When will these people start being reimbursed within the department's own guidelines?

### **Thomastown electorate**

**Bronwyn HALFPENNY** (Thomastown) (14:44): (1123) My question is to the Minister for Police. Residents in the electorate of Thomastown have raised the issue of community safety and crime across our neighbourhoods. I have raised this matter with the Minister for Police, and I ask the minister: what police resources will be available in the future to address these concerns and support the hardworking members of Victoria Police at the Epping and Reservoir stations?

### **Evelyn electorate**

**Bridget VALLENCE** (Evelyn) (14:44): (1124) For the Seville Primary School community, the students, the families and the teachers, my question is to the Minister for Education. How much funding will be provided in the upcoming state budget for major classroom and facility upgrades at Seville Primary School to fully replace block A and block B buildings with modern and safe places to learn, including new classrooms, a library, a wellness room, a kitchen and canteen, disability access, new toilets and a safe bushfire refuge? Seville Primary School's infrastructure is no longer fit for purpose, and the condition of the buildings curtails the growing school's ability for modern learning. They cannot install TV monitors and other digital tools, due to the materials in the walls. There are holes in the flooring, and the ceiling in block B consistently leaks and the make-safe program has failed to fix this. I pay tribute to principal Christopher Dossor, school council president Courtney O'Keefe and the staff and parents for their ongoing advocacy for this fantastic school, Seville Primary School.

### **Sunbury electorate**

**Josh BULL** (Sunbury) (14:45): (1125) My question is to the Minister for Energy and Resources. Minister, how many families in my electorate are benefiting from the Allan Labor government's Victorian energy upgrades program? As the minister knows, this is a significant and important program that has saved households and businesses thousands of dollars and reduced emissions to the tune of millions of tonnes since its inception. The minister recently paid a visit to my community. We had a great catch-up with Adam and Effie, two local residents that are working very hard to both save money and reduce emissions within their household, so I thank them both for the opportunity to be there. I look forward to the minister's response.

**Melbourne electorate**

**Ellen SANDELL** (Melbourne) (14:46): (1126) My constituency question is to the Minister for Education. In my electorate of Melbourne we only have one public high school, University High School, to cater for all of the CBD, Docklands, North Melbourne and Carlton. The school is excellent, and it does its absolute best to accommodate all students, but they are significantly overenrolled. Because of that overcrowding, year 9 students have been moved off campus to a temporary office building that the government has leased for seven years, with no clarity as to what happens after that. The population of my electorate is set to grow 65 per cent over the next 20 years. Arden alone will bring in an extra 30,000 residents, and yet there is only one primary school planned for that area and no high school whatsoever. My question to the Minister for Education is: when will the government find a permanent second campus or expansion for Uni High or build a second public high school in the Melbourne electorate to cater for our wonderful students?

**Monbulk electorate**

**Daniela DE MARTINO** (Monbulk) (14:47): (1127) My question is for the Minister for Emergency Services. What infrastructure funding can the Allan Labor government deliver to ensure that the CFA brigades and SES units across the Dandenong Ranges are more resilient in times of power and communication outages? Across the beautiful Dandenong Ranges we have a high incidence of power and telecommunications outages, owing to the frequency and severity of storm events as well as our risk of bushfire and the safety switches in place to prevent fires starting on extreme or catastrophic days. We are considered the most fire-prone place in the country and the third most fire-prone place in the world. When days of extreme or catastrophic fire risk are declared the giant safety switches called rapid earth fault current limiters are dialled up to maximum sensitivity to avoid fires igniting, but this does make power outages more likely. It is critical for my CFA brigades and SES units that when the power and telecoms go out across the hills their lights remain on and their access to communications continues. I look forward to the minister's response.

**Rowville electorate**

**Kim WELLS** (Rowville) (14:48): (1128) It is nice to be here. My question is to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. Minister, following the recent federal election and federal Labor's complete snubbing of urgently needed major projects in Knox, when will the Allan Labor government provide funding for the vital road upgrades in Knox – in particular, the Dorset Road extension and the duplications of Wellington Road and Napoleon Road – to alleviate the never-ending traffic congestion on Knox roads for long-suffering residents and commuters? Next week's state budget provides the perfect opportunity to provide funding support for these three road projects in Knox. Despite a major \$73.5 million campaign commitment by the Aston Liberal candidate Manny Cicchiello to extend Dorset Road from Burwood Highway, Ferntree Gully, through to Lysterfield Road, disappointingly there were no matched funds from the federal Labor government. Knox residents and road commuters deserve so much better.

**Northcote electorate**

**Kat THEOPHANOUS** (Northcote) (14:49): (1129) My question is to the Minister for Environment. Can the minister advise how the Victorian government supports the role of community-based environmental stewards like the Darebin Creek Management Committee in caring for public land? The Darebin Creek parkland was once a quarried, degraded landscape. It is now a treasured urban ecosystem, driven by over 50 years of work and advocacy by the local not-for-profit DCMC. They have restored land, revived habitat, engaged schools, partnered with traditional custodians and brought generations of volunteers into the work of caring for, connecting with and protecting this precious environment. Their impact is profound. Labor invests in this kind of care through the *Healthy Waterways Strategy 2018*, the suburban parks program and grassroots environmental restoration. Locally I have joined community members planting trees, improving trails and supporting creek health initiatives. Now, as council reviews future land management, there is a real concern that this trusted

community model could be replaced by private contractors. That would be a disaster for the creek and parklands.

**Bridget Vallence:** Speaker, I raise a point of order about a number of questions that remain unanswered. There are five to the Minister for Finance: questions on notice 2083–7. There are 11 outstanding questions to the Minister for Public and Active Transport, which are questions on notice 2304–14. Obviously I am asking for answers to those questions for my constituents.

On a further point of order, Speaker, this is something that we did discuss in the parliamentary sitting just prior to the April break – the vast number of unanswered questions and questions that fall overdue by these ministers. You said you would look into it, and I would ask if you could do so again.

**The SPEAKER:** I would ask you to hand your list to the Clerk, please, member for Evelyn.

**Chris Crewther:** On a point of order, Speaker, I have two constituency questions to follow up on. One from 14 November 2024 I have actually already followed up on here before, number 918. Also, a question to the Premier on 3 April, which was due on 3 May, is question 1096 regarding the Greek, Armenian and Assyrian genocide. I hope that I get a response before the Greek anniversary next week.

**The SPEAKER:** Order! There are appropriate ways to raise points of order. I ask members to stick to the standing orders.

**Will Fowles:** On a point of order, Speaker, there are two unanswered questions for me: constituency question 1086 and question on notice 2181. If you could please follow up with the relevant ministers.

**Cindy McLeish:** On a point of order, Speaker, I too have unanswered questions on notice. One from last year that I have already followed up with you is to the Minister for Prevention of Family Violence, question 1830, and from this year I have 2108, 2110, 2177, 2179 and 2189 to a number of recalcitrant ministers.

**Jess Wilson:** On a point of order, Speaker, I am just following up on a number of outstanding questions: 1055 to the Premier; 115 to the Minister for Industry and Advanced Manufacturing, and 2138 as well; 2182 to the Minister for Education; and 1023 again to the Premier.

**The SPEAKER:** I would ask members to give their lists to the Clerk, please.

**James Newbury:** On a further point of order, Speaker, I raised this in the last sitting week. I know that there was a trial change of the time that points of order could be raised on outstanding questions, and it is clear that the volume of questions outstanding is now significant. By raising points of order now, and I guess hiding from scrutiny at the end of question time, it is clear that the government does not intend to respond in a timely way. I would suggest that the trial is not working and that ministers are ignoring your previous rulings.

**The SPEAKER:** Order! What is your point of order, member for Brighton?

**James Newbury:** The trial is not working on the time change to raise points of order. I would ask you to reconsider and allow us to raise these points.

**The SPEAKER:** I will give consideration to the point of order raised by the member for Brighton.

### *Rulings from the Chair*

#### **Motions**

**The SPEAKER (02:54):** A matter was raised with me during business this morning. The member for Caulfield gave notice of a motion, which is now on the notice paper. A member requested a withdrawal, and I would ask the member for Caulfield to withdraw.

**David Southwick:** I will not be withdrawing a statement of fact. The member for Richmond has spent two years inciting hate towards the Jewish community –

**The SPEAKER:** Order! All I require from you, member for Caulfield, is that you are not withdrawing. I would ask you to leave the chamber for an hour and a half.

**Member for Caulfield withdrew from chamber.**

**James Newbury:** On a point of order, Speaker, I do note that following a member's open antisemitism a Jewish member has now been removed from the chamber.

**The SPEAKER:** Order! Member for Brighton, if you wish to question my rulings, I would ask you to come and see me in my office. We have had this conversation about raising matters in the house. I would ask you to come and see me in my office if you wish to raise matters regarding my rulings.

### *Bills*

#### **Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025**

##### *Second reading*

**Debate resumed.**

**Alison MARCHANT** (Bellarine) (14:56): It is a pleasure to rise to speak on the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. While this bill is largely administrative in its nature, it is going to ensure that ESSSuper can continue to provide that service to members that they deserve and reflect a more modern way that members interact with their super fund. The Emergency Services Superannuation Act 1986 was established specifically for emergency service workers and personnel, and these would include police officers, firefighters and ambulance workers. Because their career and their work was unique in its challenges and its risks, it was justified to tailor a superannuation scheme for them.

I have heard other contributions in this place, and I think across the house we acknowledge that our emergency service workers do an incredible job in our communities. As someone who deeply values community safety and the strength of our communities, I have immense respect for our emergency service men and women who serve in our communities, and their work is really, truly like no other. It is not only demanding in a physical capacity but courage is needed and emotional resilience. They need to make quick judgements and have an unwavering commitment to putting others first. Every day that they are met with these challenges they face some situations that many of us can probably never imagine. They rush towards danger rather than running the other way. They respond in a calm way to very traumatic events, and they do carry that weight of responsibility.

Because of this unique service to our state, we did recognise that it needed to be a tailored superannuation system and one that reflects the job but also maybe earlier retirement because they do face some of those extreme challenges, as I have outlined. The establishment of the Emergency Services Superannuation Board was not just really a bureaucratic decision; it was reflecting the respect and the responsibilities that we owe these individuals. In this place we talk a lot about legislation and bills and, like I have said, the administration of these bills, but it can be very personal. Changes that we make in this house do have a consequence or a benefit out in our communities, because every person who wears a uniform, whether it be police or fire, they have a family, they have a future and they have a story. We owe it to them to honour their service, not just with words but with structures that protect them.

Across the Bellarine recently there have been some quite dramatic events – tragic events – in our community, and these have been faced and dealt with by our emergency personnel. I just want to take the opportunity to thank them for the work that they do. Our local police across the Bellarine every day put themselves in harm's way to protect and serve our communities, and we have deep gratitude and respect for that. We in this place as a government have made record investments in our police force, and we are funding more than 3600 new police men and women to keep Victorians safe. The

other emergency services workers that I have recently been having conversations with were our local ambulance workers. The Premier and I visited the Ocean Grove branch only recently, and it was great to see the upgrades that they have had to their station but more importantly the conversations we were having about the job that they do, how they respond to our emergencies and the compassion that they have in the most challenging circumstances. Again, we have a profound gratitude to them for their service. This bill really does talk to the men and women who serve, like I have said, in police, ambulance and fire services, and they are the backbone of our community.

This bill will make quite a few changes, and I will just highlight a couple of those. This bill will change the spouse membership following a member's death. Under the current arrangements following a death of a member the spouse would have up to three months to apply to become a member of that scheme. We can all imagine the trauma and the grief that someone is going through when a spouse passes away, so in light of that this bill will extend the period in which a non-member spouse following a death can apply to become a member of the emergency services superannuation plan scheme up to 12 months. This really has been introduced because there has been consultation and a lot of representation stating that this change would make a real difference to families, like I have said, given the trauma and the grief that families would be going through at the time. Given that connection that many emergency services families have with the with the super fund, it is reasonable, I think, to allow 12 months for a non-member spouse to decide on whether they would like to continue or join the plan.

I have heard other contributions in this place talking to the size of the board, and we are making changes in this bill. Currently there are six members of the board nominated by the minister and six members elected by the members of various superannuation schemes, and this bill is proposing that they reduce the board size from 12 to 10. This change is being made really to ensure an optimal decision-making body and that equal representation of employee and employers on the board. Emergency services superannuation involves quite a complex benefit structure, and a dedicated board really needs to have that knowledge and tailored oversight that reflects the unique needs of those members. Managing this large public fund on behalf of members does require quite specialised duties, and the board is legally and ethically responsible for acting in the best interests of its members and beneficiaries.

When I think about superannuation and connect it to politics, my first thoughts are with our former Prime Minister Paul Keating, and I think Keating alongside Bill Kelty – and others have mentioned this today – from the union movement are widely regarded as architects of our modern superannuation system, which certainly has become a cornerstone of our retirement planning in this country. The reforms were historic in nature, particularly that economic empowerment that has been provided to working Australians, and it really was a long-term vision of building superannuation that would build a national savings pool, really, to reduce that reliance on an age pension. Labor, being the architect of this, will always protect and strengthen our workers' superannuation because we believe that workers should have that dignified retirement. It was interesting to read a little bit about the history, when I was doing research for this bill, and the accounts of Bill Kelty and Paul Keating in planning that superannuation. Even though they may have come from different angles or different takes, ultimately, from what I have read, they both had a position where they were trying to create economic growth. Keating would talk endlessly about needing to grow that economy pie rather than actually talking about how to divide it up. He said:

The people we represented can't be looked after in a low-growth economy ... Yes, a lot of wealthy people are going to do well ... but we also think you put your arm out to pull people up behind you.

I think this sums up our Labor values very much, particularly within the context of superannuation.

In closing, our super is a really important foundation for working Australians. It ensures that people can retire with dignity, independence and security – particularly, in the case of this bill, our emergency service workers. Labor built the Australian superannuation system from the ground up because we deeply believe that workers deserve dignity in retirement. We will remain the strongest defenders of

that, because protecting our super means protecting the future of working Australians. I commend the bill to the house.

**Wayne FARNHAM** (Narracan) (15:06): I am pleased to rise today to talk on the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. It has been an interesting debate today. I have had quite a listen to it, as I was sitting in the chair earlier. Just to reference the member for Bellarine and her contribution – and the member for Murray Plains expressed this as well – we are grateful for superannuation and the scheme that got brought in. It was very good foresight by Paul Keating at the time in recognising that the Australian population in 1992 was only about 17 million people. He also recognised at the time that we were an ageing population. I have never spoken to Mr Keating personally, but I would assume he recognised that we would have an ageing population and then put more pressure on the pension system as we all got older, because prior to then it was pretty much the pension system if you could not look after yourself. The introduction of superannuation in 1992 was actually a step in the right direction. We all know – I was only 22 back then, jeez – it started off at about 3 per cent, and it has been gradually increasing over time. We are now sitting on an average of 12 per cent, somewhere around about there. This was by the Treasurer of the day a very, very good plan to bring in superannuation. We all benefit from it; all Victorians benefit from it.

We are talking today about this bill, but just while I am on that, it is disappointing that the Labor federal Treasurer Jim Chalmers doubled the super rate in 2023. If you have anything over the amount of \$3 million, that rate has now doubled from 15 per cent to 30 per cent. But the problem is that it is not linked to anything, so \$3 million today in 40 years time will still be \$3 million. If you do the calculation on that, if \$3 million is linked to CPI and everything else, \$3 million today in 40 years time will actually be worth about \$45 million. What I fear with the change that the federal Treasurer Jim Chalmers has made is that, because he has linked it to nothing, our kids are going to have to live off \$3 million in 40 years time. They are not going to gain the benefit. That \$3 million today, in 40 years, is not going to be worth very much. I am not an economist, but it could be worth half a million dollars. That should have been linked to go up with CPI. Then in 40 years time that would be worth roughly about \$45 million. No-one would probably reach that threshold at that point in time, but I think that was a mistake by the federal Labor government to not link that, because all of a sudden if you are losing 30 per cent, in 40 years time \$3 million will actually be worth only half a million and you are dropping a fair bit out of it.

But we are here today talking about this bill. It has been an interesting debate. Obviously the debate has also been around the reduction of the board members from 12 to 10. I agree with what the member for Murray Plains said earlier. An ideal board always has an odd number so you get a decision – 9 or 11 is actually right. I think the member for Mordialloc quoted 15 – that could be paralysis by analysis with that many people – but an ideal number is an odd number. The concern we have with this around the board members is that the members do not get to choose. There are, I believe, about 124,500 members in the Emergency Services and State Super scheme. That is a lot of members. They should have a choice. I think there are 6000 voting members; that is what I have heard today. They should have the choice of who they want to represent them. We have got to be very careful. We do see it from time to time when government appoint board members. Sometimes they can be people of quality – absolutely, I do not deny that. Sometimes there can be that board appointment that may not be as qualified as they should be but it is a bit of a job-for-a-mate situation. I think when you are managing a fund worth, at the moment, \$37 billion you really do want your best and brightest on that board. At the end of the day, that \$37 billion is the members' money, whether they be Victoria Police, FRV or Ambulance Victoria. These are the people – I agree with everyone, and we all agree in this chamber – that really look after our communities and look after our safety. If there is an accident, they come; they are there. We should treat them with the respect they deserve, not take away their right to choose someone to be on that board. I think that is very, very important.

As I said, there is a lot of money to manage here: \$37 billion is a lot. But the concern also and part of the debate today has been about the \$3 billion in the 2022 commitment that this fund was going to be

brought up to speed. Coming out of private business, if I did not contribute to my employees' super fund the way I should, by legal requirement, I would be in a lot of trouble. If you do not pay your employees' super, then you get in a lot of trouble. I will not say the other word I was going to say. This is where I am a little bit confused. How does the government get so far behind in this? That \$3 billion of extra investment into that fund is, again, members' money. This is the point we have to remember. That \$3 billion, I think it was the original statement by Steve Bracks when he brought it in, was going to be topped up by 2035. In 2022 the Premier at the time said it would happen sooner, but it has now been kicked down the road. You have got to think of how much money that fund is missing out on for every year of investment that \$3 billion is not there. I do not know what super funds return. I might take a guess at something like 7 per cent. I am not sure; I am not a super fund investor. I just look at my super statement every now and again and go, yes, 5 per cent, thank you.

If we work on 5 per cent and we kick that can down the road, that is \$150 million a year that is not being invested back into that fund. Again, remember, it is the members' money. This is what the government must take on board. Every time you delay it you are delaying those members. If it is 5 per cent, it is \$150 million. That is a lot of money. I know there are 124,500 members, but it is their money. If we kick this can down the road now to 2035, seven years, that fund is missing out on just over a billion. I do not know if the members realise that. I do not know if the government sent out a letter to the members saying, 'We've broken our promise here. We're going to keep Steve Bracks's promise for 2035, but this fund will miss out on a billion dollars in interest.' It is a billion dollars in their back pocket. I think the government have been a little bit remiss on this and maybe not quite as transparent as they could have been with the members, because I am pretty sure if they put that out to the membership, the membership would say, 'Well, sorry, we don't want you to kick it down that far. We want this topped up now, as you promised and you said you were going to do.'

That is very, very important. I mean, our cost-of-living pressures are higher. The state government has come out and said they are going to sack 3000 public servants. The Treasurer said she is looking for those savings. Some of those public servants may want to retire; some of those public servants may be in this fund. I do not think the government should hold back on topping that fund up to where it should be. That membership should have that \$3 billion. As I said, as a private businessperson, if I did not pay my employees their super in the timeframe that is required by law, I would be in a lot of trouble with the federal government, which controls that space. I do not see why the state government should be exempt from that. Just on my final point, I really do believe the government should give the membership the right to choose their board members. I do not think they should be put there by government.

**Paul HAMER** (Box Hill) (15:16): I rise to make a contribution on the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. At the outset I would just like to thank the Minister for Finance and his office for bringing this important bill to the house this week. I was just reflecting on the bills that have been presented this week, particularly this bill and the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025 that was debated yesterday. While the changes are very technical in nature and in some ways might be considered quite dry, they do symbolise what Labor governments can achieve. In the workplace injury bill the whole system of workplace reform and having a no-fault compensation scheme for injured workers was a game changer introduced by the state Labor government back in the 1980s. And as the member for Narracan just referenced, the changes in superannuation were really a vision of Prime Minister Keating and Bill Kelty back in the day.

I am very glad that the member for Narracan was so glowing in his praise of that change, because in the subsequent years we have seen many members of the Liberal Party, particularly in the federal Liberal Party, have tried to oppose super and oppose increases to the superannuation guarantee almost every step of the way. Even when they have promised at elections that they would continue with the progress and the pathway to increase superannuation contributions, we have seen that once coming into power they have reneged on those promises. That really only serves to hurt the workforce who are relying on their superannuation to have a dignified retirement at the end of their working life. If

those contributions are not able to be made, particularly at the early stages, that has a huge impact. Because of the compounding effect of investment, the lack of investment at an early stage in one's career can really be to the detriment of the complete value of that superannuation later in life. There has been plenty of research and statistics showing how much that particularly affects women, particularly those who at the early stages of their working life are working part time because they have taken more time off for children and the like. That impacts them at retirement age. It shows the importance of making sure that there is enough of a guarantee, enough of a contribution to start with, to make sure that they do have a comfortable and dignified retirement income to live off when they choose to retire.

As was mentioned at the outset, the bill itself is relatively dry and it just makes a number of amendments to the Emergency Services Superannuation Act 1986 as well as a number of changes to the State Superannuation Act 1988 and the Transport Superannuation Act 1988. It is quite an interesting history in terms of the transition that we have gone through. The schemes that are referenced in this legislation are really about the defined benefits scheme. I was reflecting on this when I was preparing for my contribution and just thinking that both of my parents worked in public sector agencies. My mum was a teacher for many years and my dad worked for a Commonwealth agency, and both of them were beneficiaries of defined benefits schemes. Because they had both worked in the system for 20, 30 years, starting in the 1960s, or the 70s in the case of my mum, that really meant that they had something to lean back on when they retired – that there was at least some form of investment and retirement income that they could rely on. But for many people, particularly from that generation, if you were not working for one of the government agencies, you just did not have that luxury, and that is exactly why it was really visionary of Prime Minister Keating and Bill Kelty to make all those changes.

On some of the specific details of the amendments, one is to give spouses 12 months to elect to become part of Emergency Services and State Super. This extends the period that is currently available, which is only three months following the death of a loved one, and I think that is going to be a really important and significant change for those who are affected. The circumstances of anyone's death can be traumatic, and there is so much for a loved one to try and negotiate, handle and comprehend that we should not be putting the pressure on with 'Well, you've only got this three-month timeframe to make that election. Do you switch over into that super to be able to get the benefit of that?' I think giving people an additional period of time to really consider what their financial needs are going to be going forward is a really important change and one that really is a human change. It really recognises the difficulty that people go through at that time of their life.

The bill will also reduce the board composition from 12 to 10 members, with definition as to from where those members are elected, in terms of which particular fund, but it retains the equal representation of employee and employer members. I think that this is another good change, with a more efficient board structure bringing it more in line with modern governance standards. It is a way of improving the way that these boards operate and that the super continues to go into the future.

The fund that I was talking about in relation to my parents would be referred to as a closed fund now, and from 1994 there were no additional members from those sort of core public agencies – teaching staff, for example – that were on the defined benefits scheme. But obviously that is a scheme that continues to provide income returns to members who are still alive, such as my parents, but also to existing emergency services personnel, to which the defined benefits scheme is still of course open. This will continue to be an ongoing program and an ongoing fund that will help deliver those defined benefits and those defined income retirement benefits to those who have served our emergency services with such distinction.

From a policy perspective and a philosophical perspective we would all support the continuation of a robust defined benefit scheme for those who have, many times literally, put their lives on the line to service others in the community. I think that it is only right that they continue to enjoy the benefits of a defined benefit scheme. Having these structures in place that can make sure that the defined benefit

scheme and this fund operate as smoothly and as efficiently as possible is something that is really strongly supported. This is an important bill. It will set us up for the future, and I commend the bill to the house.

**Annabelle CLEELAND** (Euroa) (15:26): I rise today to speak on the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. This bill proposes a series of changes to the Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme, better known as the ESSS, by amending the Emergency Services Superannuation Act 1986. There are seven key amendments on the table, and I will discuss a few of those. First up, the bill sets out a new rule where executive officers and contract employees contributing to the ESSS will have their superable salary capped at 90 per cent. The bill also increases how often ESSS members can adjust their contribution rate each year, which gives a bit more flexibility to contributors. It extends the time allowed for a spouse, after the death of a contributor, to apply to join the ESSPLAN scheme. That gives families a bit more breathing space in what is usually a really difficult period. The bill also reduces the size of the ESSS board from 12 members to 10, and it scraps the requirement for members of the State Superannuation Fund (SSF) to elect representatives to the ESSS board. Instead of elections, union representatives will now be appointed to represent those SSF members. Finally, the position of the deputy board member is being removed altogether.

This scheme is not small, as we have heard today. The ESSS currently manages about \$37 billion in assets and nearly 125,000 members. That includes current and former employees of Victoria Police, Fire Rescue Victoria, Ambulance Victoria and the education system, along with workers from Metro Trains, Yarra Trams, Corrections Victoria, Parks Victoria and V/Line, particularly those who started before 1994. These changes, while technical, as we have heard throughout the day, will impact a huge amount of people, including how they manage their contributions and how their funds are governed.

But this conversation around superannuation also opens the door to something bigger. It raises the need to look more broadly at the financial systems Victorians are trying to navigate, particularly when it comes to land tax. Let me share some stories from real people who are trying to balance these systems and getting caught in the crossfire. Rocco from Dhurringile is one of them. He bought a property through his superannuation fund, a holiday rental in Merrijig. Anyone who knows Merrijig knows it is heavily seasonal, absolutely beautiful and close to the alpine region. Despite this, Rocco does not qualify for any of the relevant regional exemptions and is still being hit with land tax through the Victorian residential commercial tenancy framework. Because the property is tied to his super, he is not even allowed to use it himself when it is sitting vacant. This is a system that just does not get the reality of seasonal properties or of superannuation investments.

Mary Kipping from Locksley is another local who has been unfairly treated. She owns just one property, yet she is being double charged. Why? Because the system is not built to reflect real-life, honest situations like Mary's. There is also Elizabeth Grant from Goorambat. She is facing land tax on her primary residence, her actual home. Like so many others, she is being taxed on the roof over her head – not an investment property, not a side business, but her family home, and she is not alone. This is something I am hearing more and more: people being taxed on the homes they live in and love, often while they are just trying to keep their heads above water.

Matthew Trewin from Avenel runs a farm, and he is being taxed on the house that sits on his farming property, his home, which happens to be located on land that is also used for primary production. Instead of assessing that house separately, the government lumps it in with the entire property, massively inflating his land tax bill. It is not fair and it is not practical. Farmers like Matthew are doing it tough enough already without being hit with bureaucratic nonsense like this. And it is not just individuals. Our community organisations are getting smashed too. The Nagambie historical society is a small, volunteer-run group with just 60 members, and they sell jams and pickles to keep the doors open. Yet somehow they have received a land tax bill for \$1000. When they reached out to the State Revenue Office for help they were simply told to write a letter –

**Juliana Addison:** My point of order, Acting Speaker, is on the relevance of jam being sold by the CWA.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Daniela De Martino):** It has been a fairly wideranging debate, but I will ask the member for Euroa to come back to the bill.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** When the Nagambie historical society – who do make amazing jams and pickles – reached out to the State Revenue Office they were told to write a letter. It is not good enough, not for a group preserving our shared history.

**Juliana Addison:** On a point of order, Acting Speaker, it seems that the member for Euroa is defying your ruling on relevance.

**Brad Rowswell:** On the point of order, Acting Speaker, it is clear that the Labor Party is running interference on the member for Euroa's contribution. I respectfully suggest to members of the government that they sit, as we have sat and listened to the drivel coming out of government members, and listen to the member for Euroa's contribution, which is a very worthy contribution.

**Juliana Addison:** Further on the point of order, Acting Speaker, my point of order is that it is not a race to the bottom.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Daniela De Martino):** I will rule on the point of order. Again, member for Euroa, please come back to the bill.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Back to superannuation: David Russell from Ruffy is another one. He and his wife live in their one and only home, and still they are being sent land tax bills. Despite supplying proof that it is their primary residence –

**Juliana Addison:** On a point of order, Acting Speaker: relevance.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** On the point of order, Acting Speaker, I am just referencing clause 15 in regard to individuals' self-managed superannuation. We are talking about superannuation and how it should best work for people. This is through their land tax through their self-managed super fund.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Daniela De Martino):** I will rule on the point of order. The member for Euroa is being relevant to the bill in discussing that particular item.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Thank you, Acting Speaker; I appreciate your support. Despite supplying proof that it is their primary residence, David has received debt collection letters. He has done everything right and he is still being treated like he is dodging tax. It is unacceptable. These are ordinary Victorians – people trying to live their lives, raise families, run farms and care for their communities – and they are being slammed with land tax bills that just do not make sense. There might be exemptions on paper, but the reality is that people are being left to fight through red tape, beg for help and jump through hoops just to get treated fairly.

Back to the bill: while the technical amendments might seem straightforward, there are real issues that cannot be ignored, particularly the changes around board representation for SSF members. The government wants to remove the ability for members to elect their own representatives to the Emergency Services Superannuation Board and instead hand that power over to unions, which will nominate someone on their behalf. The reason the government gives is that it is too difficult to find people to fill those roles. We do not buy it. There are more than 6000 SSF members who are still eligible. If we truly respect the democratic rights of members, especially when it comes to a decision about \$37 billion in managed assets, we should bend over backwards to protect that democratic process and not scrap it. What is more concerning is the lack of transparency around how these unions will be selected. When asked, the government could not outline the criteria, process or safeguards. Officials were questioned in the briefing about consultation with SSF members, and they said there was none. It is not good enough, not when we are talking about people's futures, their livelihoods and their retirement savings. There was not even an independent review; all we got was a desktop review

by Treasury and some back-and-forth with ESSS. This is not how major structural changes to one of Victoria's largest super funds should be handled. We need real consultation, clear evidence and transparent processes, and none of that has been delivered.

There is no solid reason – none – for stripping SSF members of their right to elect their representatives. We need to hold the line on this. If this government genuinely believes in fairness and accountability, it should be fighting to strengthen member input, not removing it. These proposed changes to the ESSS sit within a much bigger context – a financial environment where Victorians are being taxed unfairly, ignored by bureaucracy and left to fend for themselves. The least we can do is protect their rights to have a say in how their hard-earned money is managed. If this government will not stand up for those basic rights, we on this side of the house absolutely will, because the Allan Labor government cannot manage money, and Victorians are paying the price.

**Juliana ADDISON** (Wendouree) (15:35): I am delighted to be on my feet today to talk about superannuation and about a range of issues, and I am speaking in support of the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. I have been in the Speaker's chair for much of this debate. I listened to the contribution of the opposition spokesperson, which was 30 minutes very much on topic, very much understanding the shadow portfolio role she has and going through that for 30 minutes. It was terrific to see such an on-point, relevant contribution from the member for Evelyn, and I commend her for that. I listened really hard, and she is across the issues. I want to talk about the issues as well, because they are very important.

This is about amending and improving the legislation underpinning the public sector superannuation scheme ESSSuper, as we have heard – I did not know it is called ESSSuper before this debate started; I was going to say E-triple-S super, but it is ESSSuper. We have mentioned it a number of times, but \$37 billion of workers' money is in ESSSuper – it is really, really significant – whether that is in their defined benefit or accumulation net assets. Members of ESSSuper are retired or active members of the public service, which we are eternally grateful for. They have more than 120,000 members, and these members really are essential service people in our community. Some of the greatest Victorians are ESSSuper members. They really are the best of us – it could be called the best super because it is such good people that they represent. They are our police, they are our firefighters, they are our paramedics, our government school teachers and staff. Members of ESSS include employees from state and Commonwealth agencies, including from Metro Trains, Yarra Trams, Parks Victoria, the court service and V/Line, who started before 1994. ESSSuper is an agency of the Victorian Department of Treasury and Finance. I would like to thank the Minister for Finance, his ministerial office and the Department of Treasury and Finance for the work that they have put into this bill and its policies.

I also note department stakeholder consultation has occurred with our emergency services unions. I am proud to be a union member. I am a member of the Independent Education Union as well as the Australian Services Union. I think I am the only person who was an elected member of the Australian Workers Union, and I could not be prouder of having been an elected union official in my career. It was one of the greatest honours – it is up there with being elected to this place. Being elected by the members you represent, them saying that they want you – because that is what democratic unions do, right? They give members who pay their wages, who are the lifeblood of the union – they choose who represents them, and I am really proud to say that I was an elected union official for steelworkers. That is something that I wear as a badge of honour. This idea that unions are not democratic is not true, and the idea that unions do not work in the best interests of their members every single day is not true either. When we are talking about representation on boards, unions are going to be putting people up who are in the best interests of their members' money, because it is their jobs. When I was a union official I fought every day for my members, and now as a proud rank-and-file member of the ASU and the IEU, I expect the exact same thing from my elected officials. I really do want to talk a lot about super because that is what this is about. We have talked a lot about unions today, and I thought that I really wanted to put my 5 cents in about why I think unions are really important.

We have also consulted with employers and ESSSuper on the 90 per cent superable salary policy, with ESSSuper leading further consultation for other policies within this bill. Thank you to everyone who has been involved in this process for your contributions in shaping these improvements. We all know how important super is, particularly as you get older, and it has become much more significant. I must admit, my interest in my super balance has increased since my milestone birthday. I have got my AustralianSuper app on my phone, which I might check daily – which is probably not very good, given the ups and downs since Trump’s tariff stuff. It has certainly turned me a bit grey recently. But it is our Labor government that stands with workers, and this includes supporting mechanisms that lead them to have a financially secure post-work life and ensure that they have a comfortable retirement. Australian workers deserve that; they deserve dignity in retirement. I am super proud that super is a Labor initiative – super proud of super. It was Paul Keating, my beloved PJK, who introduced compulsory superannuation. He introduced the superannuation guarantee charge, ensuring employers contributed to their employees’ retirement savings, and it was the Keating Labor government that also passed legislation to support the new system in 1992.

I am a great beneficiary of that. I was in year 12 in 1992. I turned 18 in 1992. I am just bragging now, Steve McGhie. Whilst I welcome the contributions from the member for Murray Plains and also the member for Narracan about how great they think it is, let me just remind people that the Liberal and National parties opposed the creation of super – I may have only been 18, but I remember it – and they have opposed every increase in compulsory superannuation contribution legislation by Labor governments – every single one. I am really glad we have had a road-to-Damascus moment from the member for Murray Plains. That lifts me up; it is just great – old dog, new tricks. ‘Superannuation is fantastic’ – well done, I am glad you are on board. But let me be really, really clear that the Liberal–Nationals have opposed this at every opportunity, and we remember. We have long memories. You think we do not remember, but we remember. That is why we will always defend super, and workers know that we are on their side.

ESSSuper is the trading name for Emergency Services and State Super, a Victorian government agency for various public employees who have provided essential services to the Victorian community. The fund that ESSSuper administers includes defined benefits, which provide members with security into their retirement. The bill today makes largely administrative changes to the act governing ESSSuper to ensure that it can continue to best serve its members and remain responsive to their needs. The proposed changes include formalising the current 90 per cent superable salary policy for executive officers, improving time limits for contribution rate changes and for widowed spouses becoming members and efficiency alterations to the make-up of the governing board. These changes would be enacted through amendments to the Emergency Services Superannuation Act 1986 as well as the State Superannuation Act 1988 and the Transport Superannuation Act 1988, all acts that came into effect before the national legislation. That says a lot about us as well. Under the Cain Labor government that is what we were doing – we were thinking about workers retirements and their security way back then, even before we had the national legislation introduced by Prime Minister Keating.

I will just go through a few other things about what is going on, but I really would love some more time, because there is so much to talk about and things that I am so passionate about. Prior to June 2022 an informal policy recognised 70 per cent of an emergency services executive officer’s total remuneration package as being their superable salary. However, since mid-2022 such employees have been able to voluntarily increase that to 90 per cent instead. This bill seeks to formally recognise that 90 per cent superable salary for a more consistent application of policy. More precisely, under these amendments executive officer salary will be defined for superannuation purposes as the greater of either 90 per cent of the total remuneration or the non-executive salary for an employee under the enterprise agreement. This will ensure that members who transition from non-executive positions into executive roles will not be left worse off, and that is really important.

This policy will be implemented within the legislation by amending the definition of ‘salary’ in the Emergency Services Superannuation Act 1986, and the transition provisions within the bill specify that this will apply to employment contracts entered into on or after the day that these legislative changes commence. In addition to the superable salary clarifications, this bill alters two important time limits currently in place within the act. Firstly, members may currently only change their contribution rates once a year for historical administrative reasons. These rate changes also require two months notice. Given the increasing automation of relevant administrative processes, this outdated restriction will be removed for members of the ESSSuper scheme, new scheme and the Transport Superannuation Fund. When it comes to super and protecting workers’ rights, Labor is on your side always and every day, in superannuation and all other things.

**Kim O’KEEFFE** (Shepparton) (15:45): I rise to make a contribution to the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. The purpose of the bill is to amend the Emergency Services Superannuation Act 1986, the State Superannuation Act 1988 and the Transport Superannuation Act 1988 and for other purposes. Largely the bill that we are debating in the house today is about ensuring consistency in the application of superannuation policies, which is so important to Victorians; improving financial flexibility for members; supporting spouses of deceased members; and making changes to the Emergency Services Superannuation Board.

Whilst we are talking about providing more support for our emergency services, I want to acknowledge that on Tuesday, on the front steps of Parliament, we had many members of our emergency services – CFA volunteers – as well as farmers and many people from across the state who I am sure are very interested in us making sure that their superannuation is truly well in place. They also wanted to be heard and acknowledged. They turned up to this place and called on the government to stop the new emergency services and volunteers levy. This is a clear example where members of our emergency services are urging the government to listen, yet they are being totally ignored. Many of them are farmers who took time out of their busy lives to come to Parliament and try and get this government to understand the devastating impact that this tax will have on their lives. Yet yesterday in this place the Premier stood up on her feet and completely disregarded their voices, making excuses as to why this bill should go ahead. Did the Premier come out onto the steps and face those that turned up to face this Parliament and give her response?

**Juliana Addison:** Acting Speaker, my point of order is relevance.

**Brad Rowswell:** On the point of order, Acting Speaker, the member on her feet is quite clearly being consistent with the contributions of other speakers not only on the opposition side but on the government side, including member for Wendouree, who did not always speak about superannuation and the bill at hand solely but also spoke more broadly about the impacts of support for Victorians, including superannuation, which is exactly what the member opposite is currently doing.

**Juliana Addison:** On the point of order, Acting Speaker, having read the legislation, I do not believe farmers are covered by this superannuation.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Daniela De Martino):** I will rule on the point of order. Member for Shepparton, it has been wideranging, but I will draw you back to the bill.

**Kim O’KEEFFE:** Thank you, Acting Speaker, and I do think it is important that we identify the total disregard and disrespect for our CFA volunteers in this place, who have been totally ignored, and that is just wrong. However, I will come back to the bill. While this bill contains a range of technical amendments across several acts, the bill itself is relatively small in scope. The Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme (ESSS) currently has around 124,000 members and holds over \$37 billion in defined benefit accumulation net assets. Members typically work or worked for Victoria Police, Fire Rescue Victoria, Ambulance Victoria and Victorian government schools. Members who commenced their employment before 1994 may have also worked for a range of other organisations.

The most concerning aspect of the bill is the proposed removal of the democratically elected representatives of State Superannuation Fund (SSF) members of the board. The bill seeks to amend the operation and structure of the current Emergency Services Superannuation Board. The first of these changes reduces the size of the board from 12 members to 10 to improve the operational efficiency of the board. Currently the board consists of six members who are nominated by the minister and six who are elected by members of the schemes. The government argues that it is too difficult to find people to fill these positions. Whilst the SSF pool of potential candidates may be declining, there remain more than 6000 members that can potentially perform these roles. Currently, of the three board positions reserved for SSF members, two are filled by SSF members. If the proposed amendment to reduce the composition of the board from 12 to 10 is passed, with the SSF representation reduced from three to two board positions, there will be no vacancies in respect to SSF representatives. Currently the board only has nine out of 12 members sitting. Of the six positions reserved for government appointment, it only has four members sitting, with two vacancies to be filled. The government has more vacant seats on the board than SSF members.

The amendments also run counter to the minister's admission in their second-reading speech, where the minister stated that elected representatives help ensure:

... the Board can make decisions informed by the valuable lived experience of elected members.

The proposal to remove the power of SSF members to directly elect their representatives to the board is an affront to the democratic principle of representation. Given the board is responsible for over \$37 billion in members' assets and benefits, the highest standards of probity are required in relation to how persons will be selected to make decisions about the management of these funds. There is also a complete lack of clarity and transparency as to how a union will become a declared union under the proposed process the bill involves. When asked during the bill briefing if there had been any consultation with SSF about the proposed changes to board representation the response from the officials was no. However, the officials indicated ESSS had undertaken some market research with members on the issue. It remains unclear what this market research consisted of. No information has been provided by the government to date as to what process will be followed or what factors will be taken into account when the minister makes their decision. In these circumstances there is no reason to move from a directly elected model to one where declared unions are able to appoint their preferred candidates. The ability to directly elect members to the board should be guarded to provide the best method of ensuring SSF interests remain respected and protected.

Another key amendment the bill seeks to make is to increase the flexibility for members to make changes to their contributions. Currently, under the Emergency Services Superannuation Act 1986, the State Superannuation Act 1988 and the Transport Superannuation Act 1988, members can only change their contribution rate once a year. The bill removes the limit on the number of times members of the ESSS's new scheme and the transport superannuation fund can change their contribution rate each year. By amending these acts to allow more frequent changes to contribution rates, rather than just once a year, the bill will not only provide greater flexibility for members but also make it much easier for them to manage their superannuation and personal finances.

There is another important amendment that the bill makes. Following the death of a member, their spouse or family members currently have only three months to apply to become a member of the ESSS accumulation arrangement, the ESSPLAN scheme. Extending this period from three months to 12 months, recognising the emotional and financial challenges faced by many Victorians during an extremely difficult time and during their grief, is well appreciated. Most importantly, it gives spouses and their family additional time to make an informed decision about their financial futures, ensuring that they are not pressured into making a rushed decision during a time of losing a loved one. I think this is such an important change, as when a loved one passes away there are so many things that change for that person. Their life changes overnight. They do need time to grieve and to have the time to work through these types of changes.

The purposes of the bill are also to ensure a 90 per cent superable salary policy for executive officers and other contract employees who are members of the ESSS and to ensure this policy is applied consistently in the future, to assist members in managing their superannuation and personal finances while enabling more frequent contribution rate changes and to better support non-member spouses of members who died to apply to become members of the ESSS plan during a time of grief, as mentioned. In 2022 the government announced that the superable salary for new emergency services executive officers and other contract employees who are members of the ESSS defined benefit scheme would be determined as 90 per cent of their remuneration, subject to a minimum of the highest non-executive salary. The prevailing method of determining superable salary was grandfathered for existing emergency services executive officers, while providing them with the ability to opt in to the new arrangements for both past and future services. This policy was initially implemented informally by notifying employees of the new superable salary policy. The government now proposes to formalise this policy in legislation to ensure that it applies consistently to all relevant members of the ESSS. In the past the determination of superable salary was exempted for existing emergency services executive officers. Legislating this change to the act will help ensure consistency, which is crucial for fairness and transparency.

The bill before the house, though small, makes a number of amendments related to the Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme in order to ensure that it remains an effective, equitable and responsive scheme for the needs of its members and their families. On this side of the house we advocate for sustainable superannuation schemes that do not place undue financial burdens on the state's budget, and we will continue to advocate for reforms that ensure long-term viability without compromising employee benefits. Finally, we should not be disenfranchising SSF members from their ability to vote for members of the board, especially in circumstances where there has been no consultation with them about these changes. I support the amendment put forward by the member for Evelyn to restore the provisions requiring SSF members be elected as representatives to the board to ensure members retain their right to directly elect their representatives, instead of a union appointment.

**Steve McGHIE** (Melton) (15:55): I rise to contribute to the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025 and my role is not the bill but this superannuation scheme called Emergency Services and State Super – I know everyone was calling it ESSS or something else, but it is called E-triple-S. I was an original member of the scheme back in 1987 when it became operational. I am still a member of the scheme. Also, in my role as the secretary of the ambulance union I was a delegate to the board for many, many years. When the scheme started it was only for emergency service workers: police, fire, ambulance and SES paid officials. It was a scheme premised on 30 years of service and you would max out your defined benefit. Every employee in the ambulance service, the fire service, the police service was entitled to defined benefits in 1987.

I do have to remind the member for Hawthorn, who said that those on the opposite benches are supportive of emergency service workers, that Jeff Kennett in 1994 changed the legislation so new employees coming into the emergency services could not be in the defined benefits unless they were frontline workers. People that were working as call takers and dispatchers in the communication centre were not defined as frontline workers, yet they dealt with emergency situations every day. Those people that came into the industry after 1994 could not be in the defined benefits, which I think was damning of the government at the time. Clearly the introduction of that provision was meant to prevent the costings and the liability of government to carry those defined benefits for people who should have been defined benefit members. There are many, many people that are still working in the industry today that should have been in the defined benefits but are not in the defined benefits.

The other thing I will say in regard to the representation of State Superannuation Fund members and not being able to get anyone to nominate to be a delegate to the board is I can tell you now my experience when I was on the board was it was very difficult to get people to come forward to be representatives of their membership. I should say that that is a fact that has been put forward, and what the unions would be trying to do is make sure that those SSF members are properly represented rather

than having no representation to the board. That is what unions are about – that is, representing the collective for better outcomes and in particular superannuation that is fundamental to people's terms and conditions. The other thing I want to clarify is that the member for Shepparton raised issues about CFA volunteers. CFA volunteers are not part of the scheme. They are not paid employees, so they cannot be in the scheme, because they do not receive a wage from the CFA and they certainly do not pay super and do not collect superannuation benefits from the CFA.

The amendments here to this bill aim to make superannuation fairer, more flexible and more supportive for our Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme members and their families. As I said before, I was a delegate to the board for many, many years before I left the ambulance union in 2018. I know it talks about ensuring the 90 per cent superable salary policy is applied consistently – I was part of the negotiations around the 90 per cent superable salary policy, because previously the executive members of the emergency services were only entitled to 75 per cent. As I said before, the start of this scheme was premised around 30 years of maximising the benefits of defined benefits. I will give you an example. If you started in the industry at 21 or 22 and you worked for 30 years, how were you going to retire at 51 or 52? Even though the benefits were good, as time rolled on the benefits were not as good. You could not continue to contribute, and the employer stopped contributing for you once you clocked up 30 years of service. That has changed in more recent years because the employer now contributes towards the accumulation scheme, which is better for those people that have clocked up 30 years.

It will be great to see the younger workforce now hopefully staying in the emergency services for 30 years – if they can cope with it, if they are not injured on the job and if they are well supported, such as by a strong government supporting them. We have shown over many, many years that we do so. This is a fantastic scheme, and it is a scheme that will continue to grow. I know all of the workers within the emergency services love this scheme; they absolutely love it. I encourage all the new employees that come into the scheme to at least contribute 7 per cent towards their superannuation. They can do that under super sacrifice, which is a great benefit to them. Contributing the 7 per cent really means that they maximise their benefits, and it is not just the long-term superannuation outcomes but also the other things – if they get injured on the job, there are provisions for things like temporary pensions, permanent pensions and those sorts of things. There are death and disability benefits, which are really important. I know we hate talking about those sorts of things, but unfortunately we have seen people at a younger age either die on the job or have an accident outside of the job, or we have seen in emergency services some of our younger generation, and even some of our older generation, unfortunately take their own lives. We have seen that some families have been not only in distress because of that trauma but also in financial distress due to the employee not contributing an amount that would have delivered the benefits to those families in supporting those families. It is so important that they do that.

I do want to acknowledge the major unions that are involved in ESSS: the Police Association Victoria, the United Firefighters Union and the Victorian Ambulance Union, and prior to the Victorian Ambulance Union, Ambulance Employees Australia. I have got to say, all those other unions that are involved with SSF – I commend all of their actions, and I have seen them work closely together in regard to being on the board and the decisions made by the ESSS board. I want to acknowledge the CEO of ESSS, Robbie Campo, who is a fantastic CEO and will do a great job as the CEO of ESSS. That is really pleasant to see.

It is great to see that one of the amendments gives members more control in regard to making frequent changes to their contribution rates. I did make reference to the 7 per cent, which is important, but in the defined benefits you can range from 0 per cent up to 9 per cent, and it is pleasing to see that you can change your rate more than once a year now out of this bill. That is, again, really important for each member. That will depend on individual circumstances, which might change during the course of a year. People might think they prefer more take-home pay, but if their circumstances change, they might think at certain parts of the year that they can increase the percentage of their contributions to

superannuation. I know in the ambulance enterprise bargaining agreement they can contribute their superannuation under super sacrifice. It may even be a national thing now; I do not know. But certainly under their EBA they can contribute under super sacrifice, which is great.

I referred before to the percentages and how important they are, how important the scheme is and how supportive it is of the membership. And as I have said before, if one sustains on the job physical or mental injuries, they may never be able to go back to that particular role that they had. I will use the example of a paramedic. I cannot speak for the police, I cannot speak for firefighters, but a frontline paramedic may injure their back or may have a mental health injury and may never, ever get even close to being 100 per cent back to the job. They are very limited in areas where they can go within the ambulance service in regard to returning to work and having alternative duties. The scheme is very supportive in that way – in providing a temporary pension or a permanent pension, in supporting retraining and those sorts of things – and as I say, that is why it is such a valuable scheme, because it does look after its members. That does not mean to say it is perfect. It is not perfect; nothing is ever perfect. But they certainly try and look after their members as best they possibly can.

As I said, I have a long history with this scheme. I joined the scheme when it started back in 1987. The member for Wendouree is not here; in 1987 I was 29, I think, so there you go. So I do remember it, and it did start before what Keating introduced in 1992.

**Jade BENHAM** (Mildura) (16:05): I would be happy to forgo some of my time for a little bit more story time from the member for Melton about the ambulance services in the 1980s. I have got a tale or two to tell about my uncle, who was also a paramedic in the 1980s. We will get to that, though, as I contribute to the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. This has been a wideranging and lengthy debate. The bill proposes a number of changes to the governance and administration of the Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme and the State Superannuation Fund; I really have a hard time getting my mouth around that. The bill makes seven key amendments, ranging from board composition and nomination processes to adjustments to how and when contributors can make changes to their superannuation settings.

Superannuation can be quite complex, obviously. We heard the member for Euroa talk about some impositions on some self-managed super funds with regard to taxes, land tax and so forth. This bill may seem technical, but it does have real-world impacts – everything we do in this place does – particularly in regional communities like Mildura where public sector and emergency workers are essential services. Our emergency service workers are the backbone of our community. We have got many emergency services personnel in Mildura, with a Fire Rescue Victoria station, station 72. There are our vast CFA brigades throughout district 18 going right through the Mallee, which I am sure you are familiar with, Acting Speaker Lambert. There are paramedics and our police. We do not have enough personnel, I might just add. I think there are around 50 current vacancies within the Mildura police district, with several stations not being able to be manned in major centres like Red Cliffs and Merbein on the periphery of Mildura, which is a real concern.

We heard the member for Melton refer to his involvement with this scheme since the 1980s. One of my uncles, who was also a paramedic through the 1980s, is one of the beneficiaries of this scheme, and he started his paramedic career in Swan Hill. It seems as though the fashion for paramedics is also starting to return. He had quite the moustache when he started, and it seems that quite a few paramedics in Mildura have brought that back, which is alarming to say the very least. He ended up working his way up to be quite high up in Ambulance Victoria, finishing his career a few years ago in Bendigo, and has since been sauntering around drinking red wine and enjoying his life, so he was quite the beneficiary of this scheme. However, when we are talking about the futures of paramedics and emergency services, public sector personnel like Uncle Butch, their retirement security should give peace of mind, as superannuation should give peace of mind to everyone. But again, with things like land tax and self-managed super funds being taxed to the nth degree, it is hard to find that security now.

We also have to be careful here. The bill provides a 90 per cent superable salary policy for executive officers and contract employees who are members of the Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme, and on the surface this will bring some clarity and consistency to how super is calculated for certain employees. But we need to be careful that we are not creating two tiers of retirement outcomes within the same sort of workforce, one for executives and another for rank-and-file workers. In areas – in fact in most areas, but I will speak on behalf of my electorate, which is what I know best – it is not the executives who are carrying the day-to-day burdens in a crisis; it is the frontline workers, as well as the CFA volunteers, and they are not eligible for this scheme. They are volunteers; they are not paid firefighters, but again they are the backbone of regional and rural Victoria. They are the ones out there fighting the fires, and soon they will also be the ones paying this emergency services volunteers tax – fair and equitable? I would think not, you would have to agree, Acting Speaker Lambert. But they do cover massive areas across Sunraysia and the Mallee. Victoria Police members, like I have said before, respond to emergencies most of the time with very, very limited backup, if any at all. These are the people we do need to support most.

Secondly, the bill will allow contributors to the Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme to change their contribution rate more frequently, from once to twice a year, which also is a practical improvement. Life circumstances change, and in regional communities, employment is often more variable. People move between roles, having to upfill positions that they may never be permanently appointed to. We see that with Ambulance Victoria members at the moment and have done so for years. People move between those roles, and they take on additional family responsibilities because of the lack of child care. These are things that need to be considered. Giving workers more flexibility is always a positive step, but these could be mitigated by some other commonsense movements in other policy areas. Of course they could be. Like I said, everything we do in here has real-world consequences on the ground.

The thing that we have heard a lot of speakers on this side of the house raise concerns about is the fact that this bill abolishes the requirement for members of the State Superannuation Fund to elect their representatives and instead proposes that board members be nominated by a union. I believe in democracy and transparency, and those should be the cornerstones of good governance, especially when we are talking about people's super and ultimately their future. In Mildura many public servants – retired nurses, teachers, police officers and paramedics – are members of the State Superannuation Fund, and they should have a right to elect a representative to advocate for their interests. Those interests should not be quietly removed by an amendment in here. These decisions will affect the long-term financial future of these real people who have spent 30 or 40 years working for their community and contributing to a fund that they have trusted to do the right thing by them. We owe them a voice, particularly our nurses. My mother-in-law was a nurse in Victoria for 30 years and has since retired. It is also a concern for her because she does not subscribe to the union movement, which is interesting. These are the people that I tend to listen to when considering all sides because, Acting Speaker Lambert, you would know as well as I do that it does not matter how flat you make a pancake, there are always two sides, and those two sides should be listened to. That is a quote from the great Dr Phil.

Superannuation is complicated enough without changing the rules quietly from under people. There is already systemic disadvantage when it comes to retirement outcomes in regional Victoria. People have interrupted careers. Like I said, they need to take time off from their careers due to lack of child care and for other reasons. There are fewer opportunities to accrue super consistently. These are just some of those disadvantages. But we want to make sure that this bill is not just about streamlining administration. Everything we do in here should be about strengthening trust. But that is seldom the case, it seems.

While there are some practical improvements in this legislation, particularly with flexibility and compassion for contributors and their families, I do urge the government to tread very carefully when it comes to governance, because as we know, when you remove elected representation and concentrate

decision-making by taking that democracy and transparency away from members, you risk undermining trust in a system that has already failed too many. We need policy that reflects how people actually live and work in the real world and in regional and rural Victoria. I know I say this until my lips bleed in this place, but that is my job. While the intent of this bill in some cases is practical and flexible, I urge the government to ensure that regional workers like those in my community of Mildura are heard, respected and protected in the decisions that shape their future.

**Luba GRIGOROVITCH** (Koroit) (16:15): It gives me great pleasure to speak to the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. At the outset I would like to thank the Minister for Finance for all the work he has done to get this bill up and into the Parliament. A little bit of history about super in Australia: it is pretty simple – Labor supports it and the Liberals oppose it. People like Bronwyn Bishop? They speak out against super. Labor? We continue to support it. So where exactly did it come from? At the start of the 1980s superannuation was far from widespread and it was not transferable between employers. As a result, until the mid-1980s superannuation was generally limited to public servants and white-collar employees of large corporations. Fast forward to 1 July 1992, when Paul Keating mandated compulsory superannuation. The superannuation guarantee was introduced with a mandatory 3 per cent contribution rate, or 4 per cent for employers with an annual payroll above \$1 million. Fast forward again to 1996, when total superannuation assets were estimated to have reached \$245.3 billion. That illustrates that from year to year it goes from strength to strength.

Turning directly to Emergency Services and State Super (ESSSuper), it was created almost 100 years ago in recognition of the people who safeguard the safety, health and wellbeing of Victorians. Its members are those at the centre of our community, including police officers, firefighters, paramedics, teachers and support workers. Members are active or retired public servants who have provided essential services to the community. Most have worked in Victoria Police, Fire Rescue Victoria, Ambulance Victoria and Victorian government schools. Other members, however, have included employees of Commonwealth agencies and state government bodies, including my very favourite Metro Trains, Yarra Trams and V/Line, as well as Corrections Victoria, Parks Victoria and Court Services Victoria – but this was only if you were employed until 1994.

As my good friend Steve McGhie, the member for Melton, said, he was proudly a former paramedics union state secretary, a job that he did incredibly well. I had the great pleasure when I was the state secretary of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union to work alongside Steve on a number of occasions. I did not realise, however, that he was also a former board member of ESSSuper, and maybe that is why it has been doing so well. The member for Melton mentioned that members of ESSSuper absolutely love this scheme and love the benefits that come with it, and I can attest to that. Having spoken to a number of Rail, Tram and Bus Union members about ESSSuper, they have all absolutely agreed that they like the scheme and they are very proud to be part of the scheme.

Labor will, as we know, always protect and strengthen workers superannuation, because it is what we do. We created the current public sector superannuation scheme, and that was to provide emergency service workers and other public sector workers in the defined benefit scheme with a financially secure retirement. This bill ensures that ESSSuper can continue to provide the services its members deserve, reflecting the modern ways members interact with a super fund. ESSSuper, as I said, is the state's public sector superannuation scheme. It was created almost 100 years ago, and we can all be incredibly proud of it.

As no new members can join the SSF, the pool of active members is diminishing as more and more members retire. It is estimated that by 2035 about 92 per cent of the SSF membership will be pensioners. Prior to 1995 the state of Victoria adopted a pay-as-you-go approach to funding the State Superannuation Fund. This means benefits were only funded as they became payable, not as they accrued, which resulted in a significant unfunded superannuation liability. In 2000 the Bracks Labor government committed to fully fund the liabilities of the SSF by 2035. This is being achieved by way of annual top-up payments that are made under section 90(2) of the State Superannuation Act 1988.

The Allan Labor government continues to make progress on this commitment, and we are on track to fully fund the state's unfunded superannuation liability by the year 2035.

The superable salary provides the basis for determining both defined benefit superannuation contribution and benefits paid to members. In 2022 the superable salary policy was updated for new emergency services executive officers and other contract employees who are members of the emergency services defined benefit scheme. While the policy was initially implemented informally by notifying employers of the new superable salary policy, it is now proposed to enshrine this policy in legislation to ensure that it is applied consistently in the future.

Members of the emergency services defined benefit scheme, the new scheme and the Transport Superannuation Fund can only change their contribution rates once a year. This limit was most likely imposed because the administration of such changes was resource intensive as well as being time consuming. However, with modern technology, this practice is out of step with the way that most people can engage with their financial services providers. Given the automation of most scheme administration processes, removing the current limit will allow members to better manage their superannuation and personal finances. Importantly, this amendment will assist members experiencing financial hardship by allowing them to reduce their contribution rate as they need to.

Currently spouses only have three months following the death of their loved one to elect to become a member of the ESSSuper accumulation plan, or ESSPLAN. Extending the period is considerate of the impact of bereavement on members' families and is an acknowledgement that during this three-month period loved ones will most likely have other things on their mind.

Under the Emergency Services Superannuation Act, the Emergency Services Superannuation Board consists of 12 members appointed by the Governor in Council. Six board members are nominated by the Minister for Finance and six are directly elected by members of the scheme – members-elect – just like the member for Melton Steve McGhie. Three members-elect are elected by members of the emergency services defined benefit scheme, with one member-elect for each of the emergency services organisations – this being our paramedics, our firefighters and our police.

I know that the member for Mildura touched on governance. I come from a union background, as many in this place do. I must say that unions are incredibly democratic places where we genuinely do take on board the thoughts and rights of each and every individual. Having direct elections to various boards such as this scheme is something that I believe needs to remain, needs to stay in place. The remaining three member elects are elected by members of the former State Superannuation Fund. The bill proposes to reduce the size of the board from 12 to 10 by reducing both the number of SSF member elects and the government-nominated members by one each. This will mean that the SSF will reduce from three to two members and employer representation will reduce from six to five members. This will ensure equal representation of employee and employer members is retained and therefore good governance is achieved.

Just moving on through the various notes I have got here, I want to say again that the Minister for Finance has really gone above and beyond in this bill. The bill will ensure that the governance of the board is fantastic and that there is better customer service and a better customer service experience. It means that people that are the beneficiaries of this scheme, like the member for Melton Steve McGhie, will ultimately end up best placed when they choose to retire and cash in with their superannuation scheme. The ESSSuper proposal is to ensure that those who dedicate themselves to protecting the health and wellbeing of Victorians can enjoy the comfort of retirement that they absolutely deserve. This government is supportive of that, and that is why we are making this change. I commend the legislation. I thank the Minister for Finance, and I am very pleased that the member for Melton Steve McGhie joined this scheme back in 1987.

**Bronwyn HALFPENNY** (Thomastown) (16:24): The problem with being lower down on the speaking list is that much of what you were going to say has already been said. It was said very well

by the member on this side just before me, but I will hopefully add a few other fun facts as we go along, talking in the same vein, which would make sense because we on this side of the house are very supportive of superannuation. We are very proud as members of the Labor Party to have been part of the party that introduced fair and equitable industry superannuation back in the 1990s under, I think, the Hawke and Keating governments. As I am saying, I want to speak in favour of the legislation, the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. The amendments this bill provides are not earth shattering and huge, but they certainly are very important and do have a great effect on those that are affected by some of the changes – for example, in particular the spouse of an emergency services worker who passes away and their ability to nominate into the fund. These are small changes in the scheme of things, but they do have a big impact on those that are affected by them.

As I was saying, it is no surprise to anyone that it has been Labor governments that have been very instrumental and are the ones that introduced industry super as a key financial instrument. It not only invests in a person's retirement to fund a retirement, but industry superannuation also invests in the broader Australian economy, because the funds are used – for example, there are a number of projects around housing that super funds are involved in or interested in. There is a social aspect to the work that they are doing, because while, yes, their fundamental and first responsibility is to invest in such a way as to provide good retirements for their members, funds also look at the bigger picture in terms of Australian society and what is required in terms of investments in infrastructure and other things like that.

It is interesting to know that Australia as a country actually has the 55th-largest population in the world. Obviously there are some much bigger ones than Australia, but this is the case, and yet we are fourth in the world's largest pools of retirement savings. That just shows how important and how influential way back in the 1980s the Labor government was in terms of introducing and investing in superannuation. That was at a time when really superannuation funds were company-run funds, and most of those working people never got a look-in. They might have stayed there five years or spent 10 years in a job, but actually you had to have been there 20 years and have retired before you would get one cent out of that fund. It meant that people worked for many years and were forced to stay at a job that they perhaps would otherwise want to leave just in order to safeguard their retirement, or the other thing of course is it meant they left with nothing and were relying on only the government age pension. One of the important aspects of having this equitable universal, if you like, superannuation through the superannuation guarantee is to ensure that everybody has access to superannuation and, as time goes on, a good retirement income and therefore there is less reliance on government pensions. This is a much more sustainable model, but also over time and as that super guarantee increases, the expectation is the retirement income of all Australians will be better and bigger into the future.

There have been a few ups and downs, and, sadly, even now, 40 years since the introduction of industry superannuation schemes, in many cases people retiring do not have enough in those funds in their accounts in order to have the retirement income and lifestyle that they really do deserve. One of the reasons for this – the main reason – is because of Liberal attacks on the superannuation scheme, industry super, as it has gone along. For example – there are many cases – the idea was that there were incremental increases from maybe 6 per cent to 8 per cent, 10 per cent and 12 per cent going onwards. During the Howard years those incremental increases were frozen, so it did not go up. Of course more recently we did not know really where things were going, whether there were going to be freezes of, increases to or cuts to the superannuation guarantee increase to 12.5 per cent.

In the recent election Liberals were coming out with things like young people raiding their superannuation to provide deposits for homes. They could maybe lose that home and then they will have lost all their super and into the future their retirement income will be much, much less. In the Thomastown electorate I meet many, many people that have now retired and are on government pensions, and honestly, their lives are not great ones. They cannot go out for dinners and travel and do all those things that one might hope you can do when you retire. That is why the superannuation guarantee is so important.

I bring us back to the Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme that we are talking about in this legislation and the changes that we are making. This is a different scheme to the industry funds and the superannuation guarantee. It is a defined benefit scheme, which means that, rather than your retirement income being based on the investments over the life of your account, it is determined by a formula that looks at things like your age, how long you have been in the service of that employer – in this case the state – and what your pre-retirement income was. It is normally a formula calculated to provide quite a good income into retirement.

One of the reasons why these funds did come about and exist is that emergency service workers have difficult jobs. They are on the frontline, and whether they are police, paramedics or firefighters, they have difficult jobs which often create other issues. I was involved in the Fiskville CFA training centre inquiry around exposure to all those terrible hazardous chemicals that create and cause all sorts of cancers. These are the things that our emergency services workers face pretty well every day. It is good to have a fund that will provide.

I have probably been waffling too long, because the time is going. One of the changes relates to if an emergency services worker who is a member of the fund passes away. Under the fund their spouse is able to opt to become a member of that fund so the generation of the retirement funds later down the track will still apply for that family, because the family will still be there and they will still need income for retirement. In the current circumstances the spouse must nominate within six months whether they are going to do that. Again, this is showing the compassion of the Allan Labor government with their listening and understanding and trying to work their way through things, because obviously it has been shown that this is not quite long enough. When families are grieving the loss of their loved one sometimes they miss that deadline and therefore that option is cut off to them. With this legislation we are looking at changing that cut-off from six months to 12 months. There is also, as has been said, a reduction in the board composition from 12 to 10 members. There is also the provision of a union-based model for the nomination process. Pretty well all the members in emergency services are in unions, and it makes sense to have their trade union, who they have elected, to be part of the nomination process and involved in the board to act in their best interests. In conclusion, I support this bill.

**Anthony CIANFLONE** (Pascoe Vale) (16:34): I rise, following the member for Thomastown's very comprehensive contribution, to also support the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. As we know, and as I touched on yesterday, we on this side of the house as part of a Labor government and as part of the labour movement – whether at the federal or state level – have always been in the corner of workers, working families and those that seek to aspire but not be left behind, as the Prime Minister so frequently says. Regardless of one's age or background or circumstances or income, everyone across Australia and indeed Victoria deserves that right to aspire and be supported. That is why we have continued to support many measures since the very beginning of the great labour movement and Labor political party and to support workers, whether through ongoing advocacy for the minimum wage; regular wage increase advocacy; Medicare; the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme; paid parental leave; the NDIS, or national disability insurance scheme; or the higher education contribution scheme that let so many people from our generation in particular access university for the first time. At a state level we have WorkCover – which we were just talking about yesterday – the Transport Accident Commission, free TAFE, free kinder, the Education State, free school breakfasts programs, free glasses and dental programs in schools and so much more. When combined it has always been the Labor side of politics that has been there to make sure every part of our community has the access to succeed and aspire.

When it comes to retirement it has been the Labor movement and Labor governments that have driven, protected, preserved and solidified the importance of the superannuation system in this country and this state. The superannuation industry is very much the cornerstone of retirement planning in Australia, but it certainly was not always the case. Having grown from what was a niche retirement tool in its infancy, it has now evolved into a universal retirement savings tool for Australian workers.

Before superannuation became widespread and legislated, most Australians did not have a formal way to save for retirement. As set out by Nick Nicolaides on the history of superannuation, a great analysis from 24 October 2018:

The idea of stopping work at a certain age wasn't something many people planned for. They typically worked as long as they could, and when that was no longer possible, they often relied on family or personal savings to get by.

In 1908, the Australian government introduced the Age Pension to provide support for those unable to work due to old age. But the pension had strict eligibility criteria, including income and residency requirements. Retirement remained unpredictable for most, with few people having a structured plan for financial security in their later years.

At that time, pensions were primarily reserved for government employees. In fact, the first superannuation fund in Australia was created in 1862 for public servants in Victoria. But for the rest of the population, there was little to no formal support for retirement, and personal savings were often inadequate.

Beginning as a benefit for government workers, it slowly spread to the private sector, with the Bank of New South Wales, now Westpac, setting up the first superannuation fund for private employees in 1915. Up until the early 1980s, superannuation still was far from widespread and was not transferable between employers. As a result, until around the mid-1980s superannuation was generally limited to public servants and white-collar employees of large corporations. By 1987 superannuation assets across Australia were estimated to be worth around \$41 billion, with 32 per cent of private sector employees covered. However, it was following the historic 1986 national wage case guidelines that contributions started to be added to some industrial awards, which significantly increased coverage to 68 per cent of the private sector by 1991.

As set out by Helen Hodgson in her *Conversation* article of 2017, the superannuation guarantee came into force from 1 July 1992. Of course it was thanks to the Paul Keating Labor government, which introduced this measure, which the Liberals at the time federally fought tooth and nail against. I should acknowledge the role of Bill Kelty at the time, the secretary of the ACTU, and just what a momentous reform and legacy that piece of legislation continues to provide us to this day. Award superannuation has been built on since 1987 as part of the ACTU's agreement to trade off wage increases for an occupational superannuation scheme, and industrial awards required employers to contribute 3 per cent of wages for a worker paid under the award to superannuation, instead of them receiving that money in their pay packet. The guarantee was announced in 1991. It required employers at the time to contribute to superannuation for all workers earning more than \$450 per month. The guarantee as legislated was 3 per cent, or 4 per cent if payroll exceeded \$1 million, increasing to 9 per cent by the year 2002. The superannuation guarantee came into force in July 1992.

Once it became mandatory, superannuation assets at that time then grew to \$148 billion, with the mandatory super rate gradually increasing over time to 9 per cent by 2002, 9.5 per cent by 2014 and 11.5 per cent as of July 2024. It is scheduled to increase to 12 per cent by July 2025. The principle of superannuation is that very straightforward principle that it is the preferred investment to support retirees and reduce reliance on the age pension and federal government taxpayer dollars. From its infancy the Australian superannuation system was heralded and still is heralded as one of the world's leading schemes, with the World Bank endorsing Australia's three-pillar system of compulsory superannuation, the age pension and voluntary retirement savings as world's best practice for the provision of retirement income. Fast forward to today, according to KPMG's *Super Insights 2024* report, and Australia's superannuation pool of funds and assets had grown to over \$3.5 trillion as of June 2023.

That is a world away from the early 1980s, when it was around \$40 billion. Some of Australia's largest funds, many of which are industry super funds, proudly representing the interests of workers include AustralianSuper, managing around \$300 billion of funds; Australian Retirement Trust, with \$255 billion; and Aware Super, with \$161 billion, amongst others. The average balance at the moment for members has increased from \$90,783 in 2022 to just over \$97,000 in 2023. According to the

analysis from the Association of Superannuation Funds of Australia the average super balance needed at age 67 for a comfortable and secure retirement is \$690,000 for a couple and \$595,000 for a single person. However, as we also know, there is still a lot more work to do, which is why we are putting this bill forward today, but also in respect of the superannuation gender gap, which continues to exist. On average women have about \$15,000 less than a male counterpart account.

It has always been, as I said, the labour movement that has continued to support, fight for and protect superannuation in this country against the best efforts of the Liberal–National parties that have always fought against it and always fought to undermine it. As set out by a good colleague Andrew Leigh at the federal level on 22 August, superannuation was introduced by Labor in the 1990s, and the Liberals opposed it and fought it then. People like Bronwyn Bishop continue to speak out against it. John Howard went to the 1996 election promising to continue with a schedule of rate increases, but then he froze it. Tony Abbott went to the 2013 election promising to increase the superannuation contribution but broke his promise and did not continue with those scheduled increases. Prime Minister Scott Morrison went to the 2019 election saying he planned to continue at the time the legislated pattern of super increases, yet his right-wing backbench agitated for those reforms to be dumped. And do not forget during COVID-19 it was Prime Minister Scott Morrison who provided that access for young people and others to their super, which generations of young people will feel the consequences of in years to come.

At the most recent election, Peter Dutton’s Liberal Party took a policy to the community for young people to raid their super for up to \$50,000 in order to buy a property, which would make property more expensive by creating massive inflationary impacts, make young people poorer in retirement because they would miss out on those decades of compounded interest that they would benefit from in retirement and also increase the burden on taxpayers, member for Eildon, who is at the table. It would have increased the burden on taxpayers to pay for more age pension rather than less, which is the whole intention of super – to support people in retirement.

That is also why this bill is before us, because we know, particularly for our essential emergency services workers in this state – they particularly do an incredible job to keep us all safe – we need to make sure we continue to modernise and improve the existing super scheme. The Cain Labor government in this Parliament were the ones who, way back in 1986, established the Emergency Services Superannuation Act 1986, which was designed to establish that Emergency Services Superannuation Board and scheme to provide and oversee superannuation benefits, investments and assets for persons employed in the emergency services. It provided the framework to support and facilitate those super funds, with oversight by the board consisting of members from Victoria Police, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, the Country Fire Authority, the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands at the time, Ambulance Victoria and others.

As I said, as things change we need to make sure that the acts remain contemporary. Today the fund from those early days has evolved to oversee 124,500 members, overseeing, I understand, \$37 billion in defined benefits and accumulated assets. That is why this bill contains quite a number of reforms to modernise that scheme and continue supporting our hardworking emergency services workers and leaders into the future. I commend the bill.

**Eden FOSTER** (Mulgrave) (16:44): I am pleased to rise today in support of the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025, and I thank the relevant minister for introducing this bill. I also thank my colleague the member for Pascoe Vale for his words on this bill too, with such passion for superannuation. On this side of the house you will see there is a lot of passion for superannuation. We protect super on this side of the chamber, whereas those on the other side have a disdain for superannuation. So I am proud to be part of the labour movement, and key to our movement is protecting our workers and protecting the dignity of our workers.

This bill remains true to our Labor values and continues to strengthen superannuation for our workers. More specifically, this bill protects and strengthens the rights of our emergency service workers as

well as other public sector workers in the defined benefit scheme with a financially secure retirement. Our emergency workers are the best of us, and they do so much for our community. I wish to thank them for their hard work and support, and their commitment to protecting and helping our beautiful communities here in Victoria. Moving towards the importance of this bill, dignity and workers' protections are at its core, which is why superannuation is so important. Everyone deserves to live a comfortable and dignified life when they retire, which is what the Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme does, and we are only strengthening it with this bill. This bill is modernising the scheme, because it is important during these ever-changing times that superannuation moves accordingly.

One of the major amendments included in this bill is the 90 per cent superable salary rule for emergency services executive officers. Our emergency service workers are some of the hardest workers in this state, and their employment benefits are hard earned and well deserved. Allowances, insurances, incentives – these all should be subjected to superannuation too. Since 2022 it has been standard policy that for new emergency services executive officers and other contract employees who are members of the emergency services defined benefit scheme superable salary is determined as 90 per cent of executive and contract workers' total remuneration package, subject to a minimum of the highest non-executive salary. Legislating this change means contract employees are included in the policy too, because if you do the work, you deserve to be paid for it, and that includes your superannuation.

These hard workers include our local paramedics and ambulance workers, who deserve a special shout-out. Within the Noble Park area we have a local ambulance branch, and the work that they do is truly life saving. This government will always back our ambos. Since 2014 we have invested more than \$2 billion into ambulance services, including close to \$300 million in the Ambulance Victoria development program. This program has delivered upgrades and modernisation to more than 41 ambulance branches right across the state. These modern and purpose-built spaces, with the latest equipment, provide better working conditions for our paramedics, ensuring that they can continue to deliver the best care to the great people of Victoria. This record investment in ambulance services has also meant we have more paramedics on the road, recruiting more than 2200 paramedics since we came to government and training 40 additional MICA paramedics.

I would also like to draw attention to an important element of this bill, extending the amount of time a spouse has to become a part of a member's super plan. Sadly, for many of us who have lost someone dear to us, grieving and that time period when we have lost a loved one can be quite a difficult time. I recently lost my godmother, who was a big part of my life. Those days and months after losing someone close to you can be quite difficult, so I know that following a close family member or a loved one's death, you are not always in a state to think about the logistics, to think about how to become a part of the ESSSuper. When spouses lose their loved ones they should not be having to think about their superannuation immediately. They should not be having to think about the amount of time spouses have to select a plan. This is why we are extending it from three months to 12 months, so they have that time to grieve and time to process and time to act on this super. Widows should be able to seek advice about where their superannuation is going at a time which is suitable to them. As a psychologist, I know that grieving is not just a three-month process. It can take longer, and it takes time, so this extension to 12 months is important for our workers' families in the sad event that a spouse loses their partner.

I would also like to pay tribute to our hardworking police officers who keep us safe in this state and who will also benefit from this. Every day they put their own safety on the line to keep us all safe. The work they do patrolling the front line every single day does not go without notice, which is why we are backing our police officers. This government's record investment into Victoria Police since coming into government is now at over \$4.5 billion, because we want to give our police force the tools and resources they need to continue to do the great job that they do. This investment includes additional police, new and upgraded police stations right across the state and investment in new technology to ensure that Victoria Police continues to be a modern, fit-for-purpose organisation into the future,

because we value our police. That is more than 3600 additional police funded by our government since 2014. That is also why we have been passing new legislation to assist in making Victorian Police's lives easier, whether it be the Terrorism (Community Protection) and Control of Weapons Amendment Bill 2024 or the Bail Amendment Bill 2025. These are the real changes to the law which this government has passed which are making a real difference to Victorians. I have also been personally visiting local Victoria Police in my area and listening to their concerns, and I would like to give them a special thankyou – to Inspector Mark Hatt, the Monash local area commander, and Inspector Cameron Prins, the Greater Dandenong local area commander, whose team will benefit greatly from this bill. They are both doing a vital job in our community. I thank them, and I thank their entire police stations for keeping our community safe in the electorate of Mulgrave and beyond.

This bill is administrative. It is not one that should have us huffing and puffing, yet we are still having to argue about it with the opposition, and it gobsmacks me. This bill continues to strengthen workers' rights to superannuation, which is what Labor will always do. I might add, on a personal note, I remember as a little one back in the day when superannuation was not compulsory. Someone like my mum did not choose to sign up to super, and looking back on that, she regrets that, because in her older age it made it a little bit harder. Superannuation is important, and that is why we on this side of the chamber value superannuation, whereas those on the other side have a history of denigrating it, have a history of putting it down. We saw that at the federal election. We saw that the federal coalition wanted people to dig into their super to buy their first homes, which would mean that not only would housing prices go up but retirement funds for retirees would later on go down. This is why we respect superannuation on this side of the chamber. We value it. We know that it is important. That is why we continue to make sure that there are significant changes that benefit the working, everyday person in our community, because we know superannuation is key. It is valuable. It is so important. It is the future for our retirement, and I commend this bill to the house.

**Matt FREGON** (Ashwood) (16:54): It is my great pleasure to rise on what would be the end of a Thursday – I have a hunch it might not be – on the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. I thank all of the colleagues for their contributions, which have outlined this bill, which is fairly technical, and I will get to some of the aspects in the time I have. But I was thinking about the member for Malvern's contribution earlier in the week where on another bill he referenced the Royal Commission on the Butter Industry. To take up his prompt during the course of that: to think there was corruption in the butter industry back then just makes your stomach churn.

**Jess Wilson** interjected.

**Matt FREGON**: Thank you, member for Kew. Through the Chair, I know. I am sorry.

**A member** interjected.

**Matt FREGON**: Well, you know, the act is coming along. In the spirit of the former federal member for Melbourne Adam Bandt, I thought, 'We are very proud of our retirement system and our superannuation system, so I will do a Google search.' I googled it and I found on our wonderful Australian Treasury website an article headed 'Towards higher retirement incomes for Australians: a history of the Australian retirement income system since Federation'. In the 4 minutes I have got left I probably will not be able to start at 1901, but I will just give you a little precis and maybe we can extend time later. Australia first brought in the aged pension system in 1908. This surprised me; I did not realise we were that forward thinking. Actually I have to give New South Wales credit because they were first. They had a system in 1900. Victoria followed in 1900, before federation. But as a country we have had that system since 1908. That retirement system we have makes up a crucial pillar. As I think the member for Pascoe Vale rightly said, when our superannuation guarantee came in in 1992, thanks to a Labor government, it was only a year later that the World Bank endorsed Australia's three pillar system – compulsory superannuation, the aged pension and voluntary retirement savings – as world's best practice for the provision of retirement income. I am one of the people who probably

benefited from that, given that I started my working life around that time. It is something that as a country we can be very, very proud of.

The bill that we have is making improvements to ESSSuper – and I thank member for Wendouree, who instructed us how to say it, because I would have thought it was E-S-S super as well. The aspect that I think the member for Mulgrave mentioned was about when a spouse who is in the system passes away – extending that time to become part of the system is very important. As the member for Mulgrave said, any of us who have lost a loved one in the family know, especially if it is a surprise or something that happens too early, it takes a lot of time to readjust. Not everyone is geared up to be thinking about superannuation. Not everyone has an accountant on speed dial or knows their way around these things. I think that is a very good change.

Our superannuation and our pension, these facilities that we have in our country, are things that we can all be very proud of regardless of our side of politics. I was reading earlier that Prime Minister Bruce, who was from the Nationalist Party back in 1920-odd, was a big supporter of the pension. I think regardless of what side of politics you are on, the care for our aged and infirm and those with disabilities is something that we have, I think, done pretty well, and we have led the world on many occasions. The first proposals – member for Eureka; I am just going to educate you on the first proposals for national superannuation in Australia, care of the Treasury office. There were three government inquiries into the retirement income system. There was one in 1928, one in 1938 and one in 1976, but they all resulted in failed proposals. I mentioned the Bruce government before, and I cannot imagine it has been mentioned much in this house since then, but credit where it is due and let us all respect our prime ministers, especially our new continuing Prime Minister. It was not a bad result the other week, by the way, if you have not noticed; you might want to google that. In 1923 the Bruce government established a royal commission into the possibility of introducing a comprehensive national insurance scheme for retirement. In 1923 there was a royal commission into that. Obviously it took a long time between then and 1992 before we got to what we know now.

**The SPEAKER:** Order! The time set down for consideration of items on the government business program has arrived, and I am required to interrupt business. My apologies to the member for Ashwood.

**Motion agreed to.**

**Read second time.**

*Third reading*

**Motion agreed to.**

**Read third time.**

**The SPEAKER:** The bill will now be sent to the Legislative Council and their agreement requested.

### **Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025**

*Second reading*

**Debate resumed on motion of Ben Carroll:**

That this bill be now read a second time.

**and Bridget Vallence's amendment:**

That all the words after 'That' be omitted and replaced with the words 'this house refuses to read this bill a second time until the government:

- (1) agrees to freeze the average premium rate at 1.8 per cent for 2025–26 to provide certainty to Victorian employers;

- (2) consults with interested stakeholders and the public on proposed changes recommended by a WorkSafe review into family supports;
- (3) makes available all modelling prepared for the legislative impact assessment for this bill in relation to the additional costs and financial impact the bill will have on employers and the WorkCover scheme;
- (4) consults with industry to minimise fees for training for return-to-work coordinators; and
- (5) implements measures to prohibit entities responsible for corruption on Big Build and Victorian construction sites from becoming an approved training provider.'

**The SPEAKER:** The minister has moved that the bill be now read a second time. The member for Evelyn has moved a reasoned amendment to this motion. She has proposed to omit all of the words after 'That' and replace them with the words that appear on the notice paper. The question is:

That the words proposed to be omitted stand part of the question.

Those supporting the reasoned amendment moved by the member for Evelyn should vote no.

**Assembly divided on question:**

*Ayes (54):* Juliana Addison, Jacinta Allan, Colin Brooks, Josh Bull, Anthony Carbines, Ben Carroll, Darren Cheeseman, Anthony Cianflone, Sarah Connolly, Chris Couzens, Jordan Crugnale, Lily D'Ambrosio, Daniela De Martino, Gabrielle de Vietri, Steve Dimopoulos, Paul Edbrooke, Eden Foster, Matt Fregon, Ella George, Luba Grigorovitch, Bronwyn Halfpenny, Katie Hall, Paul Hamer, Mathew Hilakari, Melissa Horne, Natalie Hutchins, Lauren Kathage, Sonya Kilkenny, Nathan Lambert, John Lister, Gary Maas, Alison Marchant, Kathleen Matthews-Ward, Steve McGhie, Paul Mercurio, John Mullahy, Danny Pearson, Tim Read, Pauline Richards, Tim Richardson, Ellen Sandell, Michaela Settle, Ros Spence, Nick Staikos, Natalie Suleyman, Meng Heang Tak, Nina Taylor, Kat Theophanous, Mary-Anne Thomas, Emma Vulin, Iwan Walters, Vicki Ward, Dylan Wight, Belinda Wilson

*Noes (26):* Brad Battin, Jade Benham, Roma Britnell, Tim Bull, Martin Cameron, Chris Crewther, Wayne Farnham, Sam Groth, Matthew Guy, David Hodgett, Emma Kealy, Tim McCurdy, Cindy McLeish, James Newbury, Danny O'Brien, Michael O'Brien, John Pesutto, Richard Riordan, Brad Rowswell, David Southwick, Bill Tilley, Bridget Vallence, Peter Walsh, Kim Wells, Rachel Westaway, Jess Wilson

**Question agreed to.**

**The SPEAKER:** The question is:

That this bill be now read a second time, government amendments 1 to 19 inclusive be agreed to and the bill be now read a third time.

**Question agreed to.**

**Read second time.**

*Circulated amendments*

**Circulated government amendments as follows agreed to:**

1. Clause 7, line 3, omit "237, 237A" and insert "237, 237AA, 237A".
2. Clause 9, line 14, omit "237, 237A" and insert "237, 237AA, 237A".
3. Clause 10, line 17, omit "237 or 237A" and insert "237, 237AA or 237A".
4. Clause 14, omit this clause.
5. Clause 15, line 19, omit "section" and insert "sections 237AA and".

6. Clause 15, after line 20 insert –  
**“237AA Other dependants**  
 (1) If a worker leaves –  
 (a) one or more dependants, whether dependent partners or dependent children or partially dependent partners; and  
 (b) any other person who is to any extent dependent on the worker’s earnings –  
 each person referred to in paragraph (b) is entitled to an amount of compensation, being a sum not exceeding \$20 000, which the court, Authority or self-insurer considers is reasonable and appropriate to the injury to that person.  
 (2) To avoid doubt, a determination of the amount of compensation to which a dependant is entitled under section 236 or 237 is not affected by, and does not affect, a determination of the amount of compensation to which a dependant is entitled under subsection (1).’.
7. Clause 15, line 21, omit **“237A’** and insert **“237A”**.
8. Clause 16, line 7, omit **“237, 237A”** and insert **“237, 237AA, 237A”**.
9. Clause 17, line 10, omit **“237 or 237A”** and insert **“237, 237AA or 237A”**.
10. Clause 26, line 26, omit **“237, 237A”** and insert **“237, 237AA, 237A”**.
11. Clause 32, line 7, omit **“item 37”** and insert **“item 38”**.
12. Clause 32, lines 8 to 10, omit all words and expressions on these lines and insert –  
**‘Principal Act insert –**  
     **“38A            Section 237AA(1) – \$20 000**  
     **38B            Section 237A(1) – \$10 000’.**
13. Clause 42, omit this clause.
14. Clause 43, after line 31 insert –  
**‘(1A) After section 92A(8B) of the Accident Compensation Act 1985 insert –**  
**“(8C) If a worker leaves –**  
     (b) one or more dependants, whether dependent partners or dependent children or partially dependent partners; and  
     (b) any other person who is to any extent dependent on the worker’s earnings –  
     each person referred to in paragraph (b) is entitled to an amount of compensation, being a sum not exceeding \$20 000, which the court, Authority or self-insurer considers is reasonable and appropriate to the injury to that person.  
**(8D) To avoid doubt, a determination of the amount of compensation to which a dependant is entitled under subsection (4), (5), (6), (7), (8), (8A) or (8B) is not affected by, and does not affect, a determination of the amount of compensation to which a dependant is entitled under subsection (8C).”.’.**
15. Clause 43, page 33, line 7, omit **“\$10 000.”’** and insert **“\$10 000.”’**.
16. Clause 43, page 33, after line 7 insert –  
**‘(11B) Subsection (3) does not apply to an amount of compensation payable under subsection (11A).”.’.**
17. Clause 52, line 30, omit **“Before item 3”** and insert **“After item 13”**.
18. Clause 52, line 31, omit all words and expressions on that line and insert –  
**‘Accident Compensation Act 1985 insert –**  
     **“13A            Section 92A(8C) – \$20 000”.’.**
19. Insert the following New Clause to follow Clause 13 –  
**‘13A How compensation for death of worker determined**  
 In section 235 of the Principal Act, for **“237”** substitute **“237, 237AA”’.**

## MOTIONS

1890

Legislative Assembly

Thursday 15 May 2025

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### *Third reading*

**Motion agreed to.**

**Read third time.**

**The SPEAKER:** The bill will now be sent to the Legislative Council and their agreement requested.

### **Justice Legislation Amendment (Miscellaneous) Bill 2025**

#### *Second reading*

**Debate resumed on motion of Sonya Kilkenny:**

That this bill be now read a second time.

**Motion agreed to.**

**Read second time.**

### *Third reading*

**Motion agreed to.**

**Read third time.**

**The SPEAKER:** The bill will now be sent to the Legislative Council and their agreement requested.

**Business interrupted under sessional orders.**

**Mary-Anne THOMAS** (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Ambulance Services) (17:07): I move:

That the sitting be continued.

**Motion agreed to.**

## *Motions*

### **Equality**

**Mary-Anne THOMAS** (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Ambulance Services) (17:08): I move:

That this house condemns the Shadow Minister for Equality for allowing his shadow colleagues to sponsor a petition attacking LGBTIQ+ people and calling for the cessation of the rainbow libraries toolkit.

I stand today – the day before the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia – with pride to say that on this side of the house we will always stand with our LGBTIQ+ communities. Indeed I had the great pleasure only today of meeting with members of the Pride community in the Department of Health. I think that it would be with some trepidation that members of the public service would wonder whether or not they would be able to join together in Pride networks should there ever be a change of government in this great state of ours. Because if there is one thing that is very clear, it is that those on the other side will not stand for our LGBTIQ+ community. They might stand and say certain things in this place or to the media or elsewhere, but actions speak always louder than words. What we know, and what this motion talks to, is the fact that the Shadow Minister for Equality was silent when people in his political party, on his side of the house, brought to this place petitions that sought to cease the rainbow libraries toolkit, which was nothing other than an attack on some of the most vulnerable members in our community.

It also demonstrates once again how absolutely out of step the Liberal Party are with mainstream Australia and the values of mainstream Australians, who basically are very clear that people should be

able to live their lives how they want and love who they want and choose to love. This is not radical thinking; this is about treating people with care and respect and having equality as the principle at the heart of everything that we do. As a Labor government we have always been proud to say that in this state under Labor, equality is not negotiable. It is a mantra for us. We say it with pride, and we stand in solidarity with members of the LGBTIQ+ community – who, I might say, continue to be under sustained attack by conservative forces in this nation. This is shameful, and we have to stand up against this. When we see prejudice and when we see hate, it is really important that we stand up to it.

I mentioned that it is IDAHOBIT tomorrow. This is a day that I always look forward to celebrating with members of the LGBTIQ+ community in my electorate, because I reflect and I remember that when I was a young woman growing up in regional Victoria, in the community that I lived in – at Tallangatta High, at Wodonga High – there were no Pride clubs back then. In fact there were not even the words for people to be able to express their identities. Young people from the LGBTIQ+ community were invisible. They were silenced. They lived lives of fear. They were harassed. They were attacked. I cannot share with you the stories that I know from my youth, because they are too hurtful and they are too disturbing.

We have come a long way, and this is vitally important. But we need to be vigilant. I think about this word ‘vigilant’ quite a lot when I think about the progressive agenda of our government, because what we have seen around the world is that governments that are committed to equality, ending discrimination, standing with our LGBTIQ+ communities, standing with Indigenous people and standing for the reproductive health rights of women – and the people these governments stand with – are under attack by conservative forces, right-wing forces, right around the world on a scale that we have not seen for a long, long time. We have to be vigilant because what we know is that these extreme right-wing voices exist in the Brad Battin Liberal Party.

**The SPEAKER:** Order! Refer to members by their correct titles.

**Mary-Anne THOMAS:** I am sorry about that, Speaker. The member for Berwick, the Leader of the Liberal Party – these extreme right-wing voices exist in the party that the member for Berwick leads, and neither he nor the Shadow Minister for Equality stand up in defence of the voices of marginalised people, whose rights and dignity are under attack. I am very proud to be standing here next to the Minister for Equality, and I want to congratulate her for her steadfast solidarity always with members of our LGBTIQ+ community. This has been a defining characteristic of the member for Eltham, the Minister for Equality, in the entire time that I have known her, which is actually for quite some time now, which is really great.

Also, speaking on this motion, I need to discuss the health impacts of discrimination. When people are discriminated against, when they are attacked, when they are vilified, we now know, because we have the evidence to prove it, that it actually causes physical harm. It not only causes mental harm, it causes physical harm. When you live with stress, when you live in fear, it causes your body to change, and it brings on or makes you much more susceptible to a whole range of health conditions. This is physical health, and of course the mental health impacts of being, as I said, attacked, vilified and being used, really, as a political punching bag are profound and disturbing, and they should not be tolerated. It is really important that we stand with our LGBTIQ+ community, because it is the role of leaders to stand with the most marginal in our state, and we have always done that because these are the principles and foundations of our party. We have always been there and been a voice for those that have not always had a voice, and particularly so for our LGBTIQ+ community.

I was talking about the Minister for Equality. We had a fabulous time earlier this year at what is always a fabulous time, which is ChillOut, which is of course the largest ever celebration of queer country pride. That is how ChillOut likes to describe itself. It is a great event, and you know what, unlike the Liberal Party, the LGBTIQ+ community of Daylesford and surrounds is celebrated by the entire community. One of the things I absolutely love about ChillOut is how everyone is there. The CFA,

the SES, the primary school, the local police, you name it, everyone is there – and of course the Labor Party. The Labor Party is there every year and always has been. Rainbow Labor always has been.

The Liberals came once. They came before an election. It was embarrassing, because quite frankly, everyone says, ‘Hey, we’ve never seen you guys before and now you’ve rocked up because there’s an election on. Will we ever see you again?’ I knew then that the answer was going to be no, and in fact the answer is no, because they have not been seen since. I think it was when I was running in 2018. So they came in 2018 – never seen them since. That tells you about what a sham the idea of having a Shadow Minister for Equality is on the other side of the chamber. It is an absolute sham, and the community see through this. The community know. They can see a fake, and that is what the Liberals present, because if the Shadow Minister for Equality really believed in equality he would stand up against hateful speech coming from those in his own party. But he does not do this. He is completely absent.

Let us talk a little bit about rainbow libraries and the toolkit. You know what, I have had the great pleasure during my time as local member to meet a number of drag queens, and I can tell you they are a lot of fun. They are also very funny people, in my experience.

**Vicki Ward** interjected.

**Mary-Anne THOMAS:** The make-up is next level, there is no doubt about that. But let me say: do you know who else loves drag queens? Kids love drag queens, because they are fun and they are happy people. They want to be in libraries reading to kids because that is a fun thing to do. It is just about connecting. It is connecting with community. But there are conspiracy theorists, including in the Liberal Party, who, as the Minister for Environment has pointed out, somehow think that you can catch gay. Obviously, that is not true. And they question the motives of people who really just want to participate in community, be community members and be there supporting young people and families in libraries. Where is the harm? There is no harm. The only harm comes from the hate speech, which delivers real harm – physical harm and mental health harm.

We on this side of the place know that our libraries are great centres of community action and community connection. People love their libraries. They go to their libraries to access information, to participate in reading groups, to read the newspaper, to have some company and to just talk to the librarians, and libraries continue to adapt and respond to community needs. That is why we love librarians. If you want to meet people that are really committed to honouring everyone and treating everyone with equality and respect, you need to look no further than a librarian, because librarians are there to meet people where they are at, to support them with what they need and, as I said previously, to help build community.

The rainbow libraries toolkit, which has caused such consternation for some of those on the other side of the chamber, provides guidance for public library staff to ensure that library events, spaces and book collections can be more inclusive and better meet the needs of diverse rainbow communities across Victoria. The toolkit supports those libraries to ensure that all Victorians, regardless of their identity, have a place in our public libraries. In consultation with Switchboard Victoria, the toolkit was prepared in order to provide better information and training to support public library staff in welcoming LGBTIQ+ families into public libraries. It has been necessary that we do create these safe spaces because we have seen increasing vilification of LGBTIQ+ communities and the targeting of LGBTIQ+ inclusive events, including drag story time events for young people held at libraries.

I am embarrassed to say that this behaviour is condoned by people who are members of the Liberal Party and sit in this place and in the other place as members of that party. It really is shameful. It is absolutely shameful. The very worst thing that politicians can do is seek to divide communities. We have just had a federal election where we saw what happens when you seek to divide communities. We saw a federal election that sought to vilify certain members of our community and that deployed racist dog whistles in order to elicit votes. This kind of extreme right-wing action that seeks to divide

communities needs to be called out, and that is why I am proud to be speaking on this motion tonight. These extreme right-wing views – again, why would anyone want to pit one person against another? Why would they want to do that? Why try and make people feel excluded? Why try and make people feel that they are not worthy? Why would anyone want to do that? But there are people that do this, and they sit here, and they sit in the other place, and it needs to be condemned with all of our force and all of our might. What is even worse is when they have the hypocrisy to then proudly announce ‘We have a Shadow Minister for Equality.’ It is a Shadow Minister for Equality that will not stand up for equality. It is absolutely shameful.

As I said earlier, the important thing here is not what your job title is, it is whether you take any action, whether you live that responsibility. The member for Brighton could take a leaf from the Minister for Equality’s events. As I said, despite living in and representing an electorate that has one of the largest regional LGBTIQ+ communities, have I ever seen the member for Brighton in my electorate at any of those community events celebrating our diverse LGBTIQ+ community? The answer to that is no. I can see the newly elected member of Prahran is looking a bit shocked, and so she should be, because she also represents a community that has a large LGBTIQ+ community. She should be shocked to learn about the lack of action from the Shadow Minister for Equality, the member for Brighton, when it comes to standing up for LGBTIQ+ rights. It is completely unacceptable. As I said earlier, communities can see through this bluff and bluster. Communities can spot a charlatan a million miles away, and I suspect one of the reasons why the member for Brighton has never been seen in my electorate – I am not sure if he spends any time in Prahran – is no-one actually wants him there, because they know the truth, they absolutely know the truth.

Back to the rainbow libraries toolkit: as I have said, it is a support tool for public library staff. It is not a program. Really, this big fuss and carry-on and nonsense that we saw – why would you be out garnering signatures on a petition like this? Why would you even bother, seriously, other than to stoke fear of the other, fear of difference, rather than acceptance? Acceptance and love, right? I just cannot understand it. I simply cannot understand what motivates people who want to pit one person against another. Also, I cannot understand people who are completely obsessed with people’s sexual identities. I mean, it is a bit odd, right?

We have the great honour and privilege of living in one of the best countries in the world, one of the most privileged countries in the world. We live a privileged life here, and then what disturbs me is when people want to use other people to cause resentment, when they try and pit certain people against each other to build resentment in our community and try and stoke this kind of fear and hate that somehow someone else is getting something that they are not. I think we see this in the LGBTIQ+ community in the way that conservatives seek to weaponise that community for political gain. We see it also in the way in which some members of the Liberal Party – I will say some, not all, but a sizeable number – use our First Nations people in the same way. They stoke racism to win votes. That is disgraceful. It is absolutely disgraceful, shameful behaviour. They use homophobia to try and harvest votes. Why work to diminish all humanity in this way? Because that is what they are doing. That is diminishing humanity. We should be building people up. We should take our roles as leaders in order to support people, to take people on a journey with us, to be open to difference and to be open to meeting people of different backgrounds, different sexualities, different experiences and different identities. We are enriched by the opportunity to meet and grow in this way. That is why the rainbow toolkit is so important. It is doing a very, very simple thing. It is working to support our libraries to be more supportive and inclusive of our LGBTIQ+ community members and rainbow families. As I said earlier, I know our librarians are already pretty good at this. But for reasons that I cannot quite fathom, other than rank political opportunism, those on the other side seek, as I said, to weaponise this issue. When they do it to scapegoat LGBTIQ+ members –

**Kat Thephanous** interjected.

**Mary-Anne THOMAS:** Thank you, member for Northcote – another member in this place who is proud to represent a community that has a large proportion of LGBTIQ+ members in it. The member

is very proud of that fact, I know. But to scapegoat these community members for rank political gain is disgraceful. It actually makes me really, really angry, but more than that, it makes me sad because – again I will come back to a point that I have made previously – our role as leaders is to lift people up, to bring people together and to unite people through difference, right? We should be the peacemakers, and we should celebrate diversity rather than seeking to exclude people based on their sexuality or their identity. As the Minister for Health, I am very proud of the work that our government does. Of course we have an LGBTIQ+ advisory committee, which helps me make sure that we have health services that are responsive to the needs of our LGBTIQ+ community and that we meet the needs of that community.

I might say too, while I am on my feet discussing these matters, that it has been a real privilege and honour to meet the families and the clinicians that work at the Royal Children's Hospital gender clinic. I have met families there who have shared with me their stories, their journeys and some of the very real challenges that they have experienced with their gender-diverse children, and they have been unanimous in sharing with me their regard for the clinicians at the Royal Children's. It is a multidisciplinary clinic at the Children's, with highly experienced, compassionate and sensitive clinicians who work one on one with kids to make sure that we are providing them with the very best care.

I might point out too that this is another thing that the Shadow Minister for Equality has never done. He has never raised with me the ongoing attacks on that clinic by two members in particular in the other place, Mrs Deeming and Mrs McArthur, who are relentless critics of that specialist work that is delivered. They seek to shame the children, shame the parents and vilify them. Where is the Shadow Minister for Equality when this happens? He is nowhere to be seen; there is not a peep and not a word from him. In fact I am trying to think – and I am sure the actual minister will be able to tell us – whether the Shadow Minister for Equality has done anything. Seriously, has he done anything other than ignore?

**Vicki Ward** interjected.

**Mary-Anne THOMAS:** He remains in the shadows; indeed he does. Has he done a single thing in support of our LGBTIQ+ community? No. I mean, he may have gone to Pride. I could not get there this year. He may have been there; I am not sure. But you know what, it is very easy to join a big march with a whole lot of Victorians. That is easy. The real work is in developing policy, standing up for what matters, calling out hatred and vilification when you see it and moving in your own party to discipline those who seek, as I have said, to scapegoat our LGBTIQ+ community members and to use them for rank political purposes. I cannot understand why anyone would want to belong to a party that seeks to win votes off the back of hatred, but that is what the Liberal Party does, I am afraid to say. I am afraid to say that, but I am also delighted to say that the Australian people rejected that type of politics only 10 or 11 days ago in the federal election, and they rejected it overwhelmingly. That is why I said the Liberal Party is totally out of step with mainstream Australia when it comes to these issues.

*Members interjecting.*

**Mary-Anne THOMAS:** I am going to take up some interjections. I am hearing, 'Oh, but we introduced marriage equality.' But I will tell you what, where is your Shadow Minister for Equality when it comes to calling out the vilification of our LGBTIQ+ community and the ridiculous petitions to try and ban the rainbow toolkit, making a story out of nothing for rank political purposes? I feel like I have said that about 17 times now, but it is the truth, so I have to just keep repeating it. I know that there are many others on this side of the chamber who really look forward to getting up on their feet and making a contribution on this very important issue. But on this side of the house our values are clear. We have clear eyes on these issues, because it comes from a belief and a value system that is that everyone deserves our respect, that we should all live free to be who we are, free to love who we want, but also to be celebrated for who we are, to be respected, to be cared for, to be loved and to not

face discrimination, because discrimination diminishes us all. We will always stand by these abiding values.

I will finish by reflecting on my role as Minister for Health and the absolute honour and privilege it is to be able to work with organisations of the calibre of Thorne Harbour that have worked to support the health and wellbeing of our LGBTIQ+ community in the face of discrimination and of vilification. We all remember some very dark days in the history of LGBTIQ rights here in Victoria. I know that there are others who will have more to add on this, but I commend this motion to the house.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS** (Oakleigh – Minister for Environment, Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events, Minister for Outdoor Recreation) (17:39): It is a pleasure to follow the mover of the motion, with the eloquence expressed by the Minister for Health in her comments. There are a couple of things. One is that not only does this petition offend common decency in terms of the subject matter, but the fact that you would want to put pressure from Spring Street on to local communities to cancel or cease a story time just because it happens to be rainbow queer story time is a problem already. The second problem here – and I am not sure the Libs know this – is this is censorship. From the party that talks against censorship, this is censorship. They are reaching from Spring Street right out to communities across Victoria saying, ‘You will not tell stories in public libraries that we don’t agree with.’ That is censorship.

**John Mullahy** interjected.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS**: Exactly. As the member for Glen Waverley said, this is Monash council’s story all over again. When I first heard this I thought, ‘They’ve got to be kidding.’ I thought I had missed something and we were compelling parents to take their children to drag story time, because there is no other way you would be against this, right? Then I found out that no, we are not compelling them. This is how ridiculous it is. People have a choice to take their children to any story time, and it happens to be, on this occasion, rainbow story time. I would be against the state of Victoria compelling people to take their kids there. I thought that they must be moving a motion because we were compelling them. No, we are not compelling anyone to do anything, mate. Sorry, Speaker. You are my mate, but I am not calling you mate in this forum.

**The SPEAKER**: I hope you are not reflecting on the Chair, Minister.

**Steve DIMOPOULOS**: No, not at all, Speaker. So not only is it against common decency and is fearmongering, it is actually against traditional Liberal Party values – Liberal Party: no censorship. Stop censoring what people want to do in public libraries. The modern Liberal Party is censoring Victorians. You cannot walk into a library and choose what you hear. No, the Liberal Party says, ‘You must hear what we want you to hear.’ If I fill in the counterfactual here, you must hear stories about mum, dad and two kids – heteronormative stories – because that is effectively what they are saying. You cannot hear any story that is different. It is so offensive; it is beyond belief.

But you know what, there are a bunch of stories here on a bunch of lived experience by people in Victoria who have suffered trauma. Some have died by suicide. Too many, in fact, have died by suicide. People have lived through trauma and are still living through trauma, and often it is these kinds of conversations that bring that about. It is not just a direct physical attack, it is the emotional and mental anguish, as the Minister for Health was talking about – what it does to a queer person when they are talked about in those terms. Stop talking about us in those terms. It is not your business. It is not your business, it is not decent and it is not right, so stop doing it. If you are occupying time in the Parliament of Victoria to put up ridiculous petitions like this, you are causing harm and not even realising it – you probably are realising it. But you are causing harm. But I do not expect anything different from the Liberal–National Party, and I have got proof points for that.

In 2015 this good government, the Labor government of Victoria, set about to address an inequality in adoption. We wanted to make it equal so that same-sex couples could adopt as well. Do you know what the Liberal Party did? They squibbed it at the very end. They said, ‘We will only vote for this

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bill if you allow adoption agencies to discriminate' – so 'We won't discriminate, but we'll allow them to discriminate.' I am sorry, but adoption is not an agency-specific responsibility; it is a state government responsibility. You need to mandate one way or the other, mate. You cannot choose whether somebody discriminates. You should outlaw it completely. So they squibbed that. We got it through, thankfully, but they squibbed it.

In 2016 – something really, really harmless, even for the most homophobic person; this was pre marriage equality: 'Can we register same-sex relationships so they have a sense of formality and recognition by the state?' I thought that was a really beautiful idea by this beautiful government here: 'Let's go and register same-sex relationships.' My partner and I did it at Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria. But the Liberal–National Party, after much tortuous thinking, said, 'We just can't commit. We can't commit. We're going to call a conscience vote.' A conscience vote – not even marriage equality; that was a registration process. I mean, pets had more rights at that stage. Pets get registered, for God's sake. But we wanted something as a state government. We cannot change the Marriage Act 1961, but we could do something. No, they would not even do that. They said, 'No, no, we can't bring ourselves to do that – conscience vote.' And a bunch of them did not vote for it, a bunch abstained.

There is a bunch of stuff in between but in 2021 with the Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Bill 2020, they squibbed that at the end as well. They wanted more time for consultation. What do you need more time for consultation about when people are being told that their humanity is wrong and that it is lawful to go and spend resources on priests and psychologists in a heavy-handed manner to try and change people? Do we try and change straight people? No. This is outrageous. And they just said, 'No, no, we can't quite bring ourselves to do that. Let's do more consultation.' So let us talk more about gay people – about them, not with them.

Then again in that same year there was the Equal Opportunity (Religious Exceptions) Amendment Bill 2021. Government-funded organisations and non-government-funded organisations, including some schools, could discriminate on who they hire based on their sexuality. But this is 2021, not 1821. And they said, 'No, no, sorry – freedom of expression.' Where is their freedom of expression when it comes to matters about the Jewish community in Israel? It is good that they do not have it, because – well, they squibbed that one too, and I will get to that in a moment. But fundamentally you use 'freedom of expression' when you do not care enough about the group you want to protect. That is what happens. You use freedom of expression for that. There is a place for freedom of expression in a democracy, absolutely, but not at the harm of others.

Getting to freedom of expression in the last couple of minutes I have, we had the Justice Legislation Amendment (Anti-vilification and Social Cohesion) Bill 2024, or the 'anti-vilification bill' for short. They squibbed that as well. And how did they squib that? They voted against the bill in the upper house, and the reason they voted against the bill in the upper house was because this government rightly asked how you assess whether someone has been vilified or discriminated. How? You assess it by the test that that person who feels vilified puts on you, whether it be a queer person or whether it be someone of a different colour or a different faith. They said, 'No, no, no, it has got to be a reasonable person test – an ordinary person.' How can someone who is not of Greek heritage, who is not gay, who is not Aboriginal or who is not disabled judge whether that person or that group with those attributes has been vilified? And they said, 'No, we want a reasonable person test.' There is nothing reasonable about it.

The point about all of this is that it is not one occasion, it is not two occasions, it is not three occasions and it is not four occasions. On every single occasion the Liberal–National parties in the state Parliament of Victoria have had a chance to take one step forward for the protection of our humanity as queer people, they have not taken it. They have form. I am not saying every single one of them is homophobic, but as a culture, as a party, they are absolutely homophobic. I say that as a member of Parliament, I say that as a minister and I say that as a gay man. They are absolutely, as a culture, as a party, homophobic, and this government will not stand for it. We have never stood for it because our

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community, in all their humanity, all Victorians, are worth far more than for us to play games with them.

**Bridget Vallence:** On a point of order, Speaker, I feel that the member on his feet was actually personally reflecting on members on this side, including me. I personally take offence, and I ask you to ask him to withdraw.

**The SPEAKER:** The minister on his feet did not refer to any particular member of Parliament. I will take it up, but I do not think there is a reason to withdraw.

**Bridget Vallence:** On a further point of order, Speaker, the minister was seeking to disparage members personally. I am in the chamber. He sought to disparage members. I took personal offence to that, and I would ask you to ask him to withdraw.

**The SPEAKER:** I understand, member for Evelyn. He did not refer to you directly.

**Vicki Ward:** On the point of order, Speaker, I would like it noted that the minister did say ‘not all’ when he was talking about the culture of the Liberal Party.

**The SPEAKER:** Order! There are standing orders in relation to this matter. The member for Evelyn understands the standing orders. The minister did not reflect on or mention any particular member of Parliament. It was in the course of the debate that he referred to members more broadly. That is not a reason for withdrawal.

**Vicki WARD** (Eltham – Minister for Emergency Services, Minister for Natural Disaster Recovery, Minister for Equality) (17:51): I rise to absolutely support the motion put forward by the Minister for Health, because in this place we do need to continue to demonstrate that, as the minister said, equality is not negotiable in this state under this government. We will absolutely stand with all Victorians. We are not going to stand by and allow discrimination, we are not going to stand by and allow vilification and we are not going to stand by and allow exclusion, because that is not the culture of the Labor Party. The Labor Party has always been about the collective. It has always been about inclusion, and it has always been about making sure people are not left behind. That is at the core of who we are as a labour movement. We will continue to stand in those truths, and we will continue to stand up for people.

I am not going to go as far back into history as the Minister for Environment did, but I do want to go back two years. Two years ago to this very day I was out the front of Eltham library with the local mayor, with local councillors, with members of different sporting clubs, including basketball – the Eltham Wildcats. I was there with community members, and we put forward, with coloured chalk, rainbows, rainbow butterflies and signs with messages of love and support. We had to do that because the next day drag story time had been scheduled – and, oh, the horror to think that that could actually happen in a library. My community is very happy to have drag queens. We recognise the fun that is drag queens, and so do kids. Kids love the colour and the movement. They love the sparkles. They love the exaggeration. They love the joy, the humour and the naughtiness that drag queens bring. There are a lot of people across Victoria, adults, who like the adult version too. They enjoy it a lot. In fact I reckon I could say every one of us in this place has had a local community group that has benefited from the work of a drag queen who has come along and done a fundraiser for drag bingo or a whole bunch of drag trivia.

Back to my library in Eltham, I want to do a shout-out to Frock Hudson for turning up and for continuing to read, in her full glory, books to children in Eltham while the rainbow community angels, fantastic people, spread their wings and shielded them from the hate – from those bigots who came into my community and tried to shut us down. Well, we were not shut down. But I will tell you what was really appalling. It was not just the bigots coming in, it was the vitriol and the vilification that was put on not just the queer community but on our librarians, on people in the community and on council workers who picked up the phone while people yelled and screamed and ranted and threatened down

the phone because of how outraged they were that an adult playing dress-ups would dare to read a story to children whose parents had voluntarily brought them there.

**A member** interjected.

**Vicki WARD:** Exactly – and there were personal threats to councillors. So in light of this terrible behaviour, librarians wanted to work out how we can keep our libraries safe. How can we create inclusive environments so that every person, no matter who they are, feels welcome and safe when they come to a library? Libraries are absolutely the heart of communities.

Every single person in a community is touched by a local library at some point in their lives, and our librarians are absolutely fantastic people and to be commended for the leadership that they show when it comes to inclusion. They wanted not just to have a space that could be inclusive and safe but also to know how to deal with violent bigots, with aggressive bigots, with rude bigots, with threatening bigots. Together with the department and with others, they created what became the library toolkit, a resource for libraries to use to create a safe space both for librarians as well as for the queer community. I do not know in what rational world we have people who say, ‘That’s outrageous! How dare they create a safe space. How dare they create something that people might want to come along to and feel comfortable and safe in. How dare we have people who want to have safe libraries for every person that comes in.’ But that is exactly what we have seen in the other chamber. We have seen a petition supported and debated by the opposition to shut down a resource, to shut down a toolkit. It is unfathomable, it is absolutely unfathomable, and I do not know how we get to this point, I really do not.

What I also really do not understand is: if you want to get rid of the rainbow libraries resource kit, then does that mean that you also want to get rid of the librarians who want this resource? How much do you shut down? How much of Donald Trump’s divisive politics do those opposite actually want to embrace? Because that is what this is. We look in horror at what we see in the United States, and we see the same behaviour being exhibited here. When we are talking about the queer community, we are talking about at least 11 per cent of adults in this state, at a minimum – that is those who self-identify in the statistics. But we also know that there is research that tells us for those who are under 25 it is anywhere between 17 and 20 per cent, so it could be one in five of those young people. And do you know who does not support conservatives – young people. And do you know why – because they do not support young people. If you are talking about one-in-five young people being queer, that means pretty much every young person in this state has got a mate, a sibling, a cousin who is queer. And guess what, they do not want to see them vilified, they want to see them included, and they do not want to see them used as collateral damage.

We have seen research that has been commissioned by Equality Australia, which has shown that 86 per cent of Australians think it is outrageous that transgender issues and particularly transgender kids are politicised, that their journey towards being who they are is politicised, is used as divisive and hateful politics for political gain. Australians actually do not like this, and we saw that two weeks ago at the federal election. This is not the kind of country that Australians want to live in, and it is certainly not the place that Victorians want to live in. They do not want this divisive, nasty, horrendous, damaging politics – the politics of hurt, the politics of harm, rather than the politics of love, care and inclusion. This is a dangerous game those opposite play, it really is.

That is why it is so disappointing that despite the fact that in May last year Brad Battin released a statement that said ‘A Liberal Party I lead will never tolerate hateful and divisive rhetoric.’ That is a great ambition; I am struggling to see how it has actually been manifested. I am struggling to see how he has actually kept to his word, particularly when he has rewarded and elevated a member of his team – in fact he has encouraged a higher profile of a member of his team – who has exhibited divisive and hurtful behaviour with a shadow ministry position. This is absolutely outrageous. To promote people in your party who have shown divisive, harmful, hurtful behaviour is kind of contradictory to saying that you want to promote inclusion in communities and that you will never tolerate hateful and

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divisive rhetoric. That means hateful and divisive rhetoric towards everybody, not just a couple of people and not just the people over here – all people, and that includes those in our LGBTIQ+ communities. We stand with our communities. We have invested significantly through this government, and we will continue to do so. We are the only state with a commissioner for LGBTIQ+ communities. We are the only state with a Minister for Equality, and we will continue to stand up for this community.

**Nick STAIKOS** (Bentleigh – Minister for Consumer Affairs, Minister for Local Government) (18:01): I rise to make a contribution to this motion, and I would like to begin by saying that as the Minister for Local Government, a relatively new Minister for Local Government, I spend a lot of time dealing with issues of governance, I spend a lot of time dealing with council rates and I spend a lot of time dealing with municipal waste charges. But what gives the local government portfolio a bit of colour are our public libraries – our 293 public libraries and our 24 mobile libraries. These libraries are community spaces and they are welcoming spaces.

Back in 2006 Public Libraries Victoria conducted a public library census, as they always do. What they found back in 2006 was that only 47 per cent of library users agreed that libraries were a hub for community activities and connections, but more recently in 2022 the census conducted by Public Libraries Victoria found that that figure grew to 82 per cent. So our libraries are valued. The census in 2022 also found that 92 per cent of visitors felt safe at their local library and 88 per cent of visitors felt that the library welcomed people from all walks of life. Libraries are places for everyone. In a cost-of-living crisis libraries are one of the few places you can take your kids. Libraries are places where you can bridge the digital divide. They are places where library users can access digital government services. In fact in the 2022 library census 56 per cent said that they use the library to get information about government services, 64 per cent said that they can find out what is going on in the community and 72 per cent indicated that they feel better about themselves at their local library. Libraries are places of information. Libraries are places of knowledge. Libraries are places of connection. They are safe spaces.

I, as the Minister for Local Government and as the minister responsible for our 293 public libraries, will not allow those opposite to bring their hate into our public libraries. Those opposite may organise hateful rallies and then feign surprise when Nazis turn up to them, but what I say is this, and I have this message for them: they should stay away. They should not get their hands on our public libraries. They should not bring their hate into our public libraries. I have always known that as far as those opposite are concerned, there is not a minority group in this state that they are not willing to scapegoat for their own political expediency. That is the truth about the Liberal Party. The only minority group that the Liberal Party actually supports is the Liberal Party. That is the only minority group that the Liberal Party supports.

We take a different approach. My opposite number in the other place, Mrs McArthur, the Shadow Minister for Local Government, is concerned about rainbow toolkits. Well, these toolkits were put together by Public Libraries Victoria in consultation with the government. I acknowledge Angela Savage, the CEO of Public Libraries Victoria, and her amazing team for the work that they do for all of our public libraries and our mobile libraries and the work they do in partnership with local and state government. We have these rainbow toolkits for the same reason that we have Safe Schools. It is to ensure that we have resources to make sure that our public libraries, like our schools, are safe spaces for people who are part of the LGBTQ+ community. That is all this is. I can assure Mrs McArthur that if she walks in through the front door of any of our 293 public libraries, nobody is going to offer her a rainbow toolkit. It is a resource for our librarians.

Like the Minister for Equality, who spoke just before me, I am also fed up with the intimidation that is shown towards our councillors, our council staff and especially our public librarians. The Liberal Party should be standing up for our librarians, not organising such hateful petitions and hateful rallies. This is 2025. They need to get the message that this rhetoric is not working for them, that Victorians value being part of an inclusive society. We know that of Victorians on this side of the house. That

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side of the house campaigns like it is 1959. They are stuck in a time that has since gone by, on that side of the house.

I am proud of the support that our government gives to our libraries to make sure that they are always safe spaces, that they are always inclusive spaces, and I will run through some of that support. This government in 2024–25 has provided a total of \$53.3 million to public library services in Victoria, and that includes \$48.2 million in recurrent funding, \$1.1 million through the Premiers' Reading Challenge book list and also \$4 million through the Living Libraries infrastructure program, and I am very much looking forward to announcing the recipients of those infrastructure grants over the next few weeks. It is because we value our public libraries. They are sacrosanct. They are safe spaces. So I say to the Liberal Party: get your hands off these public libraries. Do not bring your hate into our public libraries. It is not welcome.

We are in this global cost-of-living crisis and those opposite are concerned about rainbow library toolkits. They are concerned about resources for our public librarians to ensure that we make sure that our public libraries are inclusive spaces for everyone. Why so much hate? As community leaders we should be ensuring that we do everything to maintain an inclusive society, a society that embraces multiculturalism, that embraces diversity and that also ensures that we have a safe society and a safe community and safe public spaces for LGBTQ Victorians. This is what we value on this side of the house and this is what we have done on this side of the house. I am absolutely fed up – fed up – with the activities of those opposite when it comes to these sorts of matters. I am fed up with those opposite attending citizenship ceremonies and taking their selfies and then the next day organising rallies where very hateful people turn up. I am fed up with those opposite marching in the Pride march in St Kilda, going on Joy FM saying one thing and going on 3AW saying something else. I am fed up with all of this, and the Victorian community sees through all of this. That is why they have nearly got minority party status at a federal level. That is why they suffered that historic defeat and are going to be in such low numbers in Canberra.

The LGBTQ+ community know that they have an ally in this government, and I as Minister for Local Government will always ensure that our public libraries are sacrosanct, that they are safe spaces; that they are inclusive spaces; that they are places of knowledge, of imagination, of assistance and of support to our community; and that they remain safe spaces for all communities, including our LGBTQI brothers and sisters.

**Paul EDBROOKE** (Frankston) (18:10): It is an absolute pleasure to rise on this motion tonight. I am a bit of a duffer; I have forgotten my glasses, but I do not need to read notes for this one. I do not know who said it, but someone very smart said 'Privilege is when you can afford to sit back and watch other people's rights be trampled', and that is what we are seeing here. This is an impingement on people's human rights – we will get into that in a second – and this is an argument about community safety. It really is an argument about community safety, because the libraries that we are talking about in this motion were safe. They were happy. There were families there. They were enjoying people dressing up, sharing stories, acting an art form. It was the people that put their names on this petition and started this petition that actually made those libraries unsafe, and that is an absolute blight on that movement. To know that there are people, as the minister who spoke before me said, on one hand on Joy FM or going to the Pride march saying one thing and then being on 3AW and taking a harder line – that is the very essence of manipulation. When your actions do not actually meet what you are saying, that is the definition of manipulation.

I was so saddened as a former teacher to see people up in arms once again over something that is very, very simple and very, very inoffensive. People being obsessed with other people's sexuality, people being obsessed with other people's gender, people being obsessed with other people's art forms – yes, it is a little bit weird when it gets to the point where they are obsessed with toilets. Seriously, we have got people out the front protesting about bloody toilets. It is pretty simple, really. What we are talking about here as far as the petition goes I find highly offensive.

I will be very open with people, and people on this side of the house know that I could tell you every single performer on seasons 1 to 12 of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. I have read the book on RuPaul. I think the guy is an absolute business genius. What he did, against all odds, is pretty crazy. It is pretty impressive. I have met Karen from Finance, one of my favourite drag queens. I have met Reuben Kaye, who does a very, very clever cabaret. Reuben Kaye is also my style queen, just so you know, this side of the house. I do not find that offensive at all – and the people in these audiences, they are laughing. The people that are not laughing are the people that sit at home, get on their computer, get on social media and think, ‘What can I hate tonight?’

I can tell you now I am sure I might be stepping on the boundaries that those opposite find so offensive, because when I was a teacher I used to dress up to read books. Now, I am not saying I dressed up as a princess or a fairy, but there are many people who dress up as mermaids or princesses or fairies. Does it matter whether they are male or female? Does it matter if they are men or women? They are entertaining. Anyway, I have got to say, the primary school book weeks, I put a lot of work into them as a teacher – a lot of work, a lot of tailoring, a lot of hot glue guns – as did some of the parents here. I know my kids, if they heard me speaking now, would probably be nodding along and saying, ‘Yes, you did – a little bit too much, to the point where we actually wondered whether you were still straight, Dad.’ But I loved that. And the best thing about it was that I could enter a room of children and parents and the school community and we could have a great, entertaining time and everyone could feel safe. People are learning, people are enjoying reading, and all of a sudden you see kids reading who you have been struggling to get to read a comic book because that is all they will invest in. You would say to the parents, ‘Look, if you can just get them to read one page of a comic book and they can learn to read from left to right, they can learn some of the phonics, of course, when they’re reading, but also about shapes and things like that and where to write on the lines, we’ve got a foundation to grow from.’ But to see these kids in these drag library sessions inspired, looking at books – they are in a library, a room full of books; that is what our kids need. If you cannot read, you cannot do anything else. If you want to do mathematics, you cannot do that without reading. Reading is the number one issue for any educator. It is the number one issue, especially when kids are that young. You will do anything to get them to open a book and start reading and learning, and I can see you nodding your head, Deputy Speaker.

I will finish there on the community safety side of things. No, no – do not have a heart attack, Whip; I have got more to say. I could be up here for another 20 minutes, because this is a community safety issue. The essence of what I have been saying is that the only people making libraries unsafe are the people that are protesting. Can you imagine how unsafe those kids feel? They do not feel unsafe because there is a person who identifies as male in a dress acting like a fairy. It is pretty innocuous stuff. It is pretty funny; it is humorous. I am sure a whole kind of act goes with it. But the protestors made it unsafe – not that person, who the kids love seeing. At the end of the day you can tell that kids love being there.

The human rights issue is what really drives me crazy about this. We continually see people bringing these issues to this Parliament, and they do not seem to have read the United Nations charter of human rights. Whether it is their faith, just the way they were brought up and their general beliefs or maybe the stereotypes that they carried with them from the 1920s, there are things that we just do not appreciate in this state and will not support. The United Nations has actually drawn up a charter that includes rights for these people, and I just want to read a little bit from it. Under the core legal obligations of states to protect LGBTI people:

Protecting LGBTI people from violence and discrimination does not require a new set of human rights laws or standards. States are already legally required to safeguard the human rights of LGBTI people under international human rights law, in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights treaties.

The core legal obligations of States with respect to protecting the human rights of LGBTI people include obligations to:

- *Protect* LGBTI people from violence
- *Prevent* the torture and ill treatment of LGBTI people
- *Repeal* laws criminalizing consensual same sex relations and transgender people
- *Prohibit* and address discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and sex characteristics
- *Safeguard* freedoms of expression –

much like a drag queen at a library –

association and peaceful assembly for LGBTI people

It is no wonder that there are people on the other side of the chamber who shift in their seats very, very uncomfortably at the rhetoric coming out of their colleagues' mouths that they probably do not agree with. But because of how politics works – because of the factional nature of their political party – they cannot say anything. It is going to be very, very interesting in the future to see whoever leads that party actually take a stand and be on the side of their community instead of answering to backbench apparatchiks who are the powerbrokers of that party, who have that 1920s-esque sense of themselves and of what a community should be because they were just brought up like that or because they believe that.

The good news is things have moved on. As I said at the start of this contribution, privilege is when you can afford to sit back and trample on other people's human rights, and that is actually what has been happening here. Those people who protested in those libraries or in those library forecourts against innocent people providing entertainment to kids and helping kids learn to read reduced community safety. They impinged on people's human rights, and they certainly did trample on other people's rights. It is the responsibility of all of us, not just on this side of the chamber, and without any political overlay, to stand up for everyone in our community, according to the UN charter of human rights that I just read out, because this is a human rights issue. Anyone that does not should stand condemned, they really should. I think if you stand back and obsess a little bit less about toilets and who uses toilets, if you stand back and stop wasting your time obsessed with things like someone who dresses up and entertains children at a library, you will find that you might miss less of what happens, some really, really important things in our community that need your action, need your time and need you to focus on them for your community, because that is what your community deserves. You are a community representative. I commend this motion.

**Michaela SETTLE** (Eureka) (18:20): I am pleased to rise to speak on this motion:

That this house condemns the Shadow Minister for Equality for allowing his shadow colleagues to sponsor a petition attacking LGBTIQ+ people and calling for the cessation of the rainbow libraries toolkit.

I would like to take the house back to the 1970s. My family moved from Canberra to Castlemaine in the 70s, and Castlemaine then was a small country town. Very quickly I befriended a young man called Michael, and I am delighted to say that Michael remains quite literally my best friend in the world. We followed around the world together, and he now lives in Ballarat. A good percentage of our time in those days in the 70s was running in fear for Michael. Michael is very proudly gay, though of course in the 70s he was not out as a teenager, but he was pursued relentlessly by others who perhaps had decided before he had even entirely decided that he was gay. I bring this up because to me this motion speaks to something that is so incredibly important. The toolkit that we are discussing is really about making people feel comfortable, safe and included, and I know too well from those years with Michael in Castlemaine what it was to fear – to live in fear – and to not be included in society. When the rainbow libraries toolkit was designed, it was just a lovely moment, the thought that perhaps if a young Michael had been able to walk into a space and feel that acceptance and that inclusion, how different his childhood would be.

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We often talk about how far we have got in the LGBTQI+ movement. I worked at Mardi Gras in the 1980s, and it was a very different world then. But some days one has to sit back and reflect. For all of the steps forward we have taken, there are these hideous steps backwards. When people choose to demonise the LGBTI community through methods like this petition against the toolkit – I know that I had a constituent come to me, and I was really pleased because he said, ‘Look, I’m getting all of this stuff’ from Mrs McArthur in the other place and all sorts of claims about the toolkit, and he asked me if I could explain to him how the toolkit worked. It was awful this sort of incendiary line that he had been fed. He said to me, ‘You know, they’re saying that librarians will be asking five-year-olds how they identify,’ and I do not think for a second any librarian is doing that or indeed that that is a part of the toolkit. To put that sort of rubbish out there that people start to believe and that a constituent actually has to make a meeting to come and see me to find out what the truth is – I think it is abhorrent that those on the other side are comfortable to feed this disinformation into the community solely so that they can kick down, frankly, on some of the more vulnerable in our community.

But as we progress forward, I got an email on Monday – and I know that my good colleague from Wendouree will have received the same – from a wonderful organisation and a wonderful woman that we know well, Ange Elson, who runs an organisation called Tiny Pride. We are very, very proud of our Ballarat community. It is a really strong community with some fantastic advocates, right through to the wonderful coffee mornings where people can come together and feel included. But when Ange wrote to us on Monday, it was pretty tough to read. I will give you a couple of lines from it:

The past six months have been gruelling for the LGBTIQ+ community and the people that love us here in Ballarat. It’s fair to say that this stems from a feeling of watching our rights come under unprecedented attack and with that, a feeling of being less safe.

She goes on to tell us about a wide independent survey showing for the first time that people feeling safe to come out at work have decreased as a percentage of the community. For me that is absolutely heartbreaking. I have fought for 40, 50 years for LGBTQI rights, and to have them being wound back or the sense of the community feeling, for the first time in a long time, less safe is just appalling. I think those on the other side should be utterly ashamed that they stand by having a petition sent out with all sorts of rubbish in it about what the toolkit looks like solely to demonise people. They should be incredibly ashamed. They like to, as everyone says, speak out of two sides of their mouths. They come along to Pride marches and pretend that they are there for the community, yet we know that they are running this sort of line to try and unsettle them. I do not know where the member for Brighton stands, but either way you cut it, either they are a divided party room and they have no unity of opinion, or he is speaking from both sides of his mouth. I suspect it is a unity issue, because I have spoken to the member for Brighton in the past. But they need to have a long, hard look at themselves and where they stand and create a unified voice. Ange Elson sent this email not just to the member for Wendouree and me but to all of the allies in Ballarat. She was putting forth a suggestion. In fact she said:

We therefore warmly encourage you, as organisations committed to inclusion and wellbeing, to take a moment to check in with the LGBTIQ+ members of your teams, clients, and communities.

For the community in Ballarat to have to come to us and ask us to show more support, more loudly for them is just tragic. It is because of things like these petitions and this demonising that goes on endlessly from the other side.

As I said, I suspect it is more of a unity issue. I just cannot get a handle on the opposition’s position on anything. Just yesterday we heard the member for Brighton talking about how our Premier and our Treasurer were from the regions. We are incredibly proud of that. But they like to call us out-of-towners. Well, these out-of-towners have got a place in this place. And then they speak on the other side of their mouths and try and tell us that they represent regional people. There has got to be some sort of position from them. They have got to start taking a position on whether they support the LGBTQI community, and that requires that all of their members of this place show that same support. It is time for some strength to be shown by the Leader of the Opposition to call these groups in. But

of course we know why he will not do that. We know how he got what he got – it was on those numbers. I think those on the other side really need to have a long, hard think.

I spent some time on election day on a booth in Hawke, and we were surrounded by members of the Brethren church – not only do they not vote, but certainly the reason they are supporting those on the other side is because they believe that they will support their agenda, which is about excluding and demonising our LGBTIQ community. If they send the Brethren along in 2026, I will be making sure that every person on that polling booth knows their position LGBTIQ rights. If you get into bed with a dog, you get fleas. That is what those on the other side have done. If they are happy to get into bed with people with dreadful, exclusionary positions, then they are going to get fleas. The community of Victoria will know, and things like this objection to the rainbow toolkit will be remembered by all of our community and our young people.

**Sitting suspended 6:30 pm until 7:31 pm.**

**Nina TAYLOR** (Albert Park) (19:31): I am certainly very happy to speak on this motion even though there is, can I say, a very sad element to the motion insofar as it concerns the relevant petition with regard to the rainbow libraries toolkits. There is a really important point in that, and one that I want to draw out as sort of a central theme that I think is actually critical when we have this discussion, and that is that I think within the opposition the left hand is talking to the right hand. The left and the right hand must know exactly what is going on, but the thing is, you have to be consistent everywhere. You cannot just say, ‘Right, I will turn up,’ and, say, march in the Pride march – I will speak about the Pride march soon – but then on another day or in another audience have a completely different frame which has a discriminatory element, because people are going to know. They are going to find out, aren’t they? They are going to know. Thinking that they will not know, or they will not acknowledge or they will not discern this disparity, this rather disturbing contradiction, if you like – I cannot even say it is naive; I think it must be known – is like, what can we get away with? Am I being too blunt? I do not think so, because in the modern world we have social media 24/7, everything and everywhere we go. We know – and this is probably one of the challenges of being an MP more broadly – that just about everything we do is recorded in one way or another. But then again, should it matter whether it is recorded or not? I think within our own conscience, individually as MPs, it is knowing whether I am doing my absolute best to ensure everyone who I engage with is treated fairly, is honoured and is allowed to be loved just as they are, wherever they are.

I think that is probably what is so disturbing and apparent about the petition that is being spoken about in this motion; it really reflects the dreadful, dreadful inconsistency. And to think that the LGBTIQ+ community would not notice – and not only that but allies of the LGBTIQ+ community would not notice – because I would like to think that whether you are a member of the LGBTIQ+ community or you are an ally, you are going to be deeply disturbed by this dreadful inconsistency. But of course the persons most hurt are members of the LGBTIQ+ community. As was asked earlier: why do you want to cause this upset and harm? And it is not only, as I think Minister Dimopoulos was saying, physical harm – of course that is an issue of itself; violence is never okay – but it is the emotional harm and the scars that may or may not heal. I do not think any of us here in this chamber would want to be complicit in any way in that picture, so to speak. Hence the imperative for action with mechanisms such as the rainbow library toolkits to provide a constructive and considered and sensitive way of ensuring that our libraries are safe places for everyone.

I think also with the recent federal election we could see how the culture wars really did not play out at all well, and nor should they. It is a relief to know that basic human decency has triumphed in that space. I was reflecting even recently that when I doorknock, I can honestly say that these fringe culture war elements just do not come up on the doors. Funnily enough, people are talking about other things that matter to them in their daily lives. They might talk about cost-of-living issues. There might be a matter with the local school. There might be a matter with a bus that they want to go to a certain spot – whatever it is, I honestly can say it is never about the fringe culture war that seems to be fostered perpetually by elements of the opposition parties.

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If the federal election was not enough, it should be known within elements of being a good and decent human being that no good will ever come from fostering those kinds of really pernicious and underhanded and destructive elements that cause members of the LGBTQI+ community to feel in any way other or different in such a way that they are not treated fairly and equally. So I really hope that for the sake of the betterment of our Victorian community the opposition will reconsider the trajectory that they have been on to date in terms of not taking the necessary action that will lead to a fairer and kinder community overall, and I think that was stated earlier.

I do want to mention some local activities which I think are absolutely fantastic. I will get to the point of why. I did mention the Pride march before, and I am really very proud that it does occur each year in my electorate in St Kilda. Although we can be subjected to some pretty extreme temperatures at times – sometimes it is 40 degrees and standing in that oval can be pretty intense – it is always worth it of course because of that great sense of unity. But it is about visibility; it is about members of the LGBTQI+ community as paramount and also allies being there and supporting the LGBTQI+ community and making sure that it is safe for them to be heard, it is safe for them to be visible, it is safe for them to be proud. Discrimination is never okay, because as much as we would like to think, and certainly because of really positive and constructive action over many years, that we have come a long way, it is clear, as evidenced by the petition that this particular motion pertains to, that we still have a long way to go.

I was actually on JOY radio – they are known as JOY Media – at the weekend, and they had their radiothon. It is a fantastic event each year. It is a fundraiser, but it is not so much about the sustainability of the radio station per se. That was made very clear to me by the producer. He said, ‘No, no, no, actually, we’re going really well,’ because not only do they have listeners in Victoria, they have listeners across Australia and, lo and behold, all the way overseas as well. There are Americans and others who tune in. I may not be so surprised that there are people in the US who are tuning in in light of some of the less supportive elements that have evolved, unfortunately, in the United States when it comes to the LGBTQI+ community.

Nevertheless, the purpose of the radiothon is actually to help them reach more people in the LGBTQI+ community who may not be aware of all the services, the support services et cetera, that are out there for them. And they say that there are people who, if it were not for great communication channels such as Joy radio, might not be aware of what is out there. And I should say, in spite of some of the best efforts of government – of course we do everything we can, and I am not taking credit for that; I mean, there are good people on the front line who are doing their best to make sure that, whether it is legal services or, say, Thorne Harbour Health, which was mentioned before and which does a formidable job in terms of providing health care for the LGBTQI+ community – we can do more. Joy radio or Joy Media is an important voice for the LGBTQI+ community, and certainly I would encourage anyone who is not already doing so to support the radiothon, because it is only going to be good for our state because it will help more people to be aware of all the good work that they do. And of course I could not end without talking about the beautiful, the exquisite and the very safe and supportive Pride Centre. I am very proud. That is certainly a testament to our government and others who have contributed to this magnificent safe space.

**Nathan LAMBERT** (Preston) (19:42): It is a pleasure to follow the member for Albert Park in her contribution on this motion, and indeed a pleasure to hear her finish with remarks on the Pride Centre, which is within her electorate in the south-east corner. I might even take this opportunity just to give a shout-out to a family member of ours Jack Migdalek, who volunteers down at the Pride Centre. I think Jack may at this hour still be back at home helping to look after our children, so a big thankyou to Jack on both of those fronts. I do rise today, as other government speakers have done, to support strongly the motion from the Minister for Health:

That this house condemns the Shadow Minister for Equality for allowing his shadow colleagues to sponsor a petition attacking LGBTQI+ people and calling for the cessation of the rainbow libraries toolkit.

It is a wonderful opportunity to talk about equality but also an opportunity to talk about libraries, which we do not always get in this place. Libraries have a very special place in the hearts of many of us. They are of course a place to learn and a place to read, but I also think for many of us they have at times been a refuge of sorts. They are a place to go and perhaps get away from other pressures in our society, and I know those of us of a certain age might even remember memorising the Dewey system back in the day. We love the Dewey system. Sometimes a slightly nostalgic sadness of mine that our –

**A member** interjected.

**Nathan LAMBERT:** Some of us remember it.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Paul Edbrooke):** Order! I have never seen so much excitement over the Dewey system, member for Preston.

**Nathan LAMBERT:** Indeed. As I was saying, I have a nostalgic sadness that our children will be on ChatGPT or whatever it is for them and perhaps the Dewey system will become less relevant. But certainly libraries are places where people of all ages come to learn and to connect but also to feel safe and accepted. It has particularly been the case for a long time now that for some young members of the LGBTIQ+ community libraries have been important. Libraries have sometimes been one of the public places where they can go and feel that their identities and their experiences are genuinely understood and affirmed rather than being ignored or in any way marginalised. And of course that is exactly why this government has been supporting libraries in that work they do, with the rainbow libraries toolkits and so forth. It is why we are seeking to ensure that particular affirmation and support those young people often get occurs everywhere across the state and consistently across the state by encouraging those libraries to use the right sorts of inclusive language, to have the right sorts of diverse book collections and indeed to run events. And we know of the pressures that some of those events have been under and that earlier speakers have alluded to, but we encourage libraries to understand the right way to run them to support young LGBTIQ+ members of our community and in that way support their families and thus support the true diversity of our state and our communities.

Recently I had the opportunity to head down to Preston library with the Minister for Local Government, along with councillors Emily Dimitriadis, Ruth Jelley and Matt Arturi and the CEO of Darebin Council Michael Tudball, and we had the chance to chat about a wide range of topics, including our local libraries and council compliance officers – a whole range of topics. We did not chat about this particular initiative, but that is only because there is simply full support within the Darebin community for the work that we are doing to support young LGBTIQ+ people in libraries. I think it did not come up because there is simply no disagreement with it. In fact we are very lucky to have libraries that are very welcoming and accepting spaces. We have a new library up in Reservoir that was upgraded with the support of this Labor government back in 2015, and it is a very welcoming space for that particular part of the Reservoir community. I think you can get along to toddler time there tomorrow. I think they may have rainbow story time up there. I cannot remember if it is there or at Preston library, but it is certainly, as I say, a welcoming space.

I may actually just touch on the fact that the former Reservoir library, the old building that is no longer used because we did upgrade the library in 2015, remains unused as of 2025. It has been now almost a decade that that building has been sitting there unused. I did have an opportunity a couple of years ago to talk to two local artists Tom Holloway and Jamie Clennett, who had an idea to turn it into an art space. Not much has come of that, and so the library site is still unused. Now is not the place for a long discussion about how Darebin council manage their assets, but that library space, unfortunately, as I say, continues to sit unused. Perhaps there comes a point where council thinks about selling it off and using the proceeds to purchase other community assets. I am not in any way suggesting they should privatise things, but just that, given they are not finding a use for that space, perhaps they can give it to others to find some use for it. I note that recently the Keon Park Stars, who are up in our part of the world, are looking for an upgrade to their sporting facilities. Certainly there is a need in that part

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of Reservoir for some more tree planting and more speed bumps. There are a lot of other community assets that could be built should they make that decision.

Coming back to the support that we have for our libraries – and particularly for the way they act as inclusive spaces – as I say, there is no debate in Darebin about that. In fact we have a lot of local examples of other initiatives that go to exactly the same end point. Recently I had a chance to chat to the team at Bridge Darebin about their fantastic Bridge Queer Gathering program. Minister Shing and I actually visited that program a couple of years ago, back when she was in the equality portfolio, and chatted to Chris Lombardo and Ramona Barry and others there about it. It is a program that in a similar fashion provides a space where young LGBTIQ+ people can come together. There are social functions, there are opportunities for discussion and there are also employment programs and training programs. It is still going strong a couple of years later. I saw they have a yoga event coming up shortly, for anyone listening who is interested. I can see you nodding, Acting Speaker Edbrooke. You may well be, I would imagine, a fan of yoga yourself, as am I, and there is an opportunity to get along to that in that space.

Similarly, we have a really important initiative in our part of the world, which is the transgender and gender-diverse people in community health initiative. It runs out of Your Community Health on Blake Street, which is, again, strongly supported and funded by this government. It is a very important state-leading program. It has three components to it. Firstly, it provides direct health services to trans and gender-diverse people both at that clinic on Blake Street but also at the Ballarat Community Health centre. I see the member for Wendouree nodding. She is probably familiar with the program as it runs out of that centre. In addition, Thorne Harbour Health help run a training program as part of that, where they train GPs on how to better support our trans and gender-diverse Victorians. Finally, there is a fantastic peer navigation system that allows people from the LGBTIQ+ community broadly to come to their programs and particularly those from the trans community and gender-diverse community to come and get some advice and support from their peers. I think one of the real merits of that program is the way in which it has been peer led and peer designed.

The Minister for Health, Minister Thomas, and I did have the opportunity the other day to meet there with Aoife, Bea, Connor, program manager Keira Leike and Alex as well. I think we also met earlier with Professor Jeffrey Zajac, who actually as I understand is from up the minister's way and who is an important part of that program as well. I should note if I can that that program was very much supported strongly by the former CEO of Your Community Health, Kent Burgess. Kent has just moved on. He has resigned as CEO, and he has headed to head up Windana. But he made a huge contribution to our community over the last four years, particularly with that program I have just mentioned, and we are very grateful to him for that contribution. We look forward to working with their interim CEO Liz Chondros and the rest of the amazing team. I just give those examples as some of the many programs that operate in our part of the world and just show the very different attitude there to the attitude of the opposition referred to in this motion.

Unfortunately, it is never perfect. We in fact had a vicious homophobic attack earlier this year where Mykey and Frank, a gay couple, were attacked with a machete in an event that is still being investigated by Victoria Police. Like many people here, I am sure we have supported other constituents who have been the subject of transphobic and homophobic attacks and other forms of really vicious discrimination. I speak, as I have tonight, about some of these great initiatives in Darebin and some of the work that our libraries and other organisations do and the huge support in our community for the LGBTIQ+ community, who are very strongly represented numerically in our community. I end by just noting that of course that work continues to be important, because the job is not done, and that is what makes the attitude of some other members of this place so incredibly disappointing – that in the face of things like that, they are not joining with us in this government in pushing back as hard as we can against some of the historic and ongoing discrimination faced by our LGBTIQ+ community.

**Luba GRIGOROVITCH** (Kororoit) (19:52): It gives me great pleasure to rise to support the Minister for Health in tonight's motion:

That this house condemns the Shadow Minister for Equality for allowing his shadow colleagues to sponsor a petition attacking LGBTIQ+ people and calling for the cessation of the rainbow libraries toolkit.

I rise to speak on this matter that should be simple, but clearly, as we all know, it is not. Inclusion, safety and respect for all Victorians, especially our LGBTIQ+ communities, is non-negotiable, and it should be something that none of us ever forgo. Let us start with the facts. Everybody deserves to live free from discrimination, and that is why we were the first state in this country to appoint a commissioner for the LGBTIQ+ communities back in 2015. While the Liberals are busy counting petition signatures, we are counting real investments, which we make on a daily basis for all Victorians. That is why the Allan Labor government has invested \$25 million to deliver the nation's first Pride centre in St Kilda, and it was great to hear the contributions from the local member there. We have opened QHubs in Geelong and Ballarat to help address mental health and wellbeing inequalities for LGBTIQ+ young people and their families. We have invested \$28.8 million over four years to support integrated and early intervention legal assistance, including continuing the Q+Law specialist LGBTIQ+ legal service. This builds on the \$161 million invested through the 2022–23 state budget to support specialist LGBTIQ+ legal services and drive important improvements in the legal sector for the LGBTIQ+ communities.

In the last state budget alone we invested \$3 million over four years to continue our nation-leading work in supporting Victoria's LGBTIQ+ communities. All of this builds on the historic investment of \$22.5 million in the 2023–24 state budget that allows us to deliver on our 2022 election commitments that laid the foundations to deliver this groundbreaking reform across our state. This includes the \$1.85 million for Rainbow Health Australia to deliver inclusion training, which will service up to 400 organisations, helping them to improve the LGBTIQ+ inclusion in their workplaces. The rainbow libraries toolkit costs less than – let us be honest – the coffees here at Parliament House, but apparently it is the actual hill that the Liberals want to die on. It is not a radical agenda; it is a PDF. The fact that the opposition cannot handle that says more about them, who, can I say, are a little bit scarce. They are clearly not too interested in this debate. There is no-one here apart from one member.

**Tim Bull:** Acting Speaker, given this is a motion brought on by the government, you would think it would be of importance to them. I draw your attention to the state of the house.

**Quorum formed.**

**Luba GRIGOROVITCH:** I clearly hit a nerve. As I was saying, if this is the hill that the Liberals want to die on, then so be it. But to us it is something that is incredibly, incredibly important. As I mentioned, it is not a radical agenda, it is a PDF. The fact that the opposition cannot handle that says more about them than it does about this toolkit. The rainbow libraries toolkit is a staff resource. It is not a public program. It is not a drag queen story time. It is a guide developed by Public Libraries Victoria in consultation with Switchboard Victoria and with input, most importantly, from the staff and also the communities that care about this grouping. It provides practical advice on how to make libraries more inclusive for LGBTIQ+ Victorians and all of us. It includes guidance on planning inclusive events, making spaces visibly welcoming and building collections that reflect community diversity. It is a response to something very, very real.

Let us not pretend that in 2025 LGBTIQ+ people, especially young people, do not still face discrimination and isolation, because everyone in this place knows that they do. That is why this is so very important. Calling for the end of a resource that promotes inclusion is like banning umbrellas because you do not like rainbows. We have seen a sharp rise in abuse directed at inclusive library events, and it is completely unacceptable. Fringe groups are targeting drag story times, and library staff are feeling so threatened that they have to call up local members of Parliament and, worse still, the police. Families have been intimidated. In the face of this, what did our public libraries ask for?

## MOTIONS

They asked us for help, not headlines. They just asked for help, and we gave them that support. We delivered it with a \$14,000 investment – not a huge amount, \$14,000 – to create a resource to help staff manage inclusion respectfully and safely. That is what the rainbow libraries toolkit is.

Let us talk about what this is really about. I know the truth hurts, but last year a member for Western Victoria Region, Bev McArthur, tabled a petition with more than 4000 signatures calling for the end of this resource. That is right. Our librarians asked for help, and they over there – I can say, respectfully, they are not here – got a petition. The petition is not against hate, not against violence, but against a staff toolkit, something that was there to help our library staff. Worse, this petition clearly has the backing of the Leader of the Opposition. Meanwhile, the Shadow Minister for Equality has remained absolutely silent – not a word – similar to the Leader of the Opposition, who has not said a word during this debate or discussion, yet members of his own party are actively campaigning against inclusion. Let me say this plainly: you cannot be the Shadow Minister for Equality and stay silent when your team attacks the LGBTIQ+ communities. You cannot stay silent.

Silence is the face of bigotry. It is not strength, it is surrender. And it is not just this petition; it seems to be a horrible pattern of the Liberal–National opposition. This is the same party that opposed Safe Schools, opposed birth certificate reform, refuses to condemn transphobia and now vows to scrap the rainbow libraries toolkit if elected. This is a deliberate choice to use inclusion as a political football and to dog whistle to the fringe rather than to lead from the centre. It is easy to say, ‘We don’t tolerate hate’ when you are not in government, but it is harder to prove it when you are handing out shadow ministry roles to the very people promoting this division.

Let us not forget what is at stake. For many young people, especially in regional Victoria, a public library might be the only place that they truly feel safe and that they truly feel like they can be themselves. For some it is the very first time they have seen themselves reflected in a book, in a program or in a space that says, ‘Hey, you actually belong.’ These moments might seem small, especially to those who are absent from the chambers, but they are life-changing. We have had many wonderful contributions from many of my colleagues on this side of the floor today, and it does matter. This toolkit helps our staff create such a space. We are not going to back down, because in Victoria we do not debate whether LGBTIQ+ people deserve respect, we do not entertain petitions that seek to wind back progress and we do not turn our backs on the very communities we claim to represent. This government always has and always will stand on the side of equality – that is not going to change; it is non-negotiable for us – and we will always stand with this community.

**John LISTER** (Werribee) (20:02): I think this is a really important motion to be talking to tonight, particularly ahead of IDAHOBIT Day on the 17th, something that was marked at my old school, Wyndham Central College, with things like stalls that we would run or different programs that we would run, all to try and break down those barriers between children who might be LGBTIQ+ or have other sorts of gender or sexual identities. But I also think it is really important to talk about this in the context of libraries and access to libraries and how important they are as a safe space for young people. For generations, libraries have been that safe space. The Minister for Local Government earlier in his contribution cited data that 92 per cent of people feel safe when they go to their local libraries. I have had a lot to say about my local libraries in Wyndham lately, especially their lack of opening hours in certain parts of the region. But I think what Wyndham City Council and the community have done with our libraries in the area around creating safe spaces where people can go and explore the world of literature or access information technology is really important. Libraries were really important for me as well as I was growing up in the suburbs, because quite often they were one of those few third spaces that you would have away from home or away from school, a workplace or somewhere where you would have to pay money to sit down, like a cafe or going to KFC. You want to try and get to somewhere –

*Members interjecting.*

**John LISTER:** It is worth it for the chips, right? You cannot take the chips into the library; you will get told off. That is probably one of the few reasons why you should be told off for being in a library. It should not be about your identity or who you are but because you are bringing in hot food and you might damage the collection. But I digress. In my case, growing up in Werribee, having a space bigger than the kitchen table to study for exams was really important. Many of my friends and my really close friends, including Carl, who works at the St Albans Library, work across Melbourne's west in these different libraries, and the programs that they run deliver for a cross-section of our community, whether that be people who are older in our community or maybe retired, all the way back down to the mums and bubs reading programs that they do.

This motion today is an important reflection of the need to make sure these places remain safe for everyone, regardless of their background. Those opposite raise community safety quite often in this place, yet when resources to help ensure the safety of staff and patrons in libraries are distributed, they have members of their party twisting and contorting it into frankly scary ideological debates. Looking at the petition that was tabled by Mrs McArthur in the other place, she talked about how many more will feel uncomfortable, insecure or confused about having these resources and strategies set up for staff at libraries to help work with our rainbow community. As someone who has worked in schools very recently, practices were being endorsed and shared – as internal resources, might I say; they were not something that was going to get handed out as a brochure as you walked into the library – for staff in response to some frankly horrific behaviour by people who sometimes swim very close to those opposite. Having those internal resources to be able to empower staff is really important. It is something that we have seen in our state schools and in our independent schools around how we can better support our LGBTIQA+ students.

It was quite important for me when I was teaching to discreetly ask how a student would want to be referred to with their pronouns or even just their name as well. I think that is an important part about getting to know the people that you are working with. It is about showing respect to those other people. It is not something that I would broadcast to an entire class of 25 students – you would do it one on one or in a small group – but we would always reinforce the need for respect in our classrooms, and I think the same thing should be expected in our libraries as well. The colleagues of those opposite like to throw child safety into this maelstrom of spite they spawn. As someone who has very recently worked in the space of child safety, I can say that what they criticise in their petition and in the media is in no way a threat to child safety; rather, it is a responsive and considerate approach to recognising diversity.

One of my other passions, as many people on this side know, is that I am very much a literary type; I have come as an English teacher into this place. Some of my learned colleagues have mentioned the Dewey decimal system. I just want to reflect on the Dewey decimal system a little bit here, because I think it goes to something that Mrs McArthur and some of the Australian Christian Lobby friends might not recognise about our libraries – that LGBTIQA+ culture, writing and stories are already in our libraries. You can already find them in our libraries. In fact if you go to 306.76 in the Dewey system, it is sexual orientation; 306.764 looks at heterosexuality; 306.765 looks at bisexuality – and I do apologise to Hansard for this; 306.766 deals with homosexuality; 306.7662 is male homosexuality; 306.7663 is lesbianism – though it is a bit old fashioned to refer to it as that, but anyway; 306.768 is transgenderism, which is, again, a little bit of an old-fashioned term but nothing that Mrs McArthur might not be familiar with, talking about being old fashioned; and 306.7685 refers to intersexuality. I know I have just gone through a whole heap of the Dewey decimal system, but I would like to highlight that there are a lot of issues with the system that we use, with the Dewey decimal system, and we do need to think about some other ways of categorising the very varied and dynamic LGBT community that we have when it comes to presenting these stories in our libraries.

I reflected before that people opposite may want this sort of thing out of our libraries and away from public discourse, but for at least 87 years we have had authors writing these stories and presenting them in our public libraries. The famous poet WH Auden was believed to be quite fluid in his sexuality

and wrote poems like *Lullaby* to describe these feelings. If you are looking to find WH Auden in the library, you need to look under 821.912, which I believe is modern literature, 20th century literature specifically. I am making my mother proud – as a librarian herself she would probably think that I am a massive nerd for remembering a few of these Dewey decimal things. What WH Auden wrote in 1937 in his poem *Lullaby* I think is quite apt given the late sitting tonight but also to bring a little bit more calm to the chamber:

Lay your sleeping head, my love,  
Human on my faithless arm;  
Time and fevers burn away  
Individual beauty from  
Thoughtful children, and the grave  
Proves the child ephemeral:  
But in my arms till break of day  
Let the living creature lie,  
Mortal, guilty, but to me  
The entirely beautiful.

If you continue to read that poem, you will see it is actually a beautiful poem. And if I was back teaching English, we would probably be analysing that.

To go back to what this comes to, it is about making sure that we hold people to account for what they do in this place, presenting these petitions and endorsing views that are frankly abhorrent. Looking back at the terrible events that led to the creation of this resource for libraries in 2023 – and I think the Minister for Equality on this side referenced these same issues – we did see those people disrupting drag story time, which is absurd. It is such a colourful, amazing time. Drag story time is fantastic, and drag culture is a beautiful thing here in Victoria. It is so beautiful in fact that we even see drag performers wanting to be Liberal Party members, in Belinda Gread, who I know the member for Prahran is quite a fan of, although unfortunately Belinda Gread could no longer run for the Liberal Party in the federal election and she had to go on and create her own independent party. I think we should not be scared of drag culture; it is a fantastic, vibrant thing.

In concluding, I would like to say as the member for Werribee and as a former teacher that we need to make sure that we create safe spaces for our LGBTIQ+ community.

**Paul MERCURIO** (Hastings) (20:12): I am happy to stand and speak to this motion:

That this house condemns the Shadow Minister for Equality for allowing his shadow colleagues to sponsor a petition attacking LGBTIQ+ people and calling for the cessation of the rainbow libraries toolkit.

Actually I am not happy to stand and talk about this motion, because I cannot believe that in 2025 in Australia this sort of ignorance, fearmongering, stupidity, immaturity and intolerance still exists, is still going on, is still being talked about, is still being encouraged and is still considered acceptable. I am flabbergasted, I am disappointed, I am angry, I am outraged and, most of all, I am sad. I am sad for those people that fear other people who are a bit different. I am sad for those people that are so scared about their own selves that they have to take it out on other people who are a little bit different. I am sad that we have people in government and people in positions of power that feel that taking those people that are slightly different to them and taking away their power or their identity is going to make them feel better, feel safer, feel smarter, feel superior or feel more. I am sad that in 2025 we are still burning books and witches at the stake – well, figuratively, and also literally – and that that mindset still exists and thrives in some people's hearts and minds.

I do understand what it feels like to be seen as that person who is a little bit different and therefore not understood and misunderstood by people. Often when people fear things, their instinct is to want to destroy it. As a young dancer people were afraid of me because they thought I was gay. Actually they were afraid of themselves, but because I must be gay, they wanted to beat me up, and indeed I did get beaten up a couple of times. I remember many nights coming home from ballet classes and waiting

for the 625 bus in Fremantle to take me home to Coolbellup. I would be on high alert because there would be a souped-up Torana, normally yellow, doing circuits around all the bus stops in Fremantle looking for someone that those people in the car perceived to be different to them. They wanted to beat them up. As the car would come round the corner, I would quickly run up the mall and hide behind some trees. I would hear the car stop. They would wait for a while. They could not see anyone, and so they would drive off. I would come out of my hiding place and I would run back to the bus stop, and I would hope like heck that the bus would come before the car came around again.

I was not the problem. The fact that I was a bit different to them was not the problem. They did not even know I was a ballet dancer. They were the problem – their ignorance, their fear, their need to shrink their world so that it fitted in their naive, angry, small-minded world so somehow they could feel safe and they could feel valued and honoured. But shrinking the world and making others feel worthless only damages humanity, our community and our own selves. This idea that the Shadow Minister for Equality and his shadow colleagues could sponsor a petition attacking the LGBTQIA+ community and calling for the cessation of rainbow libraries toolkits is exactly that.

I love books. Books are a window into the soul. I love stories. As a performer, I have been a storyteller all my life. As I said in my inaugural speech, stories are what nourish us. They feed the soul, the body and the mind. They do this whether you tell them through dance or acting or a dish you cook and serve to loved ones, friends or strangers. Stories give us inspiration and they give us hope. Why does the Shadow Minister for Equality want to rip hope away from one group of people and not another? Why is the Shadow Minister for Equality supporting his shadow colleagues in attacking a group of people that are just a little bit different to them – a group of people that laugh the same, cry the same and bleed the same as him and indeed the same as me and the same as every other person in this chamber? I am talking about humanity. I do not really see people as being different. We are all equal in our own imperfect, weird way, and that is something to rejoice in, not fear. This is what makes the world go around. Fear builds nothing. It only destroys. Embracing our uniqueness, our differences and our diversity builds things. It builds and strengthens our community, our understanding of each other and our tolerance of our differences. It strengthens our curiosity, our considered nature and our desire to listen, to learn, to be inclusive. It creates our capacity to unconditionally love one another, a concept perhaps not shared by those who wish to attack those that are different to them.

What we are also talking about with the Shadow Minister for Equality and his shadow colleagues, figuratively, is that they are marching into a library and dictating to staff and customers, to mums and dads, to grandpas and grandmas and to kids what they can and cannot do, what they can and cannot read. This is outrageous. One of my favourite books, which I read many, many years ago, is *Fahrenheit 451*. The novel explores themes like conformity, individuality and the power of information and has been seen as controversial by some, particularly those who are concerned about challenging societal norms. It tells the story of Guy Montag and his transformation from a book-burning fireman to a book-reading rebel. Montag lives in an oppressive society that attempts to eliminate all sources of complexity, contradiction and confusion to ensure uncomplicated happiness for all its citizens. If the Shadow Minister for Equality thinks that banning rainbow libraries toolkits – and in doing so controlling the books boys and girls, mums and dads and adults can read – is going to ensure uncomplicated happiness for all of his constituents, then he and his colleagues have completely lost the plot.

I am pretty tired of watching the LGBTQIA+ community being bashed. I have watched it for years. I said in my inaugural speech that I was part of the queer community, even though I did not know I was part of the queer community because we did not call it that. The 1970s and 80s were a very difficult time for the queer community, and they were brutal times. Sometime in the 80s, and I cannot remember exactly when, a very good family friend of mine and a best mate of my brother, a fellow actor, dancer and performer, was brutally bashed in Oxford Street on a lovely summer's evening by three men. 'Carrot' was his nickname because he had a mop of red hair and freckles. He was a very beautiful, caring young man, naive and innocent, and he had the world ahead of him. He was bashed

to death on that street by those three brutes because they thought he was gay. Whether he was or was not does not matter. They killed him because of their ignorance – their fear of people who are different. This is what happens when you start to attack minority groups or people who are different: you give others permission to do the same. Yes, the 1970s and 80s were brutal. Carrot was not the first or last. So it was great to finally see in the 90s that queer people, LGBTQIA+ people, were starting to be recognised and accepted as humans, as people who are different but part of the fabric of our community. Sorry, Acting Speaker; I went a little bit heavy then. I do not suggest that banning the rainbow kids kits is going to incite this kind of thing. I would like to think that the 70s and 80s are well and truly behind us, but you can look around some countries and, sadly, they are not.

We are supposed to be leaders in this place. We are supposed to be leaders in our communities. So I would ask the Shadow Minister for Equality to stand up and be a leader for equality. I would ask that the shadow ministers who support this petition stand up and be leaders – be leaders for equality, not fear and not hate. Libraries are a safe space. They hold knowledge that gives inspiration and books that give opportunity and bring joy to those who hold them and embrace them. Libraries are not a battleground for ignorance and fear. Libraries are where knowledge, freedom of expression and love for all things should be nurtured and grown. I condemn the action the Shadow Minister for Equality is enabling, and I ask that he be a leader for equality, not fear.

**Jordan CRUGNALE** (Bass) (20:21): I just want to acknowledge the heartfelt, direct and very poignant contribution that my colleague the member for Hastings just made.

*My Shadow Is Pink*, written and illustrated by Scott Stuart:

***For Colin.***

You are loved. Exactly as you are.

My dad has a shadow that's blue as can be, and there's nothing but **blue** in my whole family tree.

But mine is quite different, it's not what you think.

For mine is **not blue** ...

***My shadow is PINK!***

My shadow loves ponies and books and pink toys, princesses, fairies, and things "**not for boys**".

**But** there's one thing it likes most I have found ...

It loves wearing dresses and dancing around!

It **spins** ...

and it **sparkles** ...

and it **twirls** through the air!

Then stops as my Dad walks in with a stare.

It will turn blue one of these days.

Don't worry he says,

it is **JUST** a phase.

Dad's shadow is **blue**, it is **big**, it is **strong**. But when I stand with it I just feel so wrong.

I wish mine was blue like all of the others, I wish mine was blue like my Dad's and my brothers.

I'd be part of the group, of that there's no doubt, but I cannot fit in when my shadow **stands out!**

Now things are all changing and that is not cool. I'm ready to start **my first day at school**.

**YOU'LL NEED:**

- pencils
- and books
- and lunch you must bring.

**DRESS UP** with your shadow! (in its favourite thing)

My heart skips a beat as **I put on a dress** and I look at my Dad who is anxious and stressed.

He takes me to class and I turn to say bye,

His face is all worried, there's *fear in his eyes*.

So I step in the doorway and puff out my chest ... One thing is clear ... I'm not like the rest.  
I try to say *hi* but my voice is too quiet.

The kids turn around and the room, it goes silent.

I run out the door and I push past my Dad  
I run to my house feeling angry and sad.  
If my shadow was blue I'd be there making friends. I'd be laughing and playing and drawing with pens.  
I rip off my dress, throw it down to the floor. I won't wear it again. *Not ever. No more.*

Just then at my door came a soft little knock ...  
It's my Dad walking in and I look up in shock.

Both he and his shadow *in dresses they stood!*  
With *shimmering seams* and *pink sparkling hoods!*

He speaks in a voice that's quite soft but is stern.

*Pick up that dress!* You must listen and learn.

Your shadow is pink, *I see now it's true.*

It's not just a shadow, *it's your inner-most you.*

He showed me the photos of parents and brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles and others.

"We've all had a shadow that's hidden from eyes. Sometimes our shadow, *it lives in disguise.*

His shadow loves *painting* and *fashion* and *art*.

Her shadow loves *engines* and *powerful cars*.

His shadow loves *dance* with its *turns* and its *twirls*.

Her shadow she hides it, her shadow likes *girls*.

His shadow loves *theatre* and *acting* and *plays*.

Her shadow loves *science* and *planets* and *space*.

Your shadow is *YOU* and pink it will be,  
so stand up with your shadow and yell *THIS IS ME!*  
And some they will love you ... and some they will not.  
But those that do love you *they'll love you a lot.*

So put on that dress, and get back to school, if someone won't like you then *THEY are the fool.*

My heart nearly burst and my shadow *it soared!*

I picked up the dress and wore it once more.

We ran out the door, this time holding hands.

My Dad and our shadows, *together we stand.*

I stride in my class and I puff out my chest, I may be different, but *different is best.*

I join a small group, though in I don't blend, they look up and smile.

*Will you be our friend?*

This is one of the books that I give out to my schools and kinders, alongside many books celebrating diversity, cultures, language and inclusion. I will say that it is one of the prized books that is revered and that kids are happy with at my schools. Children everywhere deserve and need space and opportunities to find themselves, to journey and to find universes, including in libraries, that create that space. We know librarians and libraries change and save lives every day, and this toolkit is to assist them in doing that work.

We had drag story time here at Parliament a couple of years ago, organised by then Minister for Equality Harriet Shing. Why? Because in the broader community it had been shut down by people who do not think there should be a space for drag artists to undertake that work. It was a truly heartfelt show of unity and solidarity against the most disgraceful scenes we had seen across Victoria against our LGBTIQ+ community at that time. We see you, we hear you, and you have our unequivocal support, because everyone deserves to feel safe, visible, respected and supported. So I rise today with

pride, with hope and with an unwavering commitment to equality for all Victorians. I rise in support of the rainbow libraries toolkit, a powerful, vital initiative that reaffirms a truth we hold dear on our side of the house: that in Victoria equality is not negotiable.

I wish to address a matter that also demands condemnation from this house. They are a great disappointment – as we have heard from other contributions – the actions of the Shadow Minister for Equality, who allowed his colleagues to sponsor a petition attacking our LGBTIQ+ community and calling for the cessation of the rainbow libraries toolkit. Let us call it for what it is: a betrayal, not just of our rainbow communities but of the very principles of equality, inclusion and respect. To oppose this toolkit is to oppose the right of LGBTIQ+ Victorians to feel safe in a public place and space. It is to oppose the right of children to see themselves in the stories they read. It is to oppose the dignity of human beings based on who they are and who they love. On this side of the house we stand united in condemning such actions. We cannot allow discrimination to masquerade as debate, and we cannot allow prejudice to hide behind petitions.

Libraries have and always will be more than just buildings filled with books. They are centres of community life, sanctuaries of learning and spaces of safety and inclusion. For generations Victorians have walked through library doors seeking knowledge, but many have also walked through those doors seeking acceptance, belonging and a place where they are free to be themselves. The rainbow libraries toolkit is a continuation of that legacy. It is an internal resource developed with care, with compassion and with a clear-eyed understanding of the challenges facing our LGBTIQ+ communities and children. This toolkit supports libraries across our state in providing visible, inclusive spaces – spaces where no Victorian is made to feel like they are other and where no child is told, implicitly or explicitly, that their identity is a problem to be hidden or debated.

It saddens me deeply to acknowledge that this work has become more necessary than ever. We are witnessing a disturbing rise in the vilification and targeting of the LGBTIQ+ communities. Public libraries, those very places designed to be welcoming and open to all, have become the front line in this conflict. Events like drag story times, created to uplift and engage rainbow young people, have been disrupted and attacked by fringe groups that do not speak for the majority of Victorians. Let us be clear: these attacks are not just disruptions of public events, they are acts of harm. They target staff, they traumatise young people and they send a chilling message to the LGBTIQ+ community that they are not welcome in public life, and this is unacceptable. So we respond not with silence or neutrality, but with action. The rainbow libraries toolkit is one such action, and it provides guidance for library staff on hosting inclusive events. It offers frameworks for making spaces visibly inclusive, and it helps libraries assess and diversify their collections so that all stories, rainbow stories, are represented and celebrated.

17 May marks IDAHOBIT, and on this day back in 1990 the World Health Organization removed homosexuality from the classification of diseases, a significant milestone, but the work did not end there. Today, over three decades later, our fight for equality continues. We still live in a world where too many people face rejection, violence and systemic discrimination simply because of who they are. While we have made strides here in Victoria, we must acknowledge that progress is fragile. It must be protected, nourished and reinforced, especially by those of us privileged to serve in this place. The toolkit is one way to protect that progress. It is a practical expression of our government's commitment to Victoria's first whole-of-government strategy *Pride in Our Future: Victoria's LGBTIQ+ Strategy 2022–32*, a road map to ensure all Victorians feel safe, have equal rights and live wholly and freely. It is not just a toolkit, it is a message. It says to every rainbow person: you matter, you belong, your stories are worth telling.

**Gary MAAS** (Narre Warren South) (20:31): I too rise to make a contribution to the motion that has been moved by our Minister for Health, the member for Macedon, this evening. Do you know what, in many respects it really is a matter for public health as well as being a matter for equality. In this place we have a party, a major party, that purports to be the alternative government in this state and that indeed appears to not want to govern for a particular section of the Victorian community.

I find it absolutely astounding that here we are in 2025 and we still have being espoused the sorts of views that we are seeing here.

I always think to myself that we are here to govern for everyone. Equality is not negotiable. It cannot be. We must have a set of values that we live towards and that we work towards to make every Victorian's life better and easier. I have begun a few of my speeches this week with this notion of values and that you can live by them and that you can die by them. When you live by your values, in the most extraordinary country in the world and in the most extraordinary state that we are all blessed to live in, you are able to make a positive contribution to everyone that is here. But this idea that you fall into a trap where – what is it, some 4000 signatures or something – you have a petition that actually creates grievances goes down this very Trumpian path that we see, unfortunately, with our friends in the United States of America.

A little while ago I was in the United States attending a conference, and the conference was around media communications. Yes, there were a lot of progressives at that conference, and in speaking to progressives in America about the sorts of things that they were organising around and the sorts of issues they were trying to improve, I must admit I was so glad to be from a country such as Australia. The notion that there are states in America that have banned particular books – that do not have particular books in their library because those books have a lot to do with gender identity – just makes no sense to me whatsoever. We pride ourselves on being the Education State here, and when it comes to education, books are for everyone. I might agree with some that the Dewey decimal system is a scam. Let us face it, I think Kramer got it right when he said that. The Dewey decimal system is a scam – it is outrageous. But I am so happy that in this state we can walk into any library and go to 306.75 and we are able to read and educate ourselves on those matters. I still shake my head in disbelief, but a wise person once told me that if you keep following a particular path, you will get to where you are going. And I am very sad to say that for the Liberal Party in this state, for the group that wants to call themselves the alternative government, a recent federal election has shown us that they are going to get to where they are going, and that is to non-existence in this state of Victoria.

Public libraries are a vibrant community hub, and they provide all Victorians with universal access to information. They are safe spaces and they should always be safe spaces. We were just having a discussion about this, the rainbow libraries toolkit, and you know what, a lot has been made of what is a four-page PDF document. It is not a toolkit per se, but it is actually just advice for our librarians to be able to assist them with members of the public. A lot has been made of that document. All it does is support our libraries across the state to ensure that all Victorians, regardless of their identity, have a place in our public libraries. Because the very nature of government is about consultation, speaking to your communities – not excluding them, speaking to them – the toolkit was prepared in response to a need for better information and training to support public library staff welcoming LGBTIQ+ families into public libraries. Unfortunately it was following a rise in the vilification of those communities and the targeting of LGBTIQ+ inclusive events, including drag story time events for young people held at libraries.

The Shadow Minister for Equality normally has a very loud voice on all things. I know it is a very loud voice because quite often my noise environment decibel meter will go off on my watch – I will feel it buzzing when it hits 90 dB. But strangely on matters like this it is very quiet. It is very quiet in here – very quiet, and it is really unusual. Yet, Shadow Minister for Equality, why don't you stand up for Victorians? Why don't you stand up for the whole community? I dare say in the lead-up to November next year that is what you are going to be trying to do, but there is nothing. The Victoria that all of us on this side of the chamber – and increasingly more on this side of the chamber – believe in is a fully inclusive Victoria, one that allows every single Victorian to achieve their potential. The very notion that we would exclude anyone from our community is anathema to this party. It is anathema to this government. I find it extraordinary to say this, but we just cannot trust the Liberals to stand up for equality. Their record speaks for itself. This government will always back our LGBTIQ+ communities as we work to build a state where all people, regardless of their sexuality or their gender

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identity, can live wholly and freely. It is one of the hallmarks of good governments that they govern for all, and we will govern for all and not just for the angry few, dare I say bigoted, people in this state.

At this point I would like to thank all of my colleagues who have spoken to this motion tonight. It does not take courage really, does it? It is actually easy to get up and speak for your fellow Victorians so that ultimately they can have a fair go in this incredible state that we are all fortunate to live in. I thank the member for Macedon for putting this motion forward this evening and giving me the opportunity to speak to it. I commend the motion to the house.

**Juliana ADDISON** (Wendouree) (20:41): I share the views of the member for Narre Warren South that it is so important that we do this but it is easy. We are not compromised in any way because this is who we are and what we believe in. That is why I am happy to contribute to the motion moved by the manager of government business that this house condemns the Shadow Minister for Equality for allowing his shadow colleagues to sponsor a petition attacking LGBTIQ+ people and calling for the cessation of the rainbow libraries toolkit.

What a line-up of incredible humans we have in the Labor caucus. We are just a wonderful group of people, so I really want to thank and commend the Minister for Health, the Minister for Equality, the Minister for Local Government and the members for Hastings, Eureka, Albert Park, Preston, Werribee, Hastings and Bass. I love our caucus. How good are we? Sorry, I forgot the member for Kororoit. What an exceptional group of people we are, from different backgrounds, all bringing a unique perspective to this. I think that our being here is about showing our values, who we are and what is important to us. I really look forward to the other contributions, because this stuff matters. I will talk about why it does matter, but it matters so much.

I am really proud to be a rainbow ally in my community of Ballarat. I support LGBTI+, trans and gender-diverse people in my electorate, as well as across Ballarat, across our state and across our nation. I do so because I support inclusive communities. I do so because I support public libraries and our librarians for the work that they do to build social cohesion. I want lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, gender-diverse, intersex, queer and asexual Victorians to be free to live the lives they want to live and to love who they want to love. I want parents to feel supported, and I always stand with our rainbow families. Being a schoolteacher and seeing kids struggle with gender identity and with who they are, I know it is so much easier for the kids who have parents who are supportive. For the parents who struggle, it is so hard for them as well. This is what this motion is about. This is what these toolkits are about. It is about making everyone's life easier. That is what we do.

I will not tolerate homophobia and I will not tolerate transphobia. I love going to ChillOut. I am so proud to be there with Rainbow Labor. For those who do not know, ChillOut is in Daylesford and it is for regional Victorians. It is harder to be LGBTIQ+ in regional Victoria. It is tough in Melbourne, but it is tougher in regional Victoria, but we are changing that, and that is what ChillOut does. When you walk with the federal member for Ballarat Catherine King and you walk with the member for Macedon, who brought on this motion, and you walk with the Minister for Equality, people are so proud to see Labor there. Not only do we turn up at the ChillOut festival but we turn up every day. The community knows that we do this, and they cheer for us because they know we are on their side. Everyone in this chamber, bar one, is on their side, I would say. This is what we keep doing. I am proud that Victoria leads the nation in fostering inclusive communities where everyone can live safely.

We heard the member for Hastings talk about safety – a man murdered because of who he was. It is just devastating, such a devastating story, and the ripple effect of that on all his friends many decades later and the impact that it still has on the member for Hastings is profound. But this is what we do. We are stopping those types of incidents. We are stopping those hate crimes by standing up. By standing up in our libraries, by standing up in our parliaments and by standing up in our schools – and it is great to have the Minister for Education here as well – we are saying to the community that we will stop these hate crimes and we will not allow them to happen on our watch.

Locally we are doing really great things in Ballarat. One of the most important initiatives is that we have got QHub in my electorate of Wendouree. QHub is the most beautiful space. It is a Labor government funded initiative. It is about youth mental health and social connection programs, delivered in partnership with Drummond Street Services, Queerspace, Wellways and CAFS Ballarat. QHub is a safe space in Ballarat for young lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender-diverse, intersex, queer and asexual people and, importantly, their families to get support and find connection. It is transforming and saving lives. It was co-designed with communities. Ballarat QHub is a safe, affirming and inclusive space for youth aged up to 25, providing access to crucial mental health support, social connection opportunities and wellbeing activities. I give a shout-out to everyone who works at QHub. You are just the best.

I am really proud that Mike and I have raised our children in our family to respect everyone for who they are. And they do – they call out homophobia and they call out transphobia. Jo was telling me when she came home from school the other day that she was walking out of school and another girl was making fun of someone who had he/him pronouns. Johanna just called it out; she did not let it pass. She said, ‘No, it’s he/him, right?’ And they were like, ‘But we go to an all-girls school.’ ‘No, we go to a school with lots of different people in it.’ The conversation is changing, and it is really, really great. I have conversations with my children that I never had with my parents, and I am sure a lot of us can talk about that. I am so proud when my girls sit down with my mum, and Mum will say something and the girls will say, ‘No, Grandma, you’re not allowed to say things like that. Grandma, what do you think you’re doing?’ They are so good; they do not want anyone to feel excluded or not able to be who they are. I am immensely proud of them for making their school safer. I know there are a whole lot of people who have important younger people in their lives, and I am sure they are doing really good things as well. So thank you to everyone who is raising the next generation of inclusive and open-minded people.

But these open-minded people are not everywhere, sadly. It really upsets me that two members of my Western Victoria Region are Bev McArthur and Joe McCracken – two people who do not speak for me. They do not speak for my kids, they do not speak for their friends and they do not speak for who we are in Ballarat. I reject their views, I oppose their bigotry and I oppose their attacks on my community members. What is it about the rainbow toolkit that causes so much offence to Bev McArthur in the other place? Well, according to the Premier’s media release titled ‘Rainbow libraries toolkit launches on Wear It Purple Day’ on Friday 30 August 2024:

The toolkit was established in response to a need for better information and training to support public library staff welcoming LGBTIQ+ families into public libraries, following a rise in the vilification of LGBTIQ+ communities and targeting of LGBTIQ+ inclusive events, including drag story time events for rainbow young people held at libraries.

The media release goes on to say:

The Allan Labor Government allocated \$14,020 through the Public Libraries Funding Program 2023–2024 to develop the toolkit in consultation with Switchboard Victoria –

and a shout-out to Switchboard Victoria and the great work that they do. To be clear, one of my upper house members for Western Victoria, Bev McArthur, has called on the government to cease the rollout of the rainbow libraries toolkit, a toolkit that is about providing better information and making people feel welcome in a public space. That is what outrages her – better information and something that will make people feel more welcome. Mrs McArthur does this, and I quote her petition, because:

Parents should not have to worry that a visit to the library could confuse or indoctrinate their children.

I could not disagree more. The toolkit does not need to be feared, but words of hate do need to be feared. Words matter. The words of President Trump matter. The words of Peter Dutton matter, and the words of people in this place matter. But do not just take my word for it. The member for Eureka

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referred to it earlier, but we got a letter from Ange Elson, the chief executive officer of Tiny Pride in Ballarat, earlier this week. I do not have time to share much, but what she says in the very first line is:

The past six months have been gruelling for the LGBTIQ+ community and the people that love us here in Ballarat. It's fair to say that this stems from a feeling of watching our rights come under unprecedented attack.

It is a disgrace, Bev McArthur.

**Melissa HORNE** (Williamstown – Minister for Ports and Freight, Minister for Roads and Road Safety, Minister for Health Infrastructure) (20:51): It is really heartwarming to talk about this motion tonight, because when we launched the rainbow toolkit I was the Minister for Local Government that supported the Minister for Equality in the other place at the time.

Hearing the emotion in this place about what inclusivity actually means is so important, because having a conversation in my local council area just recently where I had local councillors who were saying that having the word 'inclusiveness' in the local government plan was too woke, I wondered how 'inclusive' means woke. For every person in this place that is a parent, you talk to your child when they come home from school and you say, 'Who did you play with today, darling?' and they say, 'Well, actually, no-one really wanted to play with me today' – that is the opposite of what inclusive means. That is being exclusive. That is saying, 'I do not want to be with you. I do not accept you. I do not accept what you look like, what you believe in and what your sexuality is.' That is what exclusivity looks like. That is not what this side of the house stands for. We are about being inclusive and providing the tools and the support to say, 'We see you regardless of who you are.' We are not woke. We are being kind and compassionate. As the Prime Minister said about winning the election, that was a victory for kindness. This is what we on this side of the house stand for.

But let us have a talk about libraries, because as the daughter of two high school teachers, learning and libraries are so intertwined, and they are such beautiful places to be. But libraries are also such safe places for people to be. I know seeing many of you around this chamber that I visited many of your libraries when I was the Minister for Local Government, and they are much more places of inclusion than just places where you go and borrow books. I would really like to give a shout-out to the amazing CEO of Public Libraries Victoria Angela Savage, who is an incredible person that has built an absolute empire and has been able to do so much with our libraries. What they do ultimately is support vulnerable people. They provide those safe places and are able to say 'Here's how we support you doing a job application' or 'Here's how we support you doing your study' for people that are studying whatever and 'Here's a safe place where you can come, particularly when it is cold or when it is hot. Here's a place where you can actually be.'

It is so important that we support our libraries. What they do is an incredible job. But to have my name, as the former Minister for Local Government, on that press release where we introduced the rainbow toolkit – and that was after two years of incredible vilification of drag story time, because that was politicised by the right. It was a beautiful, inclusive opportunity for people to just dress up and tell stories to children. Who does not love that? What parent does not love to go and put a little bit of sparkle and a little bit of tinsel on their kids and say, 'This is an incredible opportunity to dress up and celebrate the magical realism of what we enjoy so much – of storytelling'? To then have the hard right vilify and target people that are going in and creating joy – joy for our children, joy for families and joy for inclusion – and say, 'You are not welcome in our society. You are not welcome in our community. You are not welcome to create hope and joy and inclusion for our families,' was a disgrace.

We were able to go there and say, 'We are creating a rainbow toolkit that makes sure that these are safe spaces, that these are places where people can come and learn and be together and actually support each other.' To turn those places into spaces that are no longer safe is a disgrace. That is what the hard right was doing, and in fact that is what parts of the opposition are doing even to this day. It is incumbent on us to stand up and call it out and say, 'You are not welcome here. Your values are not welcome here, because your values are values of division and hate, and that creates division and hate

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in our society.’ That is not what I want for my children. It is not what we on this side want for our children.

I commend this motion to the house, and I commend the incredible work that has been done to make sure that our libraries are safe spaces. Our libraries are places where everyone feels welcome, regardless of your race, your colour, your sexuality or your creed. Ultimately they are places about learning and passion and being safe, and that is what we on this side of the house stand for.

**Ben CARROLL** (Niddrie – Minister for Education, Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC) (20:59): I also rise to make a contribution on this motion. I think it was the ubiquitous catchcry once upon a time that libraries are for everyone. It is very clear that on this side of the chamber we do believe libraries are for everyone, no matter who you are, no matter what your background and no matter what your sexual orientation. It is hard to believe that as a nation we said yes to marriage equality and we have lived through a pandemic but that in the year 2025 our LGBTIQ+ Victorians, Australians, would face any sort of discrimination, harm or vilification.

I want to commend the contributions on this side of the chamber by the member for Werribee and the member for Hastings. The member for Hastings’ speech really took me back to his outstanding inaugural speech, where he discussed this very topic: how, at the end of the day, we are all human beings, and we must always remember that we are born equal and we should be treated equally. What is wrong with actually treating people for who they are and what they are? What is wrong with that? In a state that has a human rights charter – the first state to have one – we should address and treat people respectfully. Can I also commend the member for Bass, the member for Narre Warren South and my good friend the member for Wendouree for pointing out my role as the Minister for Education and that it all does begin with education. As a government that had a family violence royal commission, we said we needed to embed equality in our school system, which led to the Respectful Relationships program that has now been rolled out to thousands of schools right across our state. More than 2000 schools – Catholic, independent, Anglican and government – have signed up to Respectful Relationships.

It is about making sure that the more than one in 20 adult Victorians who identify as LGBTIQ+ are not ever discriminated against for who they are, they do not face stigma and they do not face any sorts of barriers. Because it is one thing to say libraries are for everyone, and it is another thing to actually put in place direct action. I commend the member for Macedon, the Leader of the House, and also the Minister for Equality for the work she has done in making an action plan in this important area of public policy. We do know that members of this community have been under siege. They have faced vilification, they have faced harassment, they have faced violence and they are on the front line of trying to make sure we are an educated society. The role of public libraries in our state and in our community is about enriching culture. It is about making sure that people of all backgrounds can come together. It might be to borrow a book; it might just be to meet and have a cup of tea. It might be for a drag story time, dare I say. What is wrong with celebrating diversity in one of the most important public institutions in the world, a public library?

As my friend the member for Williamstown so eloquently outlined, we must confront this issue. If you do let the hard right run, divide and do any more of the Trumpism, it will only lead to more division, more social isolation and more harm in society. We know the mental health stats and the suicide rates. This is a community that governments need to be focused on. An investment of just over \$14,000 is a drop in the ocean. Can you believe that the other side would be focused on this? A \$14,000 investment to support public libraries and make sure they have the right policies to support everyone, no matter their background and no matter who they are, to come and be able to be celebrated like any other human being, dare I say any other Victorian – it is incredible that they would even focus on this.

I do not have Mrs McArthur as an upper house member, or Mr Joe McCracken. As everyone in this chamber knows, I have listened to Mr McCracken on that podcast where he said they are waiting to cut everything when they get into office. We know where they will go. They will go straight to the

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most vulnerable members of the community first – those people with the quietest voices, the smallest voices. They will be targeted first. It is simply not on. That is why the progressive side of politics must stand up and make sure that that sort of behaviour – that action of trying to do a petition to stop the rainbow toolkit being rolled out – is condemned. You can see the speaking list on this side of the chamber – everyone is lined up to speak on this and celebrate Victoria's diversity, because we know how important that is for our state. I think it is Minister Shing at the moment that is the Minister for Equality. Am I right in saying that? Is it Minister Shing?

**Melissa Horne:** No, it's Vicki.

**Ben CARROLL:** It is Minister Ward, who I know has done such important work with this – with Minister Shing, I must say – in launching *Pride in Our Future: Victoria's LGBTIQ+ Strategy 2022–32*. I think the libraries initiative was actually launched with the new member for Mulgrave too. It is such an important initiative, to have that vision from the Allan Labor government where everyone feels safe in a healthy community, where everyone has the dignity of human rights, where they are protected and where they can live wholly and freely and be themselves. I am very proud with my family and my young daughter that we do participate in the Pride march, that she has been able to see at such a young age the value of diversity and that she knows what a good human being is all about and that she will grow up in a world, I hope, where everybody, no matter who they are and no matter what their sexual orientation, their gender, their diversity, the colour of their skin, their bank balance or their postcode is celebrated for, as you said, Acting Speaker Mercurio, in your inaugural speech, being a fundamental human being and just a person. That is what we are dealing with – people.

We must never forget that words matter. There is that great Chinese proverb, which was actually sent to me recently in an email by a constituent, and I am going to read it out. I had never heard this proverb, but it is 'Water and words – easy to pour, impossible to recover.' If you think about that, they cannot retract what they have now done. They cannot retract the petition to try to get the rainbow toolkit stopped. It is now on the public record. Who stood up for the LGBTIQ+ community in a time of need is also on the public record – the progressive side of politics did. Who was prepared to make a stand and make a contribution? The progressive side of politics. This is now being seen for what it is, an attack on our most vulnerable from people that are elected members of Parliament and that should know better. They should value our institutions and not only value our institutions in our public libraries but value the people that work in them and value the people that attend them for support and attend them for companionship.

Like all my colleagues on this side of the chamber, I think we need to support our LGBTIQ+ librarians and support that community to ensure that they continue to stand tall in the face of adversity and derision and that they continue to stand strong and to know as they stand tall and as they stand strong that the Allan Labor government stands with them and that we will continue to fight and do everything we can to make sure they feel safe. As the education minister I am so committed to the Safe Schools initiative, which we saw that side of politics try to dirty up. We will continue to roll it out because we know it is evidence-based best practice and that it all starts with respect that starts in the classroom, and it starts with education and making sure everyone feels valued in what a special place Victoria is. I am so proud of the contributions that have been made on this side of the chamber. I do condemn the other side for their lack of love, commitment, support and kindness for our most vulnerable Victorians, and that is what society is all about. As the member for Williamstown so eloquently quoted the Prime Minister recently, 'Let's be a caring, compassionate society.' Let us support all Victorians for who they are.

**Daniela DE MARTINO (Monbulk) (21:09):** It gives me great pride to speak on this motion, but it is also bittersweet because we should not have to speak to this motion. I have listened to some astounding contributions in the past hour or so, and I have to say, Acting Speaker Mercurio, yours was the first one I heard. It was interesting, because as I was approaching the chamber, I wondered for a moment if there was someone speaking because it was so quiet. I walked in and I actually said to the attendant, 'Is someone talking in there?' Then I realised it was you in hushed tones, and I could have

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heard a pin drop. The story you shared was so profoundly sad, so profoundly upsetting and so deeply felt that there was not a single person in this room or listening who was not touched and brought to tears. Thank you for sharing the awfully tragic story of your friend Carrot. What happened to him in the 1980s in Sydney – being bashed to death because of his perceived sexuality – should never have occurred. But it did, and he was not the only one. There were plenty who came before him, and there were plenty more who followed. And it is a continuum. The way we talk about others, the way we treat them – everything we do matters. When you run a petition saying that it is not a good thing to be inclusive, then you are being exclusive. You are telling people they are less than. You are saying they do not count. You are telling them that they are somehow inferior to others. That is incredibly dangerous, and it is incredibly wrong. Thank goodness I sit on this side of the chamber amongst the people in this government. I am proud every day to be a part of this government and this caucus, and I do not say that lightly. It is not a token gesture. It is true, it is real and it is heartfelt. There is so much heart here. Thank you to everyone I sit with.

I heard the contributions following yours, Acting Speaker. I heard the member for Bass read *My Shadow Is Pink*. What a beautiful, beautiful story. Who could be offended by that? Then I listened to the member for Wendouree, who spoke about her beautiful daughters, whom I do know. She and her husband have much to be proud of. They are stunningly wonderful girls, full of kindness, as are the children of those here. My children are kind. My daughter goes to school with a couple of transgender students. Does it bother her? No way. It is not even thought of. It is not an issue. One of her dearest friends has two mums. One of my dearest friends from primary school co-parents his daughter with his husband. They are the most beautiful parents. She is a most accomplished young woman. Anyone here would be proud to be her parent. It does not matter who you love. It does not matter how you identify. What matters is how we treat each other, what we do and what we say.

It is profoundly upsetting to see empty benches on the other side of this chamber. What a lack of courage. I know there are people on the other side of the chamber who feel as we do. I know there must be. Where are they? Our young people are so inclusive. They are so respectful. I listened to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety talk about inclusiveness, another fine contribution made there, and her pride in co-launching the rainbow toolkits when she was Minister for Local Government – her pride in doing something to undo the damage of those horrific protests against drag story time.

It might come as a bit of a surprise to some of you here that my grandparents were quite theatrical. They used to travel around Australia doing their shows in Italian. I did join them a couple of times, and yes, I can do the tarantella. When they did their shows, my Nonno Antonio would dress in drag. He dressed in drag for entertainment at our home when all the family was gathered around. Were we offended? Were we worried there was something terrible about this? No, we were not. It was entertaining. It was fun. He was a scream. We all laughed our heads off. He loved it, and it was never considered to be offensive or problematic or wrong. It was theatre. It was fabulous. What is wrong with drag? Do you know what the answer is? Nothing. And yet we saw angry, hate-filled – misguided, I would say – people who somehow thought this was a threat to their existence. I feel profoundly sad for them, because they must live in such a state of fear and ignorance if this rocks their world and makes them turn up angry with metaphorical pitchforks. How utterly, utterly sad for them.

I say the fact that we launched rainbow toolkits as a bit of a balm to soothe those who had been harmed by those actions was a wonderful thing to do. Then for this petition to come forth, this awful and also misguided petition, with worries that somehow we were corrupting children, that we were somehow inflicting – I do not even know what the true fear of it is. I read it. I read the language there.

For every person somehow validated by ‘inclusive’ questions, many more will feel uncomfortable, insecure and confused.

Really? That is on them. That is where we were going with this?

Parents should not have to worry that a visit to the library could confuse or indoctrinate their children.

I do not even know where to go with that wording. All it smacks of to me is ignorance and fear and prejudice, and those qualities in a person diminish them. If we operate from a point of fear, a place of fear, nothing good can come of that, because that is in the shadows, that is the darkness, and we all have a shadow side to ourselves. Maybe I am getting a bit too philosophical here, but every day I try to choose the light. That is what we do here. That is kindness, it is compassion and it is inclusiveness. It is not just diversity; it is more than that. It is easy to say we are diverse. It is another thing to be inclusive and to bring people along with you, not to just let them sit on the sides.

This government has done so much in this regard. I am, as I said before, so profoundly proud to be a member of this government. Everything we do we do with the intention – the true, authentic intention – to do good and to leave people better off and to leave this place better than we found it. That was the reason I entered politics in the first place. It is the reason I wanted to have a seat in this place and the privilege and the honour to be a voice for my community. I came in with the intention to leave this place better than I found it. I honestly believe that is what we all aim to do, and it is not only what we aim to do in this government, it is what we do.

When I see something like this, with its 4733 signatures, that can be a bit of an upsetting number. And then I go, ‘Hang on a second, the population of Victoria is not far off 7 million.’ If there is anyone here who is exceptionally good at fractions or percentages, I am tipping that that is very, very, very little of nothing. 4733 – if that is all they got in the end out of nearly 7 million, bully for them. And you know what, we are not going to let it stop us. It only encourages us further to continue on with the good work of taking care of everyone in this state and of loving them with open arms and saying, ‘You belong here. There’s a place for you here. Not only do you belong here, you are valued, you are loved and you are worthy of being who you are authentically without having to hide in the shadows and suppress how you feel or who you are.’ As I said before, it is one thing to be diverse. I have said this in this place before, but I will finish with this quote because it is a favourite one of mine:

Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance.

That is what we do every day. We hold our hands out to all, and we say, ‘Come dance with us.’

**Kat THEOPHANOUS** (Northcote) (21:19): That was an extraordinary contribution from the member for Monbulk. Thank you so much for that impassioned speech. I am not quite sure how to follow it, but I do want to rise and strongly support the motion that was put by the Minister for Health regarding the appalling petition sponsored and promoted by the Liberal Party in the other place, a petition that directly targets LGBTIQ+ Victorians and calls for the cessation of the rainbow libraries toolkit. Let us be absolutely clear: this petition is not just an attack on a toolkit; it is an attack on inclusion, it is an attack on public library staff who are just doing their jobs and, most importantly, it is an attack on some of the most marginalised people in our community – LGBTIQ+ people and their families, who simply want to have a safe place to go and be seen and be valued in a public space. Public libraries are amongst our most cherished institutions – vibrant community hubs that provide universal access to information, a place for social connection, learning and cultural expression. They are at their very best when they reflect the diversity of the communities that they serve. I cannot believe I have to explain this, but the rainbow libraries toolkit is a simple, low-cost internal resource, developed by Public Libraries Victoria with support from the Allan Labor government and in consultation with LGBTIQ+ experts like Switchboard Victoria – shout-out to them for the amazing work that they do – to help library staff create more welcoming, inclusive environments for everyone.

Let me be crystal clear: this toolkit is not a program imposed on the public. It is a resource for staff. It is based on academic research, lived experience and community consultation. It is a guide for making libraries safer for people – people who are too often the targets of hate, harassment and exclusion. I am so, so sick of seeing segments of our society scapegoated and targeted for political gain. The targeting of this toolkit by the opposition, and the decision of the Shadow Minister for Equality to stand by while it is dragged through the mud, is disgraceful. It flies in the face of everything the role of a leader representing equality should stand for. What a contrast to our government, the Allan Labor

government, and our proud record of backing in our diverse rainbow communities with real investment, strong policy and unwavering support. We were the first in the country to appoint a Minister for Equality, we were the first to establish a commissioner for LGBTIQ+ communities and we have continued to invest in our public libraries to make them more inclusive and accessible, including by allocating over \$53 million to public library services in this year's budget.

We understand the role public libraries play in fostering connectedness and belonging, especially for young people and diverse people, who still face disproportionate rates of discrimination, exclusion and poor mental health. The research is really clear on this: safe spaces and community connection are protective factors; they save lives. I remember when the school library meant a really great deal to me, when I was feeling the overwhelm of the emotional rough-and-tumble of the schoolyard, and it was a safe place to retreat to to recalibrate and to feel calm and unbothered. It was also a place to learn and to discover and to expand my mind and my heart. I loved the library. I still do. The notion, indeed the reality, that bigots can come into these places and disrupt these sacred spaces should send chills up all of our spines. I think it does on this side of the house.

When those opposite stand up and parrot misinformation, when they use the parliamentary process to push intolerance, when they demonise a toolkit designed to help public library staff do their job with compassion and when they target people who are just trying to have a good time, with joy and with support for each other, they are not just out of touch – they are actively harmful. We are charged with being leaders in this place and in our communities, and that does not mean stoking division. It does not mean igniting hate and setting neighbour against neighbour. My community in Northcote has one of the highest proportions of LGBTIQ+ Victorians, and for us, equality is not a slogan. It is embedded in our values, in our families, in our schools, in our workplaces and in our daily life – the daily life of our vibrant community and our local neighbourhoods. If you come to the inner north, you will see Pride flags flying on balconies, you will see them in shopfronts and you will see the inclusive language that we teach to our kids in our schools – it is the simple acts of kindness and respect that define how we treat each other.

Just a few months ago I had the opportunity to join the Queer Sporting Alliance for a fantastic and colourful day of basketball, netball and roller derby and market stalls and a brass band performance. It was the Queer Sporting Alliance national sports tournament at the Narrandjeri Stadium in Thornbury – the largest LGBTIQ+ sports tournament in Australia – and it was all about connection and inclusion and having fun through sport. It was such a delight to be there representing the Victorian government, who helped to fund it, alongside Darebin's now Labor mayor and to support this fantastic event in the heart of our community. The sense of affirmation and camaraderie and sheer joy at coming together in celebration and unity for this beautiful, diverse community – it was elating. That event was emblematic of the overwhelming sentiments within our community, a community where equality is not negotiable. But having such a strong and visible rainbow community also means many of us know what it feels like to carry the weight of inequality and discrimination. Many in my community have felt the fear of being their authentic selves in public, the exhaustion that comes with constantly having to explain and justify and sometimes hide or defend who you are. That corrosive weight of bigotry, of exclusion – it is not easy to live with. It lingers. It marks people, and it sends a very dangerous message to young people in particular.

I commend the work being done in our public school system to support Safe Schools and Respectful Relationships, to foster values which have us see each other first and foremost as humans. We want every person in Victoria to feel safe, accepted and welcome. That is why inclusion matters. That is why resources like the rainbow libraries toolkit matter, because they are small but powerful ways of saying to someone who might be struggling, 'You belong here. This place is for you. This place respects you. This place sees you.' When you undermine that message, when you politicise it, when you attack the very tools designed to create safety and inclusion, you do not just take aim at policy, you take aim at people – real people with real lives and real vulnerabilities.

That is why my community and this Labor government will not stand by while this kind of harm is being platformed in our Parliament. We have seen what happens when that kind of thinking digs in and embeds, when books are taken off bookshelves, when educators are silenced, when rainbow families are erased from curriculums, when difference becomes an opportunity for division, all in the name of protecting children when in fact it does the exact opposite. We have seen how quickly inclusion can be replaced by censorship, how quickly hard-won gains in our rights can be rolled back and how difference, something to be embraced and celebrated, can be weaponised to sow division and distrust. We have seen the consequences of that: increased isolation, rising rates of anxiety and self-harm in young people. That is not hypothetical; that is the lived experience of communities in places where this kind of rhetoric has been entrenched. We cannot and must not allow that to happen here in Victoria. Our state has worked really hard to make this a place where people can live openly and authentically, where equality is not just a principle but a practice. I want to thank every single member on this side of the house that has stood up to defend that.

**Kathleen MATTHEWS-WARD** (Broadmeadows) (21:29): I often say in this place and out there in the community that coming together is the antidote to hate, and those on this side of the chamber will proudly come together and stand up for equality for all Victorians no matter who they love or who they are, because in Victoria equality is non-negotiable. It is kind of nice to be here at night. We were not expecting to get this time. We are not booked with meetings, we are not checking emails, it is not between 9 and 5, and it has been such a gift to sit and listen to each other and listen to those stories. I had time to listen to the member for Hastings and the member for Bass, and it was so beautiful to hear the words and to hear the different perspectives. I want to thank everyone tonight for that time, and I thank the upper house for giving us this time. It is a gift to share these stories.

Anyone who knows me knows that I could talk all evening long about how much I love libraries and the role they play in our communities, especially my local library in Glenroy, part of a \$30 million community hub, a project started when I was a Merri-bek councillor. Like all of our public spaces, libraries are meant to be open and welcoming to everyone, and the Glenroy Community Hub is just that. I was so proud to have joined all of my fellow Labor caucus colleagues today for our annual photos for IDAHOBIT, a timely reminder to us that discrimination and hatred towards anyone, regardless of who they are or who they love, is not accepted and has no place in our society. I am also proud to be here as an elected member of the Labor Party. At the start of every branch meeting we all agree upon a simple statement of values – that there is no place for sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia or ableism in our party.

Social progress takes time, and you almost never win on the first try. Those of us on the progressive side of politics know that the work of changing hearts and minds and laws is slow, difficult work. Sometimes it is two steps forward and one step back. We have had marriage equality as a law of the land in this great country since the wonderful day, 7 December 2017, when the Australian Parliament voted to pass marriage equality. Members spontaneously broke out into song, singing ‘I am, you are, we are Australian’. There are some great singers in our caucus, and I think that would be a lovely way to start Parliament every day, singing together. It did not leave a dry eye in the house.

But it did not just happen overnight. It was only made possible due to many sacrifices and the activism of brave people who first started fighting back against the state-sanctioned violence and discrimination all those years ago in the late 1960s. They were arrested, bashed, humiliated, fired from their places of employment, condemned publicly in newspapers and treated like monsters, simply because they finally said ‘Enough is enough.’ From the decriminalisation of homosexuality to superannuation reform, our world-leading health response in the fight against AIDS, free and open military service, birth certificate and passport reform, the recognition of intersex people, the abolition of the gay panic defence, family law rights, the ban on harmful conversion therapy and marriage equality today, we have truly come such a long way, and I am proud of the fact that nearly every single one of these reforms was achieved by state and federal Labor governments. But there is still so much work to do.

We can still see the effects that ongoing discrimination and prejudice can have on our rainbow communities when you take a quick look at some of the health stats and outcomes.

There is one stat in particular that I want all of us speaking on the motion tonight to think about, and that is that one in three LGBTIQ+ adults have attempted suicide and 75 per cent have reported suicidal ideation. It is not because there is anything wrong with being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or intersex, it is because we live in a society and a culture where there are still too many people and families in communities who are told that they are not right because of who they are and who they love. I want to send a message to every single one of them listening to this debate tonight that they are perfectly fine and fabulous just the way they are.

Let us be clear: the rainbow libraries toolkit is a simple, low-cost toolkit used by library staff to create inclusive spaces and support our diverse Victorian communities. That is it: nothing more, nothing less. Too often in politics we hear others speaking about vulnerable minorities and offering their opinions about the lived reality of other people's lives. But in my contribution tonight I want to take this opportunity to share some of the stories that friends, loved ones and constituents of mine have told me – stories I will never forget. I have asked for their permission to share their stories as they make it clear that while we have made so much hard-won progress, there is still so much work to do. I thank my wonderful staffer Sam for pulling these stories together in such a short timeframe. Some names have been changed. Max, 65, from Broadmeadows:

My husband and I have lived in Broadmeadows for most of our lives – we feel like true locals, our families and loved ones are here and we contribute to our local community. We've experienced a bit of homophobia and intolerance in the past with idiots making remarks while taking public transport, but in August last year, for the first time in my 65 years of living, I was the victim of a brutal hate crime that left me in hospital. He broke my nose, caused painful lacerations to my body and he violated the sense of personal and physical safety I had always felt before then. I can still hear the foul things he was saying before the first punch was thrown and I am still seeking justice today. I've had to take some time off from my career and the job that I love to fully recover from what was done to me. I'm still not 100% today. Yes, we have marriage equality now, but it is important for our legislators and leaders to know that these things are still happening, even now in 2025.

Maddi and Rebecca, 43 and 45, in Oak Park:

We are high-school sweethearts, we've been together ever since, I reckon we were one of the first same-sex couples to get married after the marriage equality vote passed and we have 3 gorgeous boys who are growing up to be lovely young men. 95% of the time we are just like any other family – we do the constant juggling of school, work, tutoring, and sports, thinking of what we might have for dinner each night, and what we might get up to, as a family on the weekend, just like every other family. But I would be lying to you if we have never felt the judgment of others: the reactions we sometimes get when we tell people we are wives and mothers, the questioning our boys sometimes still get at their games and the staring we can feel from other parents and families. I wish they'd know that we are just like them: a family.

Nadia, 19, from Fawkner:

I haven't come out to my family and friends yet; I'm worried that they will not accept me for who I am. I have kind of hinted about it to my older sister and my Mum, you know, to see how they would react. I think they might be okay because they don't say anything bad about queer people when we see them and Mum always says that no matter what, God loves everyone. My brothers and my Dad are very different, I don't think I can ever tell them. They don't understand how many nights I have cried and prayed and hoped that they don't really feel that way about us, about me. Maybe if they knew who I was they might start to feel differently, but coming out to them is a risk I just can't take.

Mohammad, 47, of Campbellfield:

Growing up as gay Aussie Lebo kid in the northern suburbs of Melbourne was not the easiest teenage experience and I was a minority within a minority all – I copped it for being brown, I copped it for being Muslim, and if I had let anyone know my sexuality at the time, I would've copped it for being gay. I am lucky in comparison to other men I know from the community – I came out many years ago, and I live an open and honest life with the love and support of my partner of 20 years and my family. My parents did not accept it first and yes, I was kicked out of home and disowned for a short period of time until they came to

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see that this is not a choice and that this is who I am. My parents have come so far since then, so far in fact that on the last day of voting for the marriage equality survey years ago, my Dad sent me a text message with no words, just a photo: 2 ticked boxes for Yes.

And a final story from my own staff member Sam, 34, from Glenroy:

I was born and raised in a regional town, and I didn't know there was anything wrong with me until other people started to tell me there was. When I hear some people say that high school was the best time of their lives, it wasn't for me – it was daily harassment, violence and humiliation. Oftentimes, the only place to hide at lunch **was** the library. The worst moment had to be when a group of older boys cornered me on the second floor of the Maths building and pushed me down a long flight of concrete steps, yelling slurs and laughing at me while I fell. In my late teens and my early twenties, I was gay-bashed – the first time I was hit with a coward's punch from behind and kicked repeatedly while I down and out, and the second time I was glassed with a beer bottle smashed right into the back of my skull. I am a proud gay man with a very happy life, full of happiness and love and laughter, and these are all just bad memories now, but when I hear politicians from the other side target people like me for their culture wars, I just wish they would remember that somewhere out there, a child is listening.

It is people like Max, Maddi, Rebecca, Nadia, Mohammad and Sam and their stories that I held close to my heart when I had the privilege of standing in this Parliament and voting for the Allan Labor government's groundbreaking anti-vilification and social cohesion bill to protect all Victorians from vilification. I am also proud of our Labor government's record of investments and achievements for our rainbow communities, including the Pride in Ageing program and the Rainbow Ready road map for rural and regional communities. I said in my first speech in this place that my utopia is a world where everyone, no matter their age, ability, culture, religion, sexuality or gender, feels valued, safe and heard and feels a deep sense of belonging. I support the motion before the house.

**Tim RICHARDSON** (Mordialloc) (21:39): The night is running away, and it looks like most of the Liberals and the Nationals have run away. But they have come in tonight. We have got the Leader of the Nationals and the Leader of the Liberal Party in here. I am wondering whether they are going to speak on this motion, whether they are just letting it go or whether tonight the member for Berwick, the Leader of the Opposition, will actually have a position other than populist, rank hypocrisy? Time and time again we know that the member for Berwick is a see-ball, hit-ball populist. It is the headline-grabbing, policy-on-the-run type of stuff that we see. In coming in here tonight, not just for the chitchat, is there an opportunity to say whether he is on the side of the LGBTIQ+ communities? Will he condemn this motion once and for all? On cue, if anyone has got the wide screen on right now, the member for Berwick, the Leader of the Opposition, has walked out when challenged and asked whether he would support people in the LGBTIQ+ community. On cue he walked out of the chamber.

You wonder why their primary vote has been absolutely destroyed. You wonder why they cannot connect with millennials or gen Zs. It is because people want compassion. They want love. They do not want grievance politics. This is the thing – from a party who are the ultimate protectors of free speech. They are the free speech warriors – 'You can say and do whatever' – until there is any minority group; then they are pushing and punching down. They are on the side, supposedly, of children in libraries, but then when kids are taking their own lives in the LGBTIQ+ community you do not hear one comment or one statement. You never hear of one time when they are asking for more mental health and wellbeing support or assistance at all. That is the hypocrisy that we see and the harm that is associated and done. For trans and non-binary community members in Victoria there is a 16 times higher risk of suicide. If your values in life are to do no harm, then why would you ever, ever go after a community that is so vulnerable and in need of support, love and compassion? It goes to the heart of the people that carry themselves as being free speech warriors or values oriented, when they know the degradation of someone's health and wellbeing when they punch down like this. This is in the context of a world where being yourself can end your life, and that is a reality for so many around our world who identify as being in the LGBTIQ+ communities.

Why would a political organisation that is meant to be liberal – anything but liberal these days – say anything about the way people identify and their values? Well, we know. If you are not going to stand up for kids in all frames and fashions in your absoluteness, then we know that this is really just another chapter book of fear, derision and grievance politics, because it stokes up the membership, it gets the conservative base going and it gets everyone's heart pumping, and that is what it is really about. It is about securing that kind of support. Some in the party maybe are sitting in the ejector seat over there – the member for Hawthorn. I was wondering if he was still here and if he would come up into the chamber and maybe give a heartfelt contribution, open up under privilege and tell us what he really thinks and what he has tried to achieve in his political movement. For those that have gone home, on a very important policy position here, where do they stand? This is what Victorians expect. You cannot just rock up with 80 weeks to go until the election with your grievance politics, your division and your hate-filled approach to policy.

**Anthony Carbines** interjected.

**Tim RICHARDSON:** The minister at the table, the Minister for Police and Minister for Racing, makes a very good observation. How did that policy go in Canberra? Well, it yielded about 43 seats, I think, and most of them are to the north. This is a flashpoint moment. I am just really disappointed. The member for Berwick was here. I got some goosebumps thinking, 'This is the moment. He's going to stand up and show a bit of leadership for once.' I mean, we might be here until late, but the front page of the *Herald Sun* is released at 2 am. That is normally when he gets a sense of policy for the day. That is where the story of the day goes, and that is where the strategy happens. But the challenge of government and the challenge of putting a coherent policy position together is to stand for something. At the moment we see all they stand for is 'see ball, hit ball' populism. That is it – they just see a particular issue and go for it. I mean, who in their right mind thinks that any Victorians are fixated on some stories going on in a library? Are they serious that that issue is within the top five issues that Victorians are confronting? There are intergenerational issues around housing and around how we feed ourselves and make ends meet, and they think that the biggest issue for a petition to put forward is how a story is read by someone? Seriously, they are taking the micky. No wonder their primary has been ridden into the ground and we have seen intergenerational trauma done to the Liberal Party.

But it is not for me to give them campaign advice. I mean, it is obvious to a certain portion of their crew and anyone that listens to the commentariat, some of which are pleading with them to come back from the far right to some sort of centre-right movement. But they will not, because for over a decade this has been their identity. It has been about identity politics that suits them. So when you see them front up to Pride marches as a political movement but then move a motion like this, when you see them narrate and know the toll and know the harm on people, when they are causing division and hate and piling on people in these communities, then I just do not understand why anyone of any values base who cares and stands up and says that they are supportive of their fellow Victorian, and if they adhere to just doing no harm, would ever treat anyone like that. That is why, each and every time we have seen a juncture of division, it has been Premier after Premier in Victoria, Labor leaders, who have stood firm with the LGBTIQ+ community. It is not just words or getting a photo or rocking up to the Pride march. It is policy, it is funding, it is support and it is inclusion. It is every single juncture, even through to some of the most hateful elements that rock up at the Pride centre. There were neo-Nazi sympathisers at the Pride centre – remember that? Do you remember that crew who stood opposite the Pride centre, one of the most inclusive and loving symbols you could see not only in the state but in the nation, and intimidated people? Those are the elements that we see as very strange friends that keep rocking up to function after function of the Liberal Party. This has a continuous pattern.

You have got to ask yourself if it is a bit careless that the rallies that you organise or the things that you line up on just have a convergence or a cul-de-sac where you find yourselves with some of the most hateful elements in society. You have to wonder, when you are anywhere near policy positions

that see sympathisers in some of the most hateful, far-right and arguably dangerous elements that we have seen all the way back to World War II. And let us realise that that is the origin of hate; that is the origin of division. When you see those elements rocking up at your rallies or rocking up on the policy positions and saying, 'We're in unity with you,' maybe you should look back to the values of the Liberal Party that was established and think, 'We might have gone a bit too far here – no.' That is the challenge that is put forward and failed year after year, into the 11th year of this government, and time and time again on that side opposite.

That is what we have got to play with, and we will call it out each and every time. But there will come times in society when they will have to make a decision and step up. This is a moment in time that many of us on this side have narrated. When will be your opportunity to stand up and lead once in this state? On this side the Labor government under Premier Andrews and Premier Allan have led time and time again, with the equality statement, the LGBTIQ+ strategy, the diverse community strategies out of mental health, the suicide prevention strategy and the wellbeing plan. They all have hallmarks of consultation and lived experience around supporting and loving who people are and supporting them during their time.

People talk down our state on that side – the media talks down our state – but in Victoria we have one of the safest and most inclusive cities and states in the world. People get protection visas because of who they are in their communities, and they find their way to Melbourne. It is not by chance. We save lives under visas in LGBTIQ+ communities around the world based on our values and based on who people are. Again, as you so eloquently and tragically put it, Acting Speaker Mercurio, it has cost lives, and it will into the future. So if you had a principle of 'do no harm', if you love your fellow Victorian, if you have a policy of friendship and kindness to others, then you would tone down this rhetoric. You would move away from that, and you would get somewhere to a semblance of what Victorians care about, because the overwhelming majority of Victorians see straight through this. They see hate and division. They see that mob over there and see them as a rabble and look for other elements on the right side of politics, but they see them as absolutely disastrous for Victoria's future.

**John MULLAHY** (Glen Waverley) (21:49): I rise today with a heavy heart but a resolute voice. I rise not just to speak in support of this motion but to defend the values that underpin our democracy: equality, respect and the right of every Victorian to live free from discrimination and fear. This motion is not about political pointscore. It is about principle. It is about leadership, and it is about the responsibility we all share in this chamber to protect the most vulnerable among us. Let us be clear about what has occurred. Members of the opposition, including those that sit on the shadow front bench, have sponsored and supported a petition that does not merely question policy, it attacks people. It attacks the LGBTIQ+ community, and it seeks to dismantle the rainbow libraries toolkit, a resource designed to foster inclusion, understanding and safety in our public libraries. This petition is not a benign expression of opinion. It is part of a broader pattern of hostility and fearmongering that has no place in modern, inclusive Victoria.

I am reminded of a terrible incident that occurred at my local council a little over two years ago. A shameful group of narrow-minded bigots turned up to the chambers of Monash council and spewed their hate-filled bile at council staff and councillors and attacked the most vulnerable in our community. I will not give the names of the individuals or the groups that turned up, because they do not deserve a platform in this place, but they should be utterly condemned. I remind the house of the words of former Premier Daniel Andrews, who said after this event:

Today and every day every member of our LGBTIQ+ community should feel valued, safe, respected and that who they are is enough – no more, no less. Today is an important day for all of us to come together and call out appalling behaviour, bigotry, hatred and some of the nastiest stuff we have seen for a very long time.

These are not just words, they are a moral compass. They are a call to action, and they are a reminder that leadership means standing up and not standing by. The rainbow libraries toolkit is not controversial. It is not radical. It is a simple, thoughtful initiative that helps libraries create welcoming

spaces for all Victorians regardless of their gender identity or their sexual orientation. It includes guidance on inclusive language, diverse book collections and community engagement. It is about education, not indoctrination. It is about inclusion, not division. And yet members of the opposition have chosen to attack it. They have chosen to lend their names and their authority to a campaign that seeks to erase visibility, silence voices and roll back progress.

This is not an isolated incident. We have seen a disturbing rise in anti-LGBTIQA+ rhetoric and actions across our state. Monash City Council was forced to cancel their drag story time event due to threats and intimidation. This was not a protest, it was an act of hate, with individual councillors being attacked personally because of their stance. As I said in the chamber back then, I rise to condemn the threats and the hate put forward by a small minority of hate-filled bigots towards councillors, staff and residents of the City of Monash. This behaviour is unacceptable, and I am proud to be part of a Labor government that stands with the City of Monash and our LGBTIQA+ community. We have made it clear that equality is not negotiable.

Equality is non-negotiable. Let those words ring out across this chamber. Let them be heard in every council office, every school, every library and every home, because when we allow hate to go unchallenged, we give it permission to grow. The role of Shadow Minister for Equality is not ceremonial. It is not symbolic. It carries with it a profound responsibility to advocate for, to protect and to uplift the LGBTIQA+ community, to ensure that equality is not just a word in a title but a lived reality for every Victorian. By allowing his colleagues to sponsor this petition, the shadow minister has failed in that responsibility. He has failed to lead; he has failed to stand up, and in doing so he has sent a message to the LGBTIQA+ Victorians that their rights, their safety and their dignity are up for debate. That is not acceptable.

Let us not forget who this petition targets. It targets young people who are just beginning to understand who they are. It targets families who are trying to raise their children in a world that accepts them. It targets librarians, educators and community workers who are doing the quiet and powerful work of building inclusion from the ground up. These are not political pawns; they are people. They are our neighbours, our colleagues, our friends and our families, and they deserve better. They deserve to know that their government sees them, hears them and stands with them. They deserve to know that this Parliament will not be a platform for prejudice. They deserve to know that when hate rears its head, we will not look away – we will confront it.

I want to take a moment to thank the many community leaders, educators and advocates who have spoken out in defence of the rainbow libraries toolkit. Your courage, your compassion and your commitment to justice are what makes Victoria stronger. I also want to thank the staff and councillors at the City of Monash and the councils across the state who have stood firm in the face of threats and intimidation. Your work matters, your safety matters, and this government stands with you. To the LGBTIQA+ community – we see you, we hear you and we love you, and we will never stop fighting for your right to live with dignity, pride and peace.

This motion is not about silencing dissent, it is about drawing a line. It is about saying that there is no place in this Parliament for campaigns that target vulnerable communities. It is about holding those in positions of power accountable for the harm that they enable. If the opposition truly believes in equality, then let them prove it. Let them withdraw their support for this petition. Let them stand up and say that the rights of LGBTIQA+ people are not negotiable. Let them show that leadership is more than about titles; it is about action.

I urge every member of this house to support this motion, to send a clear, unequivocal message that we will not tolerate hate and that we will not allow the hard-won and hard-fought progress of our LGBTIQA+ community to be undone by fear, ignorance or political expediency. Let us be the Parliament that stands on the right side of history. Let us be the Parliament that says enough – enough of the attacks, enough of the fear, enough of the silence – because equality is not a privilege; it is a right, and it is our solemn duty to defend it. For the LGBTIQA+ community in my electorate, including

the cities of Monash, Whitehorse and Maroondah, and across Victoria, we hear you, we see you, we love you, and the people on this side of the house stand with you every single day. I commend the motion to the house.

**Bronwyn HALFPENNY** (Thomastown) (21:58): I also rise to support this motion:

That this house condemns the Shadow Minister for Equality for allowing his shadow colleagues to sponsor a petition attacking LGBTIQ+ people and calling for the cessation of the rainbow libraries toolkit.

The values of Labor governments and the Labor Party are values of equality, fairness, inclusion, care for others, opportunity, empowerment and standing up for people's rights. These are not the values of the National–Liberal coalition, as demonstrated by their sponsorship of this terrible petition without a care for the hurt they may cause to members of the LGBTIQ+ community and their families, inciting hurt and harm while knowing that there is very clear evidence from Australia and overseas that indicates that LGBTIQ+ communities experience higher levels of mental ill health, suicidality and self-harm compared to the general population because of this very treatment they receive. I am sorry for the hurt that this petition no doubt caused, but I hope that members of the LGBTIQ+ community also hear the contributions from government members tonight as we universally condemn the silence of the so-called Shadow Minister for Equality and the sponsor of this petition. Sadly, this is now the very essence of the Liberal–Nationals coalition. There are examples of this in speeches in this place nearly every time we sit. Just yesterday, as we debated extra supports for families who have lost loved ones in fatalities at work, they talked of milking the system. On other occasions they have opposed anti-vilification and social cohesion laws, laws to protect us from hate and harm. They also, at every turn, oppose stronger rights for workers and protections for renters. They oppose equality and justice for anybody and all.

Libraries have become much more than places where you borrow books. They are community hubs and places for everyone. I often visit the libraries in the Thomastown electorate – there is one in Lalor and one in Thomastown. Every time I visit there is something going on – seniors groups, homework clubs, young children with parents listening to stories, computer classes, people accessing technology that they do not have at home – but they have not always been welcoming places for all. There has to be conscious effort put in to make such places welcoming spaces that embrace all people in society. There are examples where special effort has been made; for example, to provide special spaces for children with special needs.

This is what the library toolkit is all about. It is an internal document that supports library staff to ensure that they do make members of the LGBTIQ+ community welcome in these spaces that are supposed to be open and welcoming to all. It is not a doctrine of any sort. It has policies based on a survey in which library staff indicated that they felt they needed further training and support to ensure that libraries are the safest places they can be for everyone to enjoy. The toolkit was developed to ensure that library staff had some guidance in some of the things that they could be doing. For example, rather than welcoming people to the library by saying 'Hello, boys and girls' is it so bad to say 'Hello, everyone'? These are not radical steps. They are really just steps that all people deserve, the respect that all people deserve and the dignity that should be given to all.

It is a sad day that we have to be standing here even talking about a motion like this. I would have thought our society had come so much further in making sure that all humans are treated equally, are treated specially and are treated with love and kindness rather than hate and anger. This motion condemning the opposition's so-called Shadow Minister for Equality and the sponsor of this petition, I fully support. It is just a sad day that we have to be up here even talking about a motion like this because of the behaviour of the opposition.

**Matt FREGON** (Ashwood) (22:03): It is my pleasure to join what I think has been all of us on this side on this motion. I, like others, challenge members on the other side to come and share their views. There are a few absolutes, I would have thought, for most of us: do not be mean, do not be cruel.

**Paul Edbrooke** interjected.

**Matt FREGON:** To take up the interjection from the member for Frankston, yes, a bit of Kamahl: 'Why are people so unkind?' It does not make sense to me and it never will, as I think the member for Mordialloc pointed out, the amount of time spent by many people on something that does not hurt anybody, the amount of effort that is expended by some to essentially try and put people down and make them feel less. Yet the same people – some of them, not all of them – also propose to have strong faith in their faith communities for the purpose of making people better. I do not understand how those two things can be true for those people. I am not going to stand here and suggest this is how they justify it to themselves, because that is for them, but I would challenge those who signed this petition and who agree with whatever it is putting forward: how do you justify this? Earlier today I think the Minister for Equality was saying about 11 per cent, statistically, of people identify as LGBTQIA+. However, in the younger generation, when surveyed, it is more like 20 per cent. And that got me thinking, hearing that. I will put this forward: is it possible that people who are older, who lived in generations maybe my age or similar and who went to school when I went to school, when homophobic slurs around the footy field were a natural course and there was nothing wrong with that – although I would say Dame Edna was on the TV, and there was nothing wrong with that either, so there is a bit of a dichotomy there. Is it possible that that statistic, when we look at younger people and how they identify now, was the same and there were 9 per cent of people statistically who were hiding or who did not feel comfortable being themselves or had adjusted themselves to the expectations of a society that we are progressing from?

**Paul Edbrooke** interjected.

**Matt FREGON:** Yes, as the member for Frankston says, only Western society. It is a shame when people have their prejudices, their bigotries from a position of ignorance – and there is not necessarily malice in those people. I remember on election day in 2018 I was a new candidate and did not really know what I was doing much – I probably still do not.

**John Mullahy** interjected.

**Matt FREGON:** Thank you, member for Glen Waverley; it was a great day. I had one lady of Chinese Australian heritage come up to me with her daughter. She came up to me towards the end of the day and she looked at me and she said, 'Now, I'm told that Daniel Andrews will teach my children to be gay.' And I thought, well, there is a lot to unpack there. I said, 'Well, no, that's just not true.' She did ask some other questions: what is Safe Schools? So we had a good chat about Safe Schools. But the first question just shocked me. In my mind that makes absolutely no sense – obviously that is not true. However, I am not judging that woman for her question. In fact I thank that woman for actually asking the question, because we got to have a chat about what Safe Schools was, and I have a pretty good hunch that that woman voted for us. Education in that instance was the best that I could do on the day. It hopefully made that woman understand that Safe Schools is not something that is the monster under the bed that is going to rip your life apart. But that is how it was being advertised at the time by some.

It is not the people who are unaware who concern me, obviously. I mean, most people are wonderful. It is the people who should know better, who organise, who fund. I think the Deputy Premier was saying before in his contribution that the rainbow toolkit cost \$14,000, if I remember correctly. The people who have organised this petition and the associated protests around it have most likely spent a great deal more money than \$14,000 in fighting what is essentially a toolkit for librarians. It is bonkers. And I would say a lot of those members on the other side do not disagree with us. If you have a one-on-one conversation, they do not disagree with us. Someone was telling me before that it was Rupert Hamer who decriminalised homosexuality in this state. It was Malcolm Turnbull who – and we can question how we got there – had the plebiscite for gay marriage. This should not be a partisan problem. There are people on the other side who would agree with us. They are in a party where supposedly

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they can share their own personal views without risking any internal issues. We all come in here as a collective, and proudly so. They do not have quite the same rules.

Why hasn't one of them got up and said, 'This is how I justify our party's stance. Here is my stance. Here is where I sit'? The silence is deafening. I am not whingeing at them to say they are being derelict. What I am saying, though, is speak up. I have heard the Shadow Minister for Equality say things that I would agree with in regard to the queer community, the LGBTIQ+ community. You go, 'Yes, well, that makes sense.' So where is he? It cannot be that awkward, surely, to say, 'Well, this is what I think.' Okay, it is late, sure, but if not tonight, another time.

I take up one of the things the member for Mordialloc said about 'do no harm' – the Hippocratic oath. Doctors swear it. I did a Google search for 'do no harm' because I wondered if it was Hippocrates, just to check. The first thing that came up in Google was an American group called Do No Harm, who are on the side of the banning-the-rainbow-toolkit brigade, and I thought, 'Oh'. We cannot be a better society without being better people, and we cannot be better people without accepting that everyone else is equal to ourselves. If anyone is out there trying to make their world smaller by keeping the things they do not understand out of their view, they will get nowhere. This motion is commendable and timely, and I commend it to the house.

**Josh BULL** (Sunbury) (22:13): I am pleased to follow on from my very good friend the Deputy Speaker, who always gives very measured contributions to the house. It is always pleasing to have the privilege and the opportunity to make a contribution within this chamber, albeit fairly late on this Thursday evening, but it is not pleasing to have a motion such as this before the house. As the Deputy Speaker, the previous speaker, and so many other members of this side of the house have gone to, the notion that this motion is before the house at all and the fact that this Parliament in unison, with a bipartisan and all-party approach, cannot send a message to every single Victorian that you can be who you want to be and you can love who you want to love in 2025 is a disgrace. For anyone on that side of the house to be able to swan around in their own community, to be able to come into this place and to be able to put their name to a party that supports petitions of hate is shameful and disgraceful and needs to be called out. What members on this side of the house have done in their very fine contributions, and there have been many of those, is identify that exact issue.

We have been through extraordinary times, particularly in the last five years – the pandemic, two very significant global conflicts, through all of the change that the world has seen – yet here we are again, having this same debate that need not be a debate. Fourteen thousand dollars was the contribution made to this important program – a program that is, as other members have said, a toolkit, a resource to help people within local communities, not to divide them, not to pit one person against another, not to create more hate and more fear and more division. How is it that time and time again – and we saw just two Saturdays ago a comprehensive, overwhelming endorsement of progressive, positive politics not just in Victoria but in the nation – that we have still got these characters that want to perpetuate hate and fear? It is extraordinary to think that we are in this position.

My message to every single constituent in my community is that this government will always back you for who you want to be and we will support you in each and every way that we can. And when these matters come up – and they will again, sadly – we will support a community that stands for fairness and stands for kindness and stands for respect, and we will do that today and every single day that we have got the opportunity to be in this great chamber. We have an obligation and a sense of purpose to bring that to this place. Every single member of this side of the house knows and understands that, and the contributions that have been made throughout this evening, as I mentioned earlier, have been nothing short of extraordinary.

I want to take the opportunity to acknowledge the work that is done on this program and so many others to make for a better, safer community, because in the end – and I cannot recall who the member was who spoke about very significant challenges that people in the community face – we have a sense of purpose and an obligation to work with local communities in every single way, to support people

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to be their best, to support people to get the job that they want, a safe roof over their head, a safe community, all of the things that we have spoken about during debate through the course of this week and many others. What is most important is that we are focused on those things. The stunts and the games and the fear and division that we see time and time again that get brought into this place do not serve a single member of your community well, Acting Speaker Mullahy, and they do not serve a single member of my community well, because all they do is create fear and division and, as my good friend the previous speaker spoke about, hurt and pain. That is not something that any of us in this place want, no matter what your role in life, no matter what your purpose is – to use those words, and make no mistake, those words hurt; they cause pain and they put people who are in many instances in a very vulnerable position in a much worse position. We have seen that time and time again, as members have spoken about, through many of the reforms that have happened not just through this government but over decades. The journey has been a long one, and it has been a tough one for so many people. We have got an obligation, as I spoke about earlier, to carry on that work. I do not think any of us are sitting here tonight saying that the work is done, that it is all sorted out, that the cue is in the rack. We keep going. There is more to do, and we will continue to do that work.

I want to particularly give a shout-out to members of this team, both in the cabinet and across the caucus, who have fought and worked with local communities to be able to bring about reform. There is a very long list of initiatives, of programs and of commitments that have been made because people within our team have done that work. Even more importantly, the real agents of change, the people that have done the hardest yards, are the people that have worked with members of this team but also people right through our community to see this change. To those people I want to say thank you, because we may not in many instances see their names up in lights. We may not ever hear their names. But for those people that have quietly gone about the hard work, who have done the hardest yards to see change, to bring reform and to see these initiatives come before the Parliament, these are the people in our community that we should celebrate. They are people within our community that we should acknowledge, and they are people in our community that we should be very, very proud of, because that change has taken immense work. That journey has been something that I am sure will carry on and leave a legacy of supporting others. I want to take the opportunity to thank every single one of those people that have done that work, not just in my constituency but right across the state and across the country.

I am going to finish where I started. The idea that we are here having this debate, as many others have said this evening, is frankly really disappointing, but we need to call it out for what it is. I know that that is exactly what every single member on this side of the house has done. And isn't it a shame that we do not see that same commitment, that same passion and that same determination to stand up for those that need it the most from the other side? We do not see that. We see fear and division, and time and time again we have to have this conversation and this argument. I am going to leave my comments there.

**Anthony CIANFLONE** (Pascoe Vale) (22:23): I too rise to speak on the motion that has been put forward by the Leader of the House condemning the Shadow Minister for Equality for allowing his colleagues to sponsor a parliamentary petition attacking and undermining LGBTQI+ people and communities. It does genuinely sadden me greatly that in this day and age, in 2025, I have to rise in this Parliament to speak out against such a hateful, vilifying, discriminatory petition against our LGBTQI+ community that has been tabled by Liberal Party members in this Parliament.

As the local state MP for Pascoe Vale, Coburg and Brunswick West, I will always remain committed to doing everything I can to help build a more welcoming, vibrant, diverse and inclusive community, a community that continues to welcome and embrace people of all backgrounds regardless of ability, disability, faith, religion, nationality, culture, skin colour, gender or sexual orientation. For a community that is proudly diverse, as the state MP I will continue doing all I can to ensure Merri-bek remains a welcoming and inclusive community. As I said in my first speech, pursuing real action on social justice outcomes will remain a key priority. In this respect, it is certainly members and families of our

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LGBTQIA+ communities, from lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and asexual communities, that all belong, have a place and deserve our support and protection from hate, discrimination and vilification across our state, across our city and across my community of Merri-bek.

No matter the postcode, all Victorian LGBTQIA+ community members deserve our respect and support, because on this side of the house we are proud to celebrate and embrace diversity, and human rights for all humans are always defended, including those from the LGBTQIA+ community. It is just absolutely ironic that we always hear from the Liberal Party, the party of supposed individual freedom, that is supposed to be there to champion individual choice and individual opportunity, but when it comes to LGBTQIA+ communities, nothing could be further from the truth when it comes to their policy position. Whenever there is a minority group to persecute, it is the Liberal Party at the other end always chasing the lowest common denominator to spread fear, hate and division, which is absolutely shameful in 2025.

Victoria has a long history of progressive social justice policy reform that I just want to reflect on in the context of this motion more broadly. We have led the nation, we have given a voice to the voiceless, we have ensured no-one is left behind, we have always sought to foster social cohesion and we have always sought to support our most vulnerable community members. It was Victoria that fostered the creation of the 8-hour working day from April 1856, with the Melbourne stonemasons downing their tools. We were one of the first jurisdictions in the world to introduce the democratic secret ballot from 1856. In 1872 Victoria became the first state in the world to pass the dedicated Education Act 1872 to provide free and compulsory education for all children aged 6 to 15 years. Victoria was one of the earliest jurisdictions in the world to grant women the right to vote from 1908. We restricted the consumption of tobacco and ultimately banned tobacco advertising. We legalised medicinal cannabis. We commenced the historic Royal Commission into Family Violence, which led to a record and historic 220-plus recommendations and over \$4 billion of investment to tackle family violence issues. We commenced the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, with 60-plus recommendations plus almost \$4 billion invested to address mental health and wellbeing issues. We commenced the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, the *Betrayal of Trust* report and the women's health and pain inquiry. We have passed and continue to pursue anti-vilification reforms to protect people from discrimination on the basis of disability, race, religion, sex and sexual orientation. We banned the Nazi salute and Nazi symbols. Across many policy fronts it has always been Victoria at that forefront that has led our nation's progressive patriotism.

Of course it is also our LGBTQIA+ communities that Victoria has continued to lead the way for. In 1980 homosexuality was decriminalised in Victoria, where previously men could be sentenced to up to 15 years in prison for having consensual sex with other men. I have got to acknowledge that was a Hamer Liberal government decision, as the member for Ashwood touched on earlier, way back when there were small 'l', centrist, moderate liberals running a Liberal government in this state. We have very much gone to the far right now in this case with this opposition here. No moderate Liberals are seen anywhere here. No-one is speaking on this motion from the moderate Liberal faction at all. They are cowards. As Premier Andrews said:

These laws did not just punish homosexual acts; they punished homosexual thought. They had no place in a liberal democracy; they have no place anywhere.

In December 2014 we introduced the first ever equality portfolio. Its purpose is to champion the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, gender-diverse and intersex Victorians. In 2001, same-sex couples got the same rights equal to heterosexual de facto couples. In 2005 the gay panic defence was abolished. In 2008 assisted reproductive technology became legal for female same-sex partners and same-sex partners could register their relationship as a domestic relationship, like heterosexual couples. In 2014 Victoria Police apologised for the infamous Tasty nightclub raid and Victoria Police started their *Equality is Not the Same* process to begin rebuilding that trust.

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In 2015 the state of Victoria removed HIV transmission laws. Previously intentional HIV transmission had penalties of up to 25 years in jail, compared to 20 years for manslaughter. Section 19A of the Crimes Act 1958 was removed so intentional infection of HIV became part of existing criminal offences, such as causing serious injury. In July 2015 Victoria established the first gender and sexuality commissioner. In September 2015 we removed old homosexual criminal convictions where a person or representative of a deceased person could apply and can apply to remove old convictions for homosexual sexual activity that is no longer a criminal offence. This is known as expungement.

In May 2016 we provided a historic state apology for the criminalisation of homosexuality, where Premier Daniel Andrews acknowledged the same shameful historic laws that criminalised homosexuality in Victoria before they were decriminalised in 1980 by the Hamer government. In June 2016 Victorians gathered in solidarity following an horrific shooting in Orlando, with 2500 Victorians gathering at Fed Square to show solidarity following that tragic shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando where 49 people were killed for being part of and members of the LGBTIQI community. That is where hate speech can lead, and that is where these types of divisive petitions can lead. They foster that hate in the dark corners of our community that we as leaders should be seeking to totally repel.

In September 2016 we reformed adoption legislation to allow all couples to adopt. Changes in the Adoption Amendment (Adoption by Same-Sex Couples) Act 2015 in Victoria allowed couples to adopt regardless of their sex or gender identity. In March 2017 we announced the location of Australia's first purpose-built Pride Centre on Fitzroy Street in St Kilda, which was then opened in July 2021. We launched Victoria's first LGBTIQIA+ strategy, *Pride in Our Future*, subsequently, and we launched the Rainbow Ready road map in May 2022. And of course at a federal level we had the historic amendments to the Marriage Act 1961 passed on 9 December 2017, providing the same rights for same-sex couples to marry as heterosexual couples. Again I acknowledge that was a Turnbull Liberal government. We can debate the process which led to that outcome, but it was moderate Liberals at the time who pursued those reforms in partnership with the advocacy of the Labor opposition at the time.

We have pursued and supported these reforms because they are all about building a fairer, more resilient, inclusive community for LGBTIQI+ communities. They are reforms that have totally been ignored and disregarded by this shameful Liberal petition that has been tabled in this building. But it is also a petition that totally disregards and compounds the pre-existing health and wellbeing issues being experienced by LGBTIQI+ people, who do experience significant health and wellbeing disparities compared to the wider community. One in three LGBTIQI people rate their health as poor or fair, three in four have experienced a mental health condition, almost three in five have experienced high or very high psychological distress, two in three have experienced family violence, three in five have suffered intimate partner violence, two in five have reported they have considered attempting suicide in the last 12 months, and they are four times more likely to inflict self-harm or contemplate or, sadly, go through with suicide.

That is why I have been very proud to be part of a Victorian Labor government that has continued to pursue the reforms that matter for LGBTIQI+ communities and to support their health and wellbeing. But also at the federal level I was very pleased to have joined with the federal health minister Mark Butler; Assistant Minister for Social Services and member for Cooper Ged Kearney; Peter Khalil, member for Wills; Josh Burns, member for Macnamara; and the members for Preston and Northcote as well, my northern suburbs colleagues, some months ago to help launch Australia's first nationwide action plan for LGBTIQI+ communities. With Labor governments in place at federal and state levels LGBTIQI+ communities know that Labor will always have their backs and champion their inclusivity.

**Eden FOSTER** (Mulgrave) (22:33): I too would like to speak on the motion that was introduced here by the Leader of the House:

That this house condemns the Shadow Minister for Equality for allowing his shadow colleagues to sponsor a petition attacking LGBTIQ+ people and calling for the cessation of the rainbow libraries toolkit.

I rise to address this matter, which is of grave concern. It is a matter that strikes at the very heart of our values as a tolerant, inclusive and progressive society. I stand to support this motion to condemn the Shadow Minister for Equality for their abject failure of leadership, for their complicity in the dissemination of harmful and hateful rhetoric and for their callous disregard for the wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ Victorians. I condemn all those opposite, and clearly none of them have spoken on the matter because it is quite apparent that they are cowards. I do not believe they have spoken on any matter relating to this community. The rainbow libraries toolkit is a resource designed to foster inclusion, celebrate diversity and provide a safe and welcoming space for LGBTIQ+ individuals and families within our libraries. It is a simple yet powerful tool aimed at promoting understanding, respect and acceptance, values that should be embraced by every single member of this house, regardless of their political affiliation. Yet the Shadow Minister for Equality has allowed members of their own party to sponsor a petition that attacks this toolkit, that demonises LGBTIQ+ people and that seeks to undermine the very principles of equality and non-discrimination upon which our society is built. This is not a matter of mere political disagreement. This is a matter of fundamental human rights.

The actions of the shadow minister and their colleagues are reprehensible on many levels. Firstly, they demonstrate a profound ignorance of the lived experiences of LGBTIQ+ people, who continue to face discrimination, prejudice and violence in our community. Secondly, they reveal a shocking lack of understanding of the psychological harm caused by such hateful rhetoric, and we heard much of that from the member for Pascoe Vale, who went through a number of statistics on the psychological impact. Thirdly, they represent a betrayal of the public trust and a gross dereliction of duty. We here as members of this Parliament have a responsibility to represent all Victorians and to protect their rights and ensure their safety and wellbeing. The Shadow Minister for Equality has failed in this most basic of duties and so have those opposite.

The psychological impacts of discrimination against LGBTIQ+ communities are well documented and deeply damaging. Research has shown consistently that individuals of the LGBTIQ+ community, particularly our young people, are at significantly higher risk of experiencing mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. Suicidal ideation and attempts are quite significant amongst our LGBTIQ+ community. They are four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. We know that substance abuse amongst these individuals is also quite significant. It is a means of coping with the stress and trauma of discrimination; social isolation and loneliness due to rejection by family, friends and community, let alone their members of Parliament; low self-esteem and internalised homophobia and transphobia resulting from the constant barrage of negative messages and stereotypes – the list goes on about the psychological impacts on our vulnerable LGBTIQ+ community. These are not abstract statistics. These are the real-life consequences of the hateful rhetoric that those opposite and their colleagues have enabled. Every time a politician or public figure attacks the LGBTIQ community, they send a message that it is acceptable to discriminate, to marginalise and to dehumanise. This message has a devastating impact, particularly on vulnerable people who are struggling to come to terms with their identity.

I would like to make a reference to an adjournment that was made by the member for the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region in the other place, Ann-Marie Hermans. She is, as she says in her own words, the only Liberal member in the south-east area where my constituents live – so sometimes she thinks she speaks on behalf of them, perhaps; I do not know. I quote from her adjournment on 19 March. In reference to the rainbow libraries toolkit, she said:

In this program children as young as five years old will be quizzed by library staff on their preferred pronouns. At this stage children are just learning to recognise letters and starting to speak basic sentences. Their intellectual capacity is in its infancy, and they simply do not have the ability to grasp political ideological concepts, nor do they understand the life-transforming decisions that asking them about their gender identity is going to cause.

We all know in this place that my background is as a clinical psychologist. Before working in schools I worked with adults, and I had unfortunate opportunities to speak in a therapeutic sense with

individuals who had undergone transformations because of their gender identity. I will not go into detail because of confidentiality, but some of those stories are horrific. Hearing someone tell me that at the age of five they wanted to cut off their genitals because they did not feel safe in their body, they did not feel like they belonged in their body, was distressing. Those opposite say that a five-year-old does not know, that people are taught this, people are influenced. No, these individuals know how they feel. By telling them that they do not belong, by discriminating against them, they are telling them that they are not worthy, that they are not human.

We have an obligation to our community – to every single one in our community – to show respect. And on showing respect, I can see there is only one of them sitting here listening to this debate, because they have their heads – I do not know – not even buried in the sand. They just refuse. They are full of hate towards these individuals. They are not accepting of them, because if they were, they would be here speaking on this matter. It is a real shame. I ask them to bring a plate to the table and come together with all the LGBTIQ+ community, with all people of all sexualities and all identities. Because if you bring that plate, have that chat, share experiences and listen to their stories, then you will understand. But by turning away, by dehumanising these individuals, you are not even opening yourself up to understanding.

I support this motion to condemn the Shadow Minister for Equality and really those opposite for their lack of support for this community, the LGBTIQ+ community. It is shameful, it is disgusting, it is hurtful, and it is causing harm. That is the most important thing – it is causing harm. The number of suicide attempts, the number of self-harm attempts – all of that is a disgrace. They are not helping this situation. They could come to the table and join us in embracing the LGBTIQ+ community. That is all I ask of them. I commend the motion to the house.

**Motion agreed to.**

### *Business of the house*

#### **Orders of the day**

**Mary-Anne THOMAS** (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Ambulance Services) (22:43): I move:

That the consideration of order of the day, government business, 6, be postponed until later this day.

**Motion agreed to.**

### *Motions*

#### **Healthcare workforce**

**Mary-Anne THOMAS** (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Ambulance Services) (22:43): I move:

That this house acknowledges the massive investment of the Allan Labor government in the health workforce, including:

- (1) growing the workforce by more than 50 per cent;
- (2) increasing nurse and midwife pay by 28.4 per cent;
- (3) growing the on-road paramedic workforce by over 50 per cent; and
- (4) upskilling thousands of health professionals.

Victorians well know that when it comes to investments in their health care, there is only one side of the chamber that they can trust, and that is the Labor side here on the government benches, where we devote our time to supporting our hardworking healthcare workers so that in turn they can deliver to us the health care that we need. I know that everyone on this side of the chamber joins me in expressing our thanks to our hardworking health workers – nurses and midwives, paramedics and doctors, allied health professionals, but also our cooks, our cleaners and the ward clerks. So many people play an

important role in the delivery of health care in this state. I would say too, because I think it is a point of contrast between ourselves and those on the other side of the chamber, that on this side we value all workers and we value the contribution that everyone makes. We believe that all work is important, that all work carries dignity and that all work requires respect.

We also as a government understand that there are some people who for a range of reasons have the opportunities to develop their skills at the highest of levels not just because they have very big brains but because they have been supported to develop those skills. I am very proud too that on this side of the house we respect those healthcare professionals who are operating at a world-class level in everything that they do. We respect their knowledge and their expertise. One of the disturbing things that I have noticed over the last few years arising from the conspiracy theories that flourished during the COVID years is that there are plenty of people, particularly in populist right-wing movements, who want to discredit people who have devoted their lives to science and devoted their lives to increasing the body of knowledge that drives the delivery of health care in this state and indeed around the world – people who disrespect evidence and who spread those conspiracy theories.

While I am on it, it would be remiss of me not to mention – I know I have the attention here of the member for Nepean, and that is excellent, because he was not here at that time – the rallies in the streets here in Melbourne, where various people campaigned against science, against evidence and against health and wellbeing. What is more, they erected effigies and playacted the hanging of our Premier. Do you know who was out there with them? Members of the Liberal Party. They were out on the streets. Members of the Liberal Party were out there on the steps of this Parliament House cheering on these conspiracy theorists, who were in absolute denial about COVID and the impact that it was having in our state and around the world. And do you know who suffered the most from COVID? Our healthcare workers, who went in on the front line when there was no vaccine and when there was very little knowledge. All they had between them and this raging virus that was killing people was PPE. We will always stand with our healthcare workers, and we respect their expertise.

I am delighted to be joined here at the table by the Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs, who shares my passion and now has responsibility for medical research. Here in Victoria we are one of the top three medical research destinations in the world. When you are talking medical research, there are three destinations: Melbourne, Boston and London.

**Mathew Hilakari** interjected.

**Mary-Anne THOMAS:** I will take up the interjection: it is absolutely not by accident. It goes back to a decision that was taken by former Premier John Brumby, a Labor Premier, that Victoria, and Melbourne in particular, would be a world-class medical research destination. We are very privileged and honoured to have, once again here in Victoria, some of the best medical researchers in the world, people who devote themselves and their lives to the advancement of knowledge and to the study of viruses, bacteria, humans, medicine, drugs – you name it. They devote their lives to that. Yet when those on the other side stand on the front steps here with conspiracy theorists, they are laughing at all of those people across our medical research sector. They are saying those people do not matter, that they would rather stand on the steps of Parliament House and buy cheap votes from people who disrespect the work of those hardworking medical research professionals. I can see you are fascinated, member for Nepean. Maybe you should do a little bit of research into what was going on at that time. Back to our healthcare workers, it is well known that we have worked assiduously to invest in our healthcare workforce and to grow it. I mean, that is what we do, right? That is what Labor governments are here for, because we believe in strong public services – public services that meet the needs of all Victorians, no matter where they live, no matter their background, no matter where they are and no matter where they are from. We are very proud of the rate at which we have grown our healthcare workforce here in Victoria. As I said, by more than 50 per cent we have grown our workforce. Last year saw –

**Sam Groth** interjected.

**Mary-Anne THOMAS:** It is a little bit hard for me – it is late – to concentrate while there are a lot of interjections from the member for Nepean.

We have grown our workforce. Last year saw the largest single growth in our workforce ever. It was around 6.7 per cent. The reason why our workforce is growing is because hardworking doctors, nurses, paramedics, allied healthcare practitioners and others want to come and work in Victoria. They want to work here because we have world-class health services. As I said, we have got a thriving medical research sector, but we have always respected our healthcare workers. I was very pleased to see our public hospitals reach agreement with the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation only recently for a 28.4 per cent pay rise. This is really important, and I will tell you why: because when I was growing up – and I am sure there are others in the chamber – there were two occupations. The member for South-West Coast might fit into this categorisation. When I was growing up there were two occupations that young women pursued. One was nursing and the other was teaching. I became a teacher and the member for South-West Coast, as I understand, became a nurse. That is not an uncommon story, particularly, I might say, for girls from the country. As a consequence of that I know a lot of teachers, but I also know a lot of nurses, and I have always respected their work.

But I might say one of the things about nursing is that it was for a very long time, and still is, a highly feminised profession. As a consequence of that and because of the patriarchal system in which we live, that work has for too long been undervalued. When it was compared with work that was traditionally done by men, we know that women were just not being paid as they should have been. A decision was made early last year by the Fair Work Commission in relation in particular to aged care nursing. We decided to pre-empt that decision as it applied to nurses in our public healthcare system. Here in Victoria we decided that it was about time that we paid our nurses what they truly deserve.

That is why we are very proud to have reached that agreement with them. As members in this house will also know, we have worked with the nurses union, the ANMF, for whom we have a great deal of respect, which I might say is in contrast to those on the other side of the place, to deliver the Safe Patient Care (Nurse to Patient and Midwife to Patient Ratios) Act 2015. We introduced that and then amended it two times in order to implement safe patient-to-nurse and safe patient-to-midwife ratios in our hospitals. One of the drivers for introducing the act in the first instance, back in 2015 under former minister Jill Hennessy, was that in the four years that those on the other side were in government under the failed Baillieu–Napthine governments what we saw was that those Liberal governments attempted to bargain away the nurse-to-patient and midwife-to-patient ratios that existed in the enterprise agreements at that time. When we were in government, again, under John Brumby and under Steve Bracks, we had enterprise bargaining agreements in place that had nurse-to-patient and midwife-to-patient ratios. The Liberals came in and tried to bargain them away, and we said to nurses, ‘We’re not going to let that happen to you again. We are going to legislate nurse-to-patient and midwife-to-patient ratios so that they are protected now and into the future from potential future Liberal governments,’ because that is the first thing that they will move on. They will move to take away the hard-won rights and conditions of working people, including our healthcare workers. Under our government we have worked to deliver an enterprise agreement that delivers a 28.4 per cent pay increase, and we have implemented safer patient care ratios for nurses and midwives. We have done that because we know that it delivers safer outcomes for patients. That is why it is called the safe patient care act.

The other thing that our ratios have done – and I am circling back now to when I was talking about how our workforce has grown – is that nurses are particularly attracted to come and work here in Victoria because of our safe patient care act. After the peak of COVID, when I was out visiting hospitals and we were experiencing significant workforce shortages, I had the pleasure of meeting nurses who had come to Australia, a number of them from Ireland, to work here in Victoria because we have the safe patient care act and ratios. They told me that; they were quite explicit about ratios. They also told me that they came to Victoria because here, in this state, nurses are respected. Indeed it was not long after meeting these Irish nurses that I had the good fortune at a dinner – the member for Malvern was at the dinner; it was with the Irish ambassador – to meet the Irish health minister. He said

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to me that one of his jobs in coming to visit Australia was to try and take some Irish nurses back with him. I said, 'Well, bad luck. Until such time as you introduce safer patient care ratios, they won't be going.' We discussed the various merits of our differing health systems and the work that we have done deliberately here to send a very clear message to our nurses about the respect we have for them and the esteem in which we hold them.

It would be remiss of me, because the member for Melton is in the chamber, not to talk about our paramedics. As the former secretary of the ambulance union well knows, you can fight hard and you can make great achievements as a union leader when you have a Labor government. Just as readily, what you have achieved – the benefits and the rewards for hardworking, experienced paramedics – can be ripped away by Liberal governments. That is what the member for Melton experienced. He can tell you firsthand what it is like to be representing healthcare workers under a Liberal government, and the stories that he will tell, I am sure, will shock you. I hope he takes us to the former Minister for Health David Davis in the other place and the fake union that he established. That will be just as good as some of the fake ambulances that we have seen. Will I talk about fake patients? Possibly not because –

*Members interjecting.*

**Mary-Anne THOMAS:** Well, he is not he is not in the chamber, is he? So I will not talk about the fake patients and how that came to be. But I hope that the member for Melton takes us through the story of the fake ambulance paramedics union, because it is a whopper. It is a story of lies and deceit authored by Mr Davis in the other place. It is a good story. It is one to stay up for, I might suggest. Okay, so on our paramedics –

**A member** interjected.

**Mary-Anne THOMAS:** Someone said I have run out of things to say. I am only getting started. I have got lots to talk about. Now, since we since we came to government, we have invested more than \$2 billion into our ambulance services, of which we are very proud. Right now, the number of paramedics on our road has grown by more than 50 per cent.

**Emma Kealy** interjected.

**Mary-Anne THOMAS:** Okay, I am going to take up this interjection in a moment. The member for Lowan has talked about outcomes, and I will come to that. I will talk to that in a moment, but I am talking about our healthcare workforce, and I have not stopped praising our paramedics yet. As I said, we have invested in them. Now we have got more on-road paramedics than at any time ever, and recently I was delighted that Ambulance Victoria and the Victorian Ambulance Union also reached an agreement through their enterprise bargaining negotiations. I have got to say that agreement had a particular focus on some of the wellbeing issues that we know our paramedics face with regard to the long hours that they work and the various pressures that they are under.

I am really delighted that as we work to implement that enterprise bargaining agreement – an EBA, I might say, that was resoundingly endorsed by our paramedics – we will do so now under the leadership of Andrew Crisp, the chair of Ambulance Victoria, who of course is highly regarded. A former emergency management commissioner, a senior leader – I think an assistant deputy commissioner – at Victoria Police, Andrew Crisp is the perfect person for the job of chair of the board. The Ambulance Victoria board has also appointed Mr Jordan Emery. Mr Emery currently is the CEO of Ambulance Tasmania, I might note, under a Liberal government, and he was formerly with New South Wales. Again I take it on good authority he is highly regarded in both those states for all the work that he has done, and I know that our hardworking paramedics are welcoming the commencement of these two highly regarded and well-recognised leaders at AV.

So we have backed our paramedics in with their new EBA. There are more of them on the road than ever before, and we have rolled out new ambulance stations right across the state. I cannot keep track

of the number of ambulance stations that I have had the pleasure of visiting with members on this side of the chamber, and indeed I have been able to travel right across rural and regional Victoria to meet with paramedics and see the new accommodation that we are providing them. That has been a great pleasure. But the other thing – well, there are lots of things that we are doing in ambulance, so let me talk you through a few of them.

We have made a commitment to increase the number of MICA paramedics that are on the road, and I was delighted to meet with the largest group of MICA interns ever, only recently, who are hitting the road in rural and regional Victoria and will continue to deliver that specialist care. We have created the new role of paramedic practitioners. Paramedic practitioners will be hitting the road at the end of 2026. They have will have completed a masters of paramedicine. They will be highly qualified. The existing paramedics that have taken up this opportunity to study for masters degrees are some of the best of the best, and they will be delivering care at levels not seen before in our community in rural and regional Victoria. You have heard me talk about this before. We have been challenged by the difficulty in accessing general practice in rural and regional Victoria. One of the reasons it has been difficult to access GPs in rural and regional Victoria is the 10 years of neglect by the former federal Liberal government that failed to invest the university places that are needed in order to graduate doctors.

**Emma Kealy** interjected.

**Mary-Anne THOMAS:** I can hear the member for Lowan over there interjecting; that would not surprise anyone. But I might say, in case she does not know, that universities, university places and the number of places that are available are in the remit of the Commonwealth government. Similarly, Medicare payment are in the remit of the Commonwealth government, and under the man who was voted the worst health minister of all time, Peter Dutton, we saw that with the Medicare rebate there was a freeze for six years. What we can see here –

**Emma Kealy** interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Iwan Walters):** Order!

**Mary-Anne THOMAS:** Thank you very much, Acting Speaker. What we can see here is a person who counts herself as a player on the other side of the chamber, but who has zero understanding of how the health system works here in –

*Members interjecting.*

**Mary-Anne THOMAS:** Oh, I know she was a CEO of Edenhope health service. Yes, I am well aware of that. I would expect that –

**Emma Kealy:** On a point of order, Acting Speaker, the minister is misleading the house. I was CEO of Edenhope and District Memorial Hospital, not Edenhope hospital – a hospital which no longer exists because she closed it.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Iwan Walters):** Order! Member for Lowan, there is there is no point of order, as you know.

**Mary-Anne THOMAS:** As I said, one would have thought that the former CEO of Edenhope and district hospital would know that Medicare is funded by the Commonwealth and that medical places at university are also funded by the Commonwealth. There was a failure to invest in both of those things under the federal Liberal government, a federal Liberal government which I might say was once again resoundingly rejected only 10 days or so ago by the people of Victoria.

*Members interjecting.*

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Iwan Walters):** Order! It is late in the evening, but if I cannot hear the minister on her feet, then I suspect no-one else can. Minister, the call is yours, please continue. The minister will be heard in silence.

**Mary-Anne THOMAS:** Well, they have certainly woken up on the other side of the chamber, so I suppose that is a good thing.

I wanted to make the point again, in response to some interjections from the member for Lowan, our ambulance services faced unprecedented challenge during COVID, a time that I have already canvassed in my conversation. We know what we were doing during that time: we were protecting the health and safety of Victorians. We were here saving lives and we were standing by our healthcare workers while members like the member for South-West Coast – here she is – were out on the front steps cheering on the conspiracy theorists. That is what was happening. That is what she was doing. That is what was going on. The unprecedented demand that our health services were under was completely disrespected by those on the other side, but since that time, our government has been resolute in its commitment to continuing to build back from that time. It is why, as I have already outlined, we have implemented a range of initiatives in order to support our ambulance services, treat our paramedics with care and respect and implement safe and timely ambulance and emergency care standards that address the fact that the biggest impediment to getting our paramedics back on the road as quickly as possible is a system issue. It is about patient flow through our hospitals and the need that we have for our hospitals to really be focused on getting paramedics back on the road as soon as possible, and that is what is happening. And you know what, we are already seeing improvements right across the hospitals where the standards are being implemented. We are seeing the transfer times from ambulance to hospital reduced significantly.

These standards will work, and I will tell you why: it is because they have been developed by healthcare workers themselves. They have been developed by paramedics, by emergency department nurses and by our clinicians in our hospitals, because we listen to our healthcare workers. When they come forward with a good idea, we work to implement it. We respect their work, we value their work and we stand by them. And one thing that we will always do is consult with their industrial representatives. People in this chamber will remember that under the former Liberal government – this one was talking about performance before. Do you know what happened when Mr Davis was the health minister? Do you know what happened to ambulance response time data when he was the minister? It was not reported, it was hidden.

**A member** interjected.

**Mary-Anne THOMAS:** No, there was no reporting. He just said, ‘Oh, here’s the data. These are the worst response times in history, so you know what I’ll do with it, I’ll hide it. I’ll make sure that no-one can see it.’ And that is exactly what he did. That is another story, I might say, that the member for Melton might have an opportunity to tell us a little bit more about. We will never do that. We are transparent when it comes to producing the data and to ensuring that people can see the hard work that we are all doing to ensure that Victorians can access world-class healthcare in our state.

In the few seconds that I have remaining I want to take the opportunity again to speak on behalf of those on this side of the house and send our regards and respect to healthcare workers right across this state.

**Emma KEALY (Lowan) (23:14):** What a delight to go after and speak after the Minister for Health. You would be amazed to think she had been the Minister for Health for more than 5 minutes given that rambling little collection, having a kick at the opposition, trying to say ‘ambulance’ a few times and ‘We love the workers’ and not taking any responsibility. The Labor government have been here, ruling this space in the health system for 10½ years. If you are concerned about what is happening in the health system today, and the Minister for Health has just outlined some of the problems in the system, she can look no further than the issues that she has governed over herself, which she has got

ultimate responsibility for. The lesson that she was trying to outline today is nothing more than a farce. The fact that you have got a Minister for Health who has to refer to notes to understand how the health system works is perhaps the greatest indictment on the health system in Victoria today. It is little wonder that we have problems with ambulance ramping. It is a little wonder we have issues with the Triple Zero system.

What an interesting intersection we have today. I acknowledge in the gallery today members of the United Firefighters Union and other volunteers. I can see an SES shirt; there is also a Fire Rescue Victoria shirt. We can see that there are people standing up here for the debate that is happening in the other place, and which will soon come here, on a piece of legislation which is being hotly contested and includes aspects where we are being told we need to fix up core government services that the government already receives taxpayer money to deliver: Triple Zero, fire services and the SES – these fabulous volunteer-led services as well as paid member services. Yet the minister would not talk about that today. She would not talk about this great big new tax which is going to fund core government services. It means every single Victorian will pay the price for the government's mismanagement. Households will have to pay twice as much in emergency services taxes. Farmers will have to pay about 170 per cent more

**Anthony Cianflone:** On a point of order, Acting Speaker, on relevance, this is a motion that is about health and investments we are making to grow the health workforce – our nurses, our midwives, our doctors – and training our young people for healthcare careers. This is not a motion that is foreshadowing debate on a bill that is yet to come back before this chamber. I ask you to draw the member back to the motion.

**Emma KEALY:** On the point of order, Acting Speaker, this was a wideranging debate and the minister herself spoke about –

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Iwan Walters):** Member for Lowan, I am ready to rule on the point of order. It has been a wideranging debate in the very limited amount of debate we have had to date – the minister was the first speaker – but the member for Lowan should make sure she is constrained to the motion.

**Emma KEALY:** It may come as a bit of education to government members opposite that when you need an ambulance you call Triple Zero. That is what I am talking about. This might come as a surprise to some Labor backbenchers. There are so many Victorians today that call Triple Zero because they have got a loved one who is unresponsive next to them, and they cannot get an answer. That is part of what the minister should be handling. It is something she has failed to do, and she is paid a premium to do that. These are Triple Zero services. That is part of what we are being sold as why the government needs to put this great big new tax on every single Victorian in this state. It is to fund a budget black hole, and we know it will not end up where we are being told it will end up. It is Victorians again who will have to pay the price for Labor's mismanagement of, in this instance, Victoria's health system. Do you know how Victorians pay the price? I do not know if any member of the Labor government opposite has ever sat down with a family member who has had a loved one die beside them while they have been waiting for Triple Zero –

*Members interjecting.*

**Emma KEALY:** This is not a joke. It is very disappointing to hear Labor backbenchers starting to laugh at this matter. It is extremely disturbing to hear Labor members laugh at a situation where people are on the phone waiting for somebody to answer and seeing their loved ones dying, seeing the last stages of their lives, not knowing when an ambulance will arrive. This is something that has certainly happened in Hamilton, and I have sat with family members through this. I cannot believe that the Labor members in this chamber are willing to make a joke out of this. I think it is a reflection upon every Labor backbencher who is now looking at having to win their seat in different ways. You have to face your own conscience if you think that it is a laughing matter that Victorians today cannot get

an ambulance. I think that that is a reflection on you, and you do not deserve to be re-elected. You have got people who manage to get in an ambulance and end up stuck in the ambulance on the hospital ramp and do not even get through the doors. I hope that never happens to your family. We are hearing more frequently of people on stretchers in the corridors of emergency departments who cannot find a bed and who are dying in these corridors some days after they were admitted to hospital. I hope that never happens to you. I hope you never have to listen to constituents who have gone through that situation, because it breaks my heart. I have had to go through that, and I think that it is something that is extraordinarily serious, because they are lives. People deserve dignity.

I am very sensitive to this today because I have lost three good friends in the last three days. I think that we need to make sure that we always look at why we are elected to this place. We can make jokes and grandstand, and you can try and bicker and say, 'You're right', 'You're wrong' or whatever. But we support health workers because they do save lives, and they deserve the resources to make sure that they can do their job well. Members of Fire Rescue Victoria, the CFA volunteers, the SES volunteers and Forest Fire Management, who put in so much time and effort at the Grampians and Little Desert bushfires over summer, are Victorians who give their best to try and make sure that our state is well looked after. They do it because they love it. They do it because they are proud of what they do. They do it because they want to make a difference. That is what should inspire each and every one of us in this place. We should want to make a difference every single time we get up in this chamber and say something, because it does mean something to Victorians. We cannot just play petty politics all the time and not realise that there is a consequence to the action or inaction of government. There is a consequence when you do put huge new taxes on people who cannot afford it.

My electorate is a heavily farming-dominated electorate. It is 20 per cent of the state; it is largely filled with national parks and farms. We are suffering a horrific drought. I learned a few hours ago that a good friend, someone I highly respect, had taken his own life. This drought is massive, and late today, after desperately calling for and needing drought relief for so many farmers, we see somehow this off-selling that they will get some drought relief tomorrow as part of this great big new tax. We have got a situation where farmers in drought are going to have a big new tax forced upon them. They will have to pay every year, no matter whether it is a productive year or not. They could have the best season they have ever had, with bumper crops, the best prices and huge income. They will pay the same amount that year as they will in a year like this, where there is no feed for stock. There is no feed in Victoria and there is none in most of New South Wales. The South Australian government have offered a generous rebate, which means that farmers have been able to secure fodder and they have better support. There is fodder over in Western Australia. But we have got fodder prices that are going from \$300 a tonne to \$465 a tonne in just three weeks. It is a massive increase, and it is simply unaffordable.

**Belinda Wilson:** On a point of order, Acting Speaker, the member for Lowan is talking about a very irrelevant situation that is not actually what we are talking about.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Iwan Walters):** Member for Narre Warren North, what is your point of order?

**Belinda Wilson:** Relevance – we are talking about a health motion.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Iwan Walters):** There is no point of order.

**Emma KEALY:** There are significant increases in input costs for farms, and this has a mental health impact. You can screw your face up, member for Narre Warren North, and just say, 'Well, why is that?' If you are facing a situation where your only outcomes are either to destock and lose all your genetic material and then have nothing – to be an intergenerational farmer who has lost everything and who has the weight of all your farming predecessors before you because you have lost that genetic stock – or not be able to afford anything so you lose your home, you lose your farm, you lose your family, you have a marriage breakdown and you lose everything, there are some people who think that

this world would be a better place without them, and that is why it is a health issue, member for Narre Warren North. That is why it is a bloody health issue, because it has an impact on their mental health, and they are committing suicide. As I said, my friend committed suicide two days ago and was found today. That is why it is a health issue and that is why it is related to this motion, because my people do not have any access to mental health support at this point in time. There is no mental health support.

As part of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, it was promised by the Andrews Labor government and then the Allan Labor government that they would deliver on all the recommendations, yet we still do not have a mental health local in our local area. We have got suicides happening in our area, and there is no way to do that. Do you know the reason we were given by the minister in last year's budget for why we would not get mental health locals? It was because there was no workforce. This comes back to the cut and thrust of exactly this motion. This motion is about the health workforce. This motion goes to the core. It is about the health workforce. The mental health workforce element from the royal commission's recommendations has been moved into the health workforce department. It fits exactly within that and yet it has been scrapped. We are being told as an excuse that we are not progressing with mental health reform because we have not got a mental health workforce, yet we are in this situation where they have scrapped the mental health workforce strategy. It was launched by Minister Merlino, who was the last minister who actually did something about the mental health reforms, back in 2021. If you bother to look at the mental health workforce strategy, it says it must be reviewed every two years. It ran out in 2024 and has never been reviewed. Not only was it not reviewed in 2023, it is now out of date.

We do not have a mental health workforce strategy, and the excuse given by the Minister for Mental Health in the other place is the reason we cannot keep going with the mental health royal commission recommendations and the implementation of them is we do not have a mental health workforce. Guess what, it is not rocket science. Update your bloody strategy and get on with training more people. Get on with supervising and providing more places. Get on with making sure that there are people who are able to turn to mental health, to get their training, to get their supervision and to be able to do it in Victoria, so that Victoria is a place of choice for mental health workers. We are very, very fortunate at the moment. The New South Wales mental health system is in collapse, so for the first time since the royal commission handed down its recommendations we are getting more people applying for jobs in Victoria. This is the first time that this has happened, but it is a fluke. It is because of the New South Wales collapse.

*Members interjecting.*

**Emma KEALY:** Acting Speaker, I find the interjections by the Labor backbenchers inappropriate. I am getting told 'Bring it on.'

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Iwan Walters):** I do not need guidance from the floor. Member for Lowan, it has been a debate that has been characterised by a fair bit of interjection from across the house, so I would suggest that we carry on. Everybody in the chamber can desist from interjections, which are of course disorderly.

**Emma KEALY:** I have no problem speaking to mental health or the healthcare sector. I worked in the healthcare sector. It was my career before politics. I had a career before politics, unlike many of the people who sit opposite me. I worked hard. I went to uni. I got a bachelor of biomedical science. I worked in the Northern Territory with Indigenous people very frequently. I worked in Alice Springs, and I worked in Darwin. I came back to Melbourne and worked in pathology. I was actually the CEO of a hospital for five years before I got on with coming into this place. I am very proud to sit next to a former nurse who knows very, very well what she is doing and the experience of working within the health system. We also have Ms Crozier in the other place, another former nurse, and I acknowledge the member for Melton, whom I worked with and I have acknowledged before, because we signed off, together with Edenhope and District Memorial Hospital and Ambulance Victoria, on the first MOU –

**Steve McGhie:** I didn't think I had a career, going by what you said earlier.

**Emma KEALY:** No, not at all. We signed off on the first MOU to support paramedics to provide services and support for people in Edenhope hospital when a doctor was not available.

The minister tried to tell me over the table that she has done so much to improve outcomes in hospitals across the state. I can tell you that is certainly not the case in my electorate of Lowan and in many corners of this state. In fact it is disappointing to me. I went back and actually went through one of the old annual reports that we published when I was CEO at that health service. It is so interesting to go back to that time, because it was a time that really did fill my cup in that it was great to be able to improve health outcomes for local people. I came from that town. I grew up in Edenhope – sixth generation there. It is the hospital I was born in, 32 years before I was appointed as CEO. For me it was great that we could train up nursing staff to be able to do some pathology testing and do some X-rays. It took pressure off the paramedics so people would not have to travel an hour to Horsham to have those tests done to be given the all clear. We were able to establish the first purpose-built medical clinic in Edenhope. We attracted the first female GP. We had the most amazing range of visiting services. We did not have enough work to support everybody. We would have liked to have full-time workers, but we had visiting physiotherapists, podiatrists, a social worker and a geriatrician. We also had a dentist that was based there a couple of days a week. We had a fantastic community health program. It really was a credit to the people that worked there. At the end of the day, and I am not pumping it up – I know we like to say it is the CEO, but it was not me – it was the bloody brilliant staff that we had. I would like to pay credit to Meredith Finnigan, as the director of nursing, and also Andrew Saunders, who was the director of community services at that time. We worked with every single staff member and treated everybody as equal, because everybody contributed in an amazing way to make sure that local people got health care.

I look back at what were delivering 11 years ago, and I look at the range of services that are there now. Speaking to people whom I am lifelong friends with and I have known my whole life, it is really, really hard to see how that service has been absolutely spun out. This is because of the merger with Ballarat under this idea of Grampians Health. Edenhope and District Memorial Hospital does not exist anymore. It has been written off in history.

**A member** interjected.

**Emma KEALY:** It was bugged by the Labor government, that is exactly right. The hospital is still there, absolutely, but their services have shrunk so much, which has impacted on local jobs. It impacts the ability of people to get access to high-quality health care locally. That has an impact on their health outcomes. It is a very simple formula. It has been catastrophic for that community. It is a small community of just a thousand people. The hospital is the biggest employer. It is a very, very important organisation in terms of providing support. The person who is in charge of finance probably is also the treasurer of the football–netball club, because they have got that knowledge and experience, or there is governance experience which is shared through the community as well. But what we have seen is this whittling down by the Labor government so that the services and the money are centralised into Ballarat, and it has just filled a massive budget black hole. Labor have proven they have not been able to manage what happens, particularly in country hospitals. We are seeing that happen in Horsham; it has just been devastating to speak to staff who work in the Horsham hospital. It does not matter whether they are nurses, whether they work in allied health, whether they work in linen services or whether they work in the kitchen or the maintenance department.

Sadly, in those latter departments in particular there are just not many people left, because it has all been centralised into Melbourne. The linen service is on its way to closing. These are people who are the salt of the earth, who work so hard. They are proud of their jobs. They have been in those jobs for years and years. That linen service is being closed, and that is millions of dollars out of our local economy in Horsham being pushed into Ballarat. We are seeing kitchen services now closing in Horsham and being relocated to Ballarat. We are seeing more and more patients having to receive

services in Ballarat because the doctors or the specialists are not coming out to Horsham anymore, because of the travel time. It eats into the productivity and eats into the service, and that puts more pressure on everybody who works in our health system in the local community. People are not as well, so there are more calls to paramedics, who have to come out and are under pressure because their numbers have not been increased locally.

Our MICA paramedics are at critically low levels. I think there is only one MICA paramedic from Ballarat all the way through to the border, and they see horrific instances. They see kids who are in awful positions. They see horrific trauma that they have to be involved in, and there is no time out from that. We had a horrific situation when one of our MICA paramedics took his own life a couple of years ago. He was a brilliant bloke, but staffing shortages meant that he was just burnt out. You cannot have one side of the story and ignore the other part. If someone losing their own life by their own hand is not enough to say, 'You know what, we can do better,' then I do not know what is.

You see it with the fire service as well. There are too many people in all emergency services who take their own lives. It has to stop, and the government has the power and is in the position to do that. You have got the funding to do that and you have got the power to do that. We have got a suicide intervention and reduction strategy. Again, it was released back in 2016, and it had an aspirational target to halve the suicide rate in Victoria within 10 years. We are now at rates that are higher than ever. It is terrible to see, and it is heartbreaking for the colleagues who see that and who find the bodies. It is horrifying for family and friends who have lost a loved one. It is horrifying for children who are left behind. It is horrifying for the entire community, and it is felt for a very, very, very long time.

This is why it is important that the government gets decisions right. I know this bill looks like it is coming back from the upper house to the Legislative Assembly right now. It will be a massive cost impost to rural communities. It is going to take millions of dollars out of our communities in the same way that the Grampians Health merger has and what is on the table now around the merger between Casterton Memorial Hospital and Western District Health Service in the south of my electorate. We simply cannot afford to take more and more money out of country Victoria, funnel it into a big black hole in Melbourne and never see anything come out. It is to the detriment of the state.

It has impacts at the most basic level on our gross domestic product, because we reduce our productivity if we do not support regional communities. Agriculture delivers so much to the state's economy. It creates the wealth and the tax that the government uses to spend to provide services for everyone in Victoria. But if we have health mergers that pull jobs and money and centralise it into the bigger cities like Melbourne, if we then have these massive taxes – another one today, which is going to raise over \$1 billion in its first year alone – and if we are predominantly taking money out of regional communities and out of regional LGAs, that is going to have an impact on our local people. It means that we have less shops locally. It means we have less jobs locally. It means that it is more likely that those things we do to keep us mentally and physically healthy – like playing footy or netball, playing a musical instrument or going out with our mates – dissipate because we do not have enough people to support the clubs. We do not have enough people to have that sense of community. These are impacts which are massive.

I do not believe that the Allan Labor government understands the implications of having a massive tax which is focused on taking money from farms. It is a surrogate land tax. I do not think you have thought through what the implications are. I also do not think that you understand what the implications will be on your vote, and that should be of great concern to you. You may not have had the opportunity to look through social media, but my social media – and it is being reported everywhere – is filled with feeds of people, volunteers, taking the batteries out of their pagers. They are throwing away their CFA uniforms. They feel absolutely disregarded and disrespected by the Allan Labor government. It is disgraceful after the summer that I have seen, with volunteers and paid firefighters – Forest Fire Management Victoria have been out there the whole time, Fire Rescue Victoria were here today – and the SES. There are so many people out there. They were there from the start of December to mid-February fighting fires, yet they are the ones that you are going to penalise the most with this tax. It is

the highest form of disregard and dishonour, and it is shameful that a Labor government that says it stands for workers is the one that is inflicting this great big tax.

It will play out at the next election. We are seeing that strongly. People see through what has happened today. It will certainly play out next Tuesday, when I understand there will be another massive rally on the steps of Parliament. This is the start of what will be, I think, a very, very poor decision. We know that Labor cannot manage money, but Victorians are sick of having to pay the price. They want to make sure that Labor pays the price for its own problems and its own mismanagement; for wasting money; for trying to gloss over the real issues that are happening in our community; for trying to say that there is no problem with the workforce in health care and in mental health care that we are seeing in this motion today; for trying to gloss over the fact we have serious issues when it comes to mental health in our emergency service workers; and for trying to gloss over the fact that putting a huge tax on people who are facing one of the worst droughts of their lifetime will affect their mental health and their physical health, not to mention the health of our country communities.

I feel like this has nearly turned into a grievance more than a motion. But I do very much appreciate that I was able to get all of that on the record because it has been a tough week for me personally, as I said. It is hard when people that you know and love are no longer with you when you thought they would be. It galls me that the Minister for Health thinks she is doing a great job when that is happening on her watch. Surely you cannot sleep at night when that is happening. Surely you think, 'I could do a bit better. I can do better.' It is not a time for gloating. It is a time to be a bit humble and say, 'You know what, maybe we got some things wrong and we need to do things differently.' Maybe it is time to stand up and say, 'I'm going to vote no to this great big tax from the Labor government. I'm going to actually stand up for the community that elected me to be here. I'm going to do what is right, and I'm going to vote down –

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Iwan Walters):** Order! I remind the member on her feet not to pre-empt debate on a subsequent item on the business program and to constrain her remarks to this motion.

**Emma KEALY:** This has been a very interesting motion to debate, but I am very pleased that I have been part of it because it shows Labor's true colours. It really does go to the heart of scoffing at suicide, scoffing at people who are dying in our healthcare system and scoffing at people who are waiting for an ambulance in pain and watching their loved ones die. That is nothing to scoff over, and it is nothing to be proud of. If you are proud of that, then shame on you, shame on your own conscience, and I hope that your electors hold you to account at the next election.

**Danny PEARSON** (Essendon – Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs, Minister for Finance) (23:44): I move:

That the debate be now adjourned.

**Motion agreed to and debate adjourned.**

**Ordered that debate be adjourned until later this day.**

### *Bills*

#### **Fire Services Property Amendment (Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund) Bill 2025**

##### *Council's suggested amendments*

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Iwan Walters):** I have received a message from the Legislative Council returning the Fire Services Property Amendment (Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund) Bill 2025 and suggesting amendments.

**Ordered that suggested amendments be taken into consideration immediately.**

**Council's suggested amendments considered:**

1. Clause 6, page 4, lines 27 and 28, omit "Forest Fire Management Victoria" and insert "emergency management".
2. Clause 6, page 4, after line 28 insert –
 

**“Examples**

  - 1 Functions of Emergency Management Victoria, the Emergency Management Commissioner, the Chief Executive, Emergency Management Victoria and the Secretary to the Department of Justice and Community Safety in relation to emergency management include operation of the following –
    - the State Control Centre;
    - Emergency Recovery Victoria;
    - the Emergency Alert Program in Victoria;
    - the Emergency Management Operational Communication Program.
  - 2 Functions of the Secretary within the meaning of section 3(1) of the **Forests Act 1958** in relation to emergency management include functions delegated to the Chief Fire Officer employed under that Act.”.
3. Clause 13, page 9, line 4, after “recipient” insert “other than the CFA, Fire Rescue Victoria and VicSES”.
4. Clause 13, page 9, line 6, omit “exceeding –” and insert “exceeding 95%.”.
5. Clause 13, page 9, lines 7 to 9, omit all words and expressions on those lines and insert –
 

‘(2B) The percentage of the annual funding requirements of the CFA and VicSES that are to be funded by the levy in a levy year is 95%.

(2C) The percentage of the annual funding requirements of Fire Rescue Victoria that are to be funded by the levy in a levy year is 90%.’.
6. Clause 13, page 9, after line 14 insert –
 

‘(4) After section 12(5) of the Principal Act **insert** –

“(5A) The Minister must specify in a notice of a determination in respect of the next levy year under subsection (1) –

  - (a) for each funding recipient –
    - (i) an estimate of the amount in dollars of the funding requirements of the funding recipient that are to be funded by the levy in that levy year; and
    - (ii) the percentage of the funding requirements of the funding recipient that the amount in subparagraph (i) represents; and
  - (b) an estimate of the amount of levy to be collected in that levy year for each land use classification specified in section 15(1); and
  - (c) that there is no duplication of funding.”.’.
  7. Insert the following New Clause to follow clause 17 –
 

**‘17A New section 62A inserted**

After section 62 of the Principal Act **insert** –

**“62A Proceeds of levy**

The proceeds of levy collected under this Act must not exceed the sum of –

    - (a) the amounts applied to fund the funding recipients in accordance with section 12(2A), (2B) and (2C); and
    - (b) the administrative costs incurred in the performance of functions under this Act.”.’.
    8. Clause 22, line 9, omit “determined under” and insert “specified in”.
    9. Clause 22, line 10, omit “12(2A)” and insert “12(2B)”.
    10. Clause 22, line 20, omit “determined under” and insert “specified in”.
    11. Clause 22, line 21, omit “12(2A)” and insert “12(2C)”.

**Danny PEARSON** (Essendon – Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs, Minister for Finance) (23:46): I move:

That this house make the amendments suggested by the Legislative Council.

The Legislative Council has suggested a number of amendments, which I will outline for the benefit of the chamber. An amendment is suggested to provide a guaranteed level of funding for the Country Fire Authority, Victoria State Emergency Service and Fire Rescue Victoria – that is via clauses to require that 95 per cent of the CFA and VICSES budgets and 90 per cent of FRV's budget are funded through the levy. As has been made clear by the Treasurer, this will have no impact on the budgets of these agencies, but it will ensure the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund is only funding our frontline emergency services.

There is also a suggested amendment to increase the funding percentage of FRV's budget that can be collected under the levy from 87.5 per cent to 90 per cent, following consultation with firefighters. This will provide a guaranteed funding level for Fire Rescue Victoria that cannot be altered by a future government. There is an annual reporting suggested amendment requiring the Treasurer to detail via the *Government Gazette* how the revenue collected through the levy is being spent, including a breakdown by entity and the percentage of the annual budget of the entity being funded.

There is another suggested amendment to clarify exactly what areas of the Department of Justice and Community Safety and Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action budgets the funding is being allocated to, to reaffirm that only direct emergency response and recovery functions are being funded through the levy. Finally, there is another suggested amendment that specifies that every single dollar raised by the levy will be spent on our emergency services, as has been the case since the introduction of this bill. These suggested amendments were drafted following extensive consultation with members of Parliament, community members, volunteers and farmers. I commend the suggested amendments to the house.

**James NEWBURY** (Brighton) (23:47): It is an absolute disgrace that we have seen sell-outs in the upper house sell out Victorians. Tonight we have seen an estimated 160 CFA brigades go offline. These are people who are always first there to protect their communities, so to see these brigades go offline tells you the depths to which they feel strongly about what this government is doing. They are the first people when this state needs them, when their communities need them, to be there in harm's way, and for them to be downing their tools tells you the depth of their feelings. I am sure that they were absolutely torn in making that decision, and none of them will have wanted to do it. But they have no other way to show the outrageous pain this government is causing Victorians than to do that in protest tonight. It is unprecedented. Of the 1200 brigades, to see some 160 – not including the tankers – go offline tonight tells you the depth to which people are concerned about this great big new dog of a tax.

What we also learned in the debate in the upper house tonight is that the government has done deals and has not costed them. The government has no idea of the cost of the deals they have done, deals that are not included in the suggested amendments, by the way. The suggested amendments that are being dealt with tonight in the chamber do not outline the dirty deals that have been done to get this bill through the Parliament. But how concerning is it that we have a budget paper that has been printed and we do not know the cost of the changes that have been made to get this bill through – potentially hundreds of millions of dollars, because rates have changed in terms of the tax. And the government has been crowing they are going to reach some fake surplus next week.

Yet we know the budget papers are absolute rubbish. The Treasurer has admitted it tonight. They have no idea of the cost of the dirty deals that have been done. The budget papers are not accurate when they have not even been released. They have been printed and have not been released. Whatever this is costing, the tax raised has clearly been reduced because of these deals. We do not know how much it is going to cost. Even in terms of the rebate, the rebate numbers previously published and the ones discussed in the debate tonight are two different numbers. The government has absolutely lost control

of the budget and more specifically with this tax. What it tells you is the budget papers are complete rubbish for this \$2.1 billion new tax over the next three years.

The coalition will not be supporting these amendments. That does not mean that we do not agree with every element of the amendments, but the amendments are going to be considered as a whole. I do think it is important to note that, although we do not support many of the elements of the amendments, we do support parts, because the government has picked up part of the proposals we have made. The government has directly lifted an amendment we proposed around reporting and said, 'We'll put our own little badge on it because we can't let the opposition and the crossbench agree to that more-transparency-by-way-of-reporting measure, so we will move the amendment ourselves.' We support that, but the amendments are being dealt with as a whole and so therefore we cannot. In relation to the other amendments, there are some consequential amendments which we did not take issue with either.

But in terms of the listing of where the funding would be applied, we have had an issue with that and we moved amendments in the Council, which were defeated. Of course we do not support that. We have, in principle, from the get-go, said that we feel very strongly that this is the wrong tax model and the government is effectively using a new tax to fund core government business. So we do not support the amendments in relation to that, the first amendments in the package. It is worth noting that in relation to the reporting measure – though it is included in these amendments, which we will not support – we have not got the opportunity to break that down and let that go through separately, but it should not be read that we oppose that. In fact, as I said, the government has picked up our amendment.

What the overall amendments do and the final bill will do is cause immense damage in the community. There is no question this government are tax addicts. This bill will cause deep damage to the community. Tonight, when the Treasurer was speaking about this in the Council, we saw the flippant nature of the way she said things like, 'For the average property the price will only go up from \$190 to \$250,' as if the increase meant nothing. She literally talked about it flippantly, and when she did, it did not surprise anybody who was watching that this was the same Treasurer who, when asked about the increase, said, 'People can afford to pay.' That is when you know how broken a Labor government is, because this is what happens when Labor have been in government for more than a term.

They forget that taxpayers, at the end of the day, work hard to raise a dollar through the sweat of their hard work. That dollar comes in, through tax, to the government. Labor always assumes that this money somehow grows on trees and it is their right to waste it. You could see, when the Treasurer was talking about these increases tonight, the absolute coldness of it. We know because the Treasurer, when asked about these measures, said that people could afford to pay, just flippantly. Well, people cannot afford to pay, because this is the 60th increase in taxes and charges by this government. What this government is doing is absolutely crippling people, and for the Treasurer tonight to talk about these tax increases so flippantly was outrageous. We know that Labor are tax addicts. We know this was their plan. At least their plan was clear to everybody. They did not resile from it. They said that they were going to overtax everybody; they said that they were going to run government differently by creating new taxes instead of funding core government business through consolidated revenue. They were open about it; you have got to give them that.

I think a special award needs to go to the crossbenchers, who through the federal election held out their votes purely to con voters. They did not vote for this bill throughout the federal election period, because they wanted to con voters. They did not want voters to know what types of con artists they are, what types of dirty deals they are willing to do. They wanted to wait till after the federal election before they sold out. You can hear the government protecting their con artist friends. What a surprise that is. They held out. You can hear them standing with the Greens. They stood with the Greens tonight. They stand with the Greens. They have done a deal with the Greens. What a disgrace that the government would do a deal with the Greens to sell out Victorians. It is an absolute disgrace. We have a Treasurer who is mocking Victorians, saying that Victorians can afford to pay, and we have minor parties holding out their vote until after an election to con people throughout the election and then after the election vote against them. I am very, very sure on this one: Victorians are going to remember, and

we are going to remind them. Not only has this government hurt Victorians but the crossbench have sold out, which is absolutely disgraceful. We have fought at every single opportunity to call out how bad this great big new dog of a tax is.

I know tonight many members on our side of the chamber want to speak on this, so I will make sure they all have an opportunity to speak, because all members who want to speak on this should have that opportunity so that they can put on the record how they have stood on behalf of Victorians, so they can put on the record how it is that the Labor Party and the crossbench have done a dirty deal to sell them out. This tax is going to hurt people. To see 160 CFA brigades go off line tonight should tell the government the damage that this tax is doing. As I said earlier, to see the people who are first to walk into danger to protect their communities protest tonight –

**Michaela Settle** interjected.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** The member for Eureka is warned.

**James NEWBURY:** and down their tools tells you how strongly they feel about what this government is doing. I am sure every single person who is doing that tonight is doing it against their best nature, because they do not want to be doing that. They want to be volunteering, they want to be helping and they want to be standing by to protect their community. For them to say they need to send a message should tell the government to listen. The government should be listening to these people who are the first in line to protect our community, and it is not listening. It is absolutely disgraceful what this government is doing. Every single member that wants to should take the opportunity to put on record our disgust and our opposition to what this government is doing.

When it comes to tax, we will have more to say. Of course we will, because what the government is doing in terms of tax is absolutely crippling Victoria. The government often says – they shout across the chamber – ‘What are you going to do on tax?’ I do not think I can possibly talk about how much I do not like the tax regime in Victoria. I do not think there is any secret about that. I do not think it is a secret on our side of the chamber. In our DNA we do not support high taxes. We do not support them; it is in our DNA. It is no surprise. No-one over that side of the chamber should be surprised that we do not support the current tax mix. We do not support what the government is doing in relation to tax. We have stood again and again and again and said how outrageous what the government is doing is. We oppose taxes in this chamber regularly. Of course we do, because we do not support increased taxes. Of course we do not. This is in our DNA. Sixty times – I mean, there must come a time when you stop –

**Michaela Settle** interjected.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Member for Eureka – 10 minutes.

**Member for Eureka withdrew from chamber.**

**James NEWBURY:** with your Cheshire smiles. Today when this bill was being discussed and the government moved to delay the house adjourning, everyone cheered on that side of the chamber. They cheered to increase tax. I mean, can you believe it? Look it up in *Hansard*. Earlier today the government cheered that they were staying back late to introduce a \$2 billion tax over three years. What a bunch of – I cannot even say; it would be unparliamentary. But they cheered multiple times, by the way, at staying back late to impose a new tax on Victorians.

We would love to know next week, in relation to this tax, how much it is going to cost. But we cannot. We will have a budget paper that we already know will not be properly listing what this tax is going to raise. We know the budget papers are a complete con. The Treasurer said it tonight. She said tonight that she has no idea what the cost of the deals is. What are the budget papers worth? We already know that the fake surplus that is supposedly being listed in it is only made up of the increased GST bailout. It is the first time our state has required a bailout. The government was crowing about that, weren't they? They were crowing about the fact that we required a bailout. I mean, seriously, when someone

has to come along and bail you out, doesn't that just show what a hopeless bunch of financial managers you are? 'We've been bailed out for the first time in history. We're so hopeless that someone needs to come and save us, and we're crowing about it.'

I mean, seriously, what a hopeless bunch of financial mismanagers this group is, and for them to crow about it. But what is worse, and we all saw it earlier today, is the government were cheering when this house moved to sit late. The Leader of the House came in here and moved a continuation motion, which means we can sit later so we can consider an increase in tax tonight, and this government all cheered. They had their arms up, cheering: 'Yay, great big new tax.' Cheering – I mean, it is craven. It is so incredibly craven what this bunch do, crowing about increasing tax. You never know, when these amendments are dealt with later, when these amendments pass, we might hear them cheer again. I can see the energy over there. I can see it now, them crowing. 'Yeah, we've got a great big new tax through.' How clever. When you introduce a tax you hurt people. When you introduce a tax what you should do is work out, frankly, what taxes you do not need. That should be your base position: what shouldn't you be taking from people. Because, guys, it is not your bloody money. That is what is so outrageous about these taxes.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Through the Chair.

**James NEWBURY:** Deputy Speaker, I apologise. What is so outrageous is that this is not your money. Every tax dollar is taxpayers money. No government has a God-given right to that money. It should stay in the taxpayers' pockets. Yet this government crows about it and cheers about it multiple times. All of you were cheering. Do not say you were not; you were. You were cheering. It was absolutely outrageous, all of you. We all saw it.

**A member** interjected.

**James NEWBURY:** Yes, that is right. We will get the video. You were cheering about increasing taxes. What a bunch of craven crooks. Anyway, a bunch of craven crooks they are. But cheering about increasing taxes – are we surprised? No, because the Treasurer said, when asked about the pain this would cause, 'Well, they can afford to pay.' Are you serious? I thought when the former Treasurer said that, because the former Treasurer said the same, that he was out of touch. He had been in government for so long, he had been working for the Labor Party for so long, that he was out of touch. For the new Treasurer to come in and say exactly the same thing just shows there is something rotten in this government. There is something rotten when a Treasurer thinks they have a God-given right to someone else's money and they do not care about the pain they cause every single taxpayer with these 60 new and increased taxes. And to think, on top of that, that the Treasurer has not even got the wit and wherewithal to know what it cost. How can you do a deal and not know the cost? How can you do that as a Treasurer?

**Richard Riordan** interjected.

**James NEWBURY:** That is right. And the answer, member for Polwarth, is she does not care about the money. She does not care about taxpayers money; there is no respect for taxpayers money. When asked how much these deals would cost, she did not know. It tells you also that the deals were about the political dividend of the vote. That is what they were about. They were saying to the sellouts, 'How much is it going to cost us to buy you out? How much is it going to cost? We will pay it. We will give you the blank cheque, and we don't need to know how much it will cost.'

We will have a budget next week that will not even properly account for these deals. We can go into detail about why the budget is a great big crock, but this is just another example of why the budget cannot be believed, because when the Treasurer was asked to account tonight for these changes, she had no idea.

The other thing that came out, which was just flagrant, was when she was asked about the rebate scheme and people receiving it. Of course she was not fully across the detail on that, because why

would she be? But when it came to the rebate she also said renters do not get it. If you are a volunteer and you do not own your property, guess what you do not get. You do not get a rebate. Did anyone know that little one? No-one knew that. If you do not own your property and you are a volunteer, do you get a rebate? No, renters do not get a rebate. The Treasurer admitted that tonight. The Minister for Industry and Advanced Manufacturing is looking quizzical; the minister did not know. The Treasurer admitted that tonight.

I would ask the Greens, the supposed champions of the renter: is that the deal that was done with the Greens? Have the Greens sold out renters tonight? The answer is yes. These amendments sell out renters. Can you believe it? Tonight I challenge the Greens to come into this chamber and talk about their deal – if they are still here, and I am sure they are not. I say to the attendants, the clerks, the caterers and everybody who is still here, thank you for keeping us going. You are all doing an incredible job, and we all thank you. I note we do not even know if the Greens are still here, but if they are, I put the challenge out to them: did you know?

**Danny O'Brien** interjected.

**James NEWBURY:** That is right. It is Friday now; it is stay-at-home day. I ask the Greens, who have not accounted for themselves today at all – they have dodged every possible media – to explain their vote when they come in here. Explain why, as champions of renters, the government's rebate scheme does not extend to renters if you are a volunteer and you do not own your property – did anyone know that? I am seeing a lot of very confused people on the government side of the chamber. Minister, if it helps, when the Treasurer said that, she said it very, very softly. 'They don't own their property,' she said. If you are a volunteer and a renter, guess what you do not get. The volunteers that rent do not count for this government and do not count for the Greens, their supposed champions. I am looking forward to hearing from every Labor member who gets up talking about their protections for renters.

What is so clear about this bill is that Victorians have absolutely had enough when it comes to this government's tax addiction. This evening, as we saw reports coming in of CFA brigades downing their tools, I was with the Leader of the National Party in the Council. We were aware how strongly Victorians were over what this government was doing with tax, but we were both struck when CFA volunteers downed their tools – the people who are there first and always do the right thing. That should tell you something. And it was not one, it was not two; the last reports were 160-plus tankers –

**Danny O'Brien** interjected.

**James NEWBURY:** Now 200, I am advised.

I would say to the government: do not make light of these reports. Do better than that, guys; do better than that. At least 200 have downed –

*Members interjecting.*

**James NEWBURY:** Make an issue of everything else I have said, but do not make issue of that. Two hundred brigades have downed their tools. I am advised it is now 200 who have walked away. We should say to ourselves, 'If one volunteer is downing their tools, we should be listening,' because it is the first person who will not want to walk away. The CFA volunteers will always be the first person there, so for a reported 200 to be downing their tools tonight should say to us that there is a huge proportion of the community who are now saying, 'Enough.' So for the government to be cheering earlier tonight in this chamber is an absolute disgrace. It says there is something so incredibly rotten with this government. It is just incredibly rotten. The government thinks people can afford to pay. They cannot. It is absolutely rotten. The Greens will presumably have to come in here and vote tonight. Whether or not they explain themselves will be interesting, because they did not in the Council.

**A member** interjected.

**James NEWBURY:** Well, they might have gone home. I do not think they will be in bed. They have an opportunity to come in and explain themselves, and they need to give Victorians their reasoning as to why they have got in bed with this rotten government. These amendments do exactly that. It is a dirty deal that is hurting too many people, and you can see it. It is an incredibly profound message that is being sent by the CFA volunteers tonight. What the government is doing with this tax is fundamentally wrong. It is absolutely, fundamentally wrong. It is hurting people and it is going to hurt people, and the craven joy from the government over this tax is absolutely shameful. They should stand condemned for doing it, and I hope every single Victorian remembers what this government has done to them.

**Tim RICHARDSON (Mordialloc) (00:17):** I rise to speak on the amendments to the Fire Services Property Amendment (Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund) Bill 2025. You could not get a more classic example of a 3-minute speech spread over 30 minutes. If that is the entree to the budget reply speech next week, goodness me, we want a refund. That was an extraordinary trail of destruction, and it really opened up a window to where the mindset of those opposite really is, because in the 1800-second rant from the member for Brighton there was not one single mention of an investment in emergency services – not one single mention. I listened intently to the member for Brighton, and there was not one single mention of investing in emergency services and the notion that we all work as one and that principle.

**Brad Battin** interjected.

**Tim RICHARDSON:** The member for Berwick, the Leader of the Opposition, can interject, but we remember what was said about career firefighters at the Bunyip State Park fire. We remember the gaslighting that happened here in 2015 and 2016 that they had to walk back. They can go out on the steps of Parliament, but everyone remembers what the member for Berwick did when tens of millions of dollars were talked about for fire reform. That was tens of millions of dollars for fire reform that the member for Berwick, the Leader of the Opposition, opposed. The Leader of the Opposition has got form. It is about 2 am that he gets the front page of the *Herald Sun* and reads what his next clips might be. But this is a window into the policy narrative –

**James Newbury:** On a point of order, Deputy Speaker, relevance.

**Tim RICHARDSON:** Relevance from you?

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Without assistance, member for Mordialloc. The debate is supposed to be on the amendments. We did stray a bit from that in the lead speech. I would encourage the member to come back to the amendments, please.

**Tim RICHARDSON:** We heard in 1800 seconds – 30 minutes – cost, tax and nothing about the need to fund emergency services, and they are they are the fundamental principles of the suggested amendments. The increase in the guarantee from 87.5 to 90 per cent, following consultation with firefighters and the FRV – let us just take that back a step. That is not narrated as a cost or a tax dollar that should be taken away or out of the pockets of taxpayers, as the member for Brighton said, which is absolutely –

**Sam Groth** interjected.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** The member for Nepean is warned.

**Tim RICHARDSON:** absolutely the case. They would cut, slash and take hundreds of millions out of emergency services. We have seen tonight, in the response given, whatever consideration the member for Brighton put forward. But the member for Brighton not once said that the investment in emergency services was a necessary thing, that any additional investment in emergency services, any additional thing for CFA, for their trucks and fleets and their need for replacements, or the case that has been put forward –

**James Newbury** interjected.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** The member for Brighton has been warned.

**Tim RICHARDSON:** by Fire Rescue Victoria for their ageing fleet and the replacements that are needed or the SES and their funding needs in the future.

*Members interjecting.*

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Member for Eureka – 10 minutes.

**Member for Eureka withdrew from chamber.**

**Tim RICHARDSON:** That is clearly spelt out – that the needs of the ageing fleets in CFA, Fire Rescue Victoria and the SES that have been put forward would not be supported, because in not one second of that contribution over 30 minutes was a case put forward for additional funding for any emergency services – not once. That was an opportunity, and those –

**Richard Riordan** interjected.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** The member for Polwarth can leave for 10 minutes.

**Member for Polwarth withdrew from chamber.**

**Tim RICHARDSON:** opposite, like the member for Polwarth, narrate that it is not part of the amendments. Well, it is literally in the amendments guaranteeing a funding levy for emergency services. As he rants and goes and thinks about wind farms and wire rope barriers, maybe he should have a think about the emergency services that need to be funded into the future and the impacts of climate change and other changes into the future and how they will impact on our communities and the need for support going forward.

There is a significant number of amendments, and, importantly, some footnotes in the amendments that will be gazetted show clearly in the documentation where that funding will go and where the levy will be spent. That is important on behalf of Victorians. Critically the government is committing to a guaranteed level of funding for the CFA, Fire Rescue Victoria and the State Emergency Service by removing the words ‘up to’ for these agencies. Brigades 33 and 34 – Mentone and Highett – service my community in the north of my electorate. I have a volunteer CFA brigade. I have an integrated brigade at Patterson River that supports my community –

**Cindy McLeish** interjected.

**Tim RICHARDSON:** What do they think of me, member for Eildon? I will be at a CFA dinner – the 100 years of Edithvale CFA – on Saturday night, so I will ask them. But they keep having me back, and they had me ring the bell. I see time and time again career firefighters who serve my community, and I put on the record my thanks and appreciation to them. Their representations around ageing fleet into the future are a well-made case in point, and I hope that this goes to some of the funding and support that is needed for the critical work that they do, including to the ageing fleet of the CFA, and more funding for the State Emergency Service. I have Greater Dandenong SES and Chelsea SES in my communities. This is what this is about. It is not just about tax to take from community, it is about justifying the emergency services investment into the future. In a 30-minute contribution that had 3 minutes of content, you would have thought there could have been 3 seconds to say we should fund emergency services more – not once was that uttered. It was only about the cuts that would be made and the impacts that have on emergency services into the future. These are important amendments. They needed the consideration of the upper house in our Parliament and the important consultation frame they have gone through. It is important to get these through the house.

**James Newbury** interjected.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Member for Brighton – 10 minutes.

**Member for Brighton withdrew from chamber.**

**Danny O'BRIEN** (Gippsland South) (00:24): I have just got one question for the member for Mordialloc. If this bill and these amendments are so much about supporting our emergency services workers, why are those that are supposedly benefiting from them downing tools tonight in protest at this legislation? The member for Brighton talked about 160. I had my own captains telling me that 160 brigades had parked up. The *Herald Sun* is now reporting that 200 brigades have parked up tonight and said, 'We are unavailable because we are protesting against this new tax.' If it is so good for emergency services, why are those volunteers that get up on the trucks and fight for our communities day in and day out parking up those trucks? They are doing it because they know this is a con job. They know this is not about emergency services. This is about fixing the budget black hole that the Allan Labor government has established.

It is absolutely clear, and yet the member for Mordialloc goes for 10 minutes and cannot even acknowledge that. This is not \$2.1 billion of extra funding for emergency services. This is a big cost-shift. This is a tax pea-and-thimble trick. We are taking half-a-dozen agencies that are core government services and have always been funded by consolidated revenue, we are shifting them out of consolidated revenue and we are charging Victorian taxpayers for them again – \$2.1 billion. When those in the other place asked the Treasurer how much it is saving consolidated revenue, she did not even have the decency to tell Victorians what it is. The government has at least been able to advise us that nearly \$1 billion in costs for Triple Zero Victoria, Forest Fire Management Victoria and Emergency Management Victoria will now be taken out and put into this great big new tax that Victorians are going to have to pay. So do not tell me, member for Mordialloc, that this is about supporting our emergency services workers. This is just a budget cost-shift, and the member for Mordialloc would know it if he stopped just reading the government lines that he gets every time. He reckoned the member for Brighton gave the same speech for 30 minutes. We just heard the same 1-minute speech from the member for Mordialloc for 10 minutes, over and over and over again.

As for the deals with the Greens, those of us on this side are pretty sick of hearing those on that side say how bad the Greens are and then them going home every night and jumping back into bed with them. Whether it is preferences or it is deals like this, here we are. I am disappointed that the Minister for Finance is not here, because he loves to get outraged. Whenever there is an opportunity, they say, 'We'll cut a deal with the Greens,' and here is the deal we have got today. Farmers are so rapt – I am hearing from them all around the state – they are no longer going to have to pay a 189 per cent increase in their fire services levy; thanks to the Greens they are only going to have to pay 150 per cent. They are dancing in the streets at how wonderful this deal is that the Greens have cut with the government. I might add that not one of the suggested amendments that we are talking about here actually reflects the deal that the Greens have supposedly done with the Labor Party, because all of it is on trust. Apparently we are going to have all sorts of other deals that the government is going to announce, and the Greens are expecting us to be happy about it. It is absolutely outrageous. They say, 'We're saving you something' – as I said, golly gee, we are dancing in the street. It is now only a three times increase in our fire services levy instead of a four times increase. You cannot put lipstick on a pig and tell me it is pretty. This is just a joke.

It is not just about the farmers. Even after this deal we will still have every home owner in the state paying double for their emergency services levy, every commercial business owner in the state paying double and every industrial property owner in the state paying a 64 per cent increase – and every renter. The member for Brighton touched on this, but what he did not touch on was one of the answers given by the Treasurer in the other place, which was that the out years for the budget update show an increase next year of \$610 million and then for the two out years after that another \$765 million each year. The Treasurer just acknowledged that that \$310 million over the last two years is a new tax, a new increase, a doubling of the rate and a doubling of the fixed charge on non-principal private residences. Now, what are they? They are predominantly places landlords provide for people to rent. Another \$310 million is to be added to the rental bill at a time that this state is suffering a rental crisis of both availability and affordability. The geniuses on the Treasury benches over there think another \$310 million is a good idea to add to that – what a disgrace.

**Bridget Vallence** interjected.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Exactly, member for Evelyn: the Greens also think that is a good idea. These are people who stand there and profess to be in favour of renters and supporting them, but instead they are going to whack another \$310 million of tax on the rental sector. That is just ridiculous.

Every Victorian pays for this, because all of these charges get passed on. The member for Mordialloc should understand, as we do over here, that when you add taxes to Victorians, which they cannot pass on, it hurts. It hurts in a cost-of-living crisis. We know that our farmers are struggling at the moment. We know that as a result of drought, particularly in western Victoria, they are feeling the pinch, and the thanks that they get from this government is this new big tax – a 150 per cent increase on their taxes, which they will fight. You wonder why they turn up on the front steps of Parliament to protest. You wonder why they are downing tools tonight and parking up trucks at 200 brigades around the state. They are the ones who get on those trucks. They are the volunteers. When I spoke to them out the front the other day I said, 'Put your hand up if you're a farmer.' Ninety per cent of the crowd did. I said, 'Keep your hand up if you're a volunteer.' Ninety per cent of the crowd kept their hands up, because they are the people that actually get up and do it. Yet we have got this government putting a tax on them for the joy of volunteering their time to go out and look after our communities. It is all about this Labor government's inability to manage money. It is all about trying to save money from consolidated revenue and add it to Victorians to pay another big tax.

We have been getting messages of support tonight to keep up the fight on this issue. Every one of us on this side has been hearing from people in our communities, telling us about the fire brigades that are shutting down tonight, telling us to keep going and telling us to keep the fight up against this great big new tax. We have a Treasurer over there who has made this deal with the Greens and has admitted in the other place that she does not know the cost of it. If I say Labor cannot manage money, there is your evidence for it. They make a deal and they make a change to the rates that people are going to be charged, and they cannot tell Victorians what that will cost. We know, though, that what the government has budgeted is \$2.1 billion. We also know therefore, given the changes they have made today, that whatever they put out on Tuesday is irrelevant. It is not worth the paper it is written on because the government does not know what these changes impact. Mr Davis in the other place even tried to follow up. He asked if it was tens of millions of dollars or if it was hundreds of millions of dollars. The Treasurer could not tell him. This is a government that cannot manage money.

**Sam Groth** interjected.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** He put it in as simple economic terms as he possibly could, but she could not answer the question. I say again to the government: if this bill is about supporting emergency services workers, why are they protesting on the front steps of Parliament? Why are they bringing their trucks – including their private trucks that they use regularly to support all their communities, including Crown land areas – and complaining on the front steps of Parliament? Why has this debate united a disparate group of organisations throughout the community? This slug is lumped on all Victorians because Labor cannot manage money, and all Victorians are paying the price.

**Nina TAYLOR (Albert Park) (00:34):** No-one is enjoying the increasing frequency and ferocity of fires, storms and floods, and it is the emergency services who are on the front line and having to cop that day in, day out. We cannot just sit on our hands and pretend it is not getting worse and is not getting harder for them. That is exactly the imperative for these changes. We must back in our emergency services. I will only speak to the suggested amendments, and I will speak briefly, because I do trust that the matter has been thoroughly transacted in the upper house, which is completely appropriate. Also, the member for Mordialloc has spoken to many aspects of this very important legislation. I should say that the suggested amendments that were introduced in that house have had thorough consultation with community members, volunteers and farmers. It is very important that do I emphasise that the government will commit to a guaranteed level of funding for the CFA, Fire Rescue

Victoria and the Victoria State Emergency Service by removing the words ‘up to’ from these agencies’ funding allocations. As we have made clear before –

*Members interjecting.*

**Nina TAYLOR:** You misunderstood what I said. As we have made clear before, this will have no impact on the budgets of these agencies, but it will ensure that the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund is only funding our frontline emergency services. It is about services, and I am not surprised that those opposite do not care about services. But we do, and that is why we are backing them in. We are also increasing the funding percentage for FRV that can be collected under the levy from 87.5 to 90 per cent, following consultation with firefighters. This will guarantee funding for Fire Rescue Victoria. In talking about accountability, we are proposing an annual reporting clause requiring the Treasurer to detail via the *Government Gazette* how the revenue collected through the levy is being spent, including a breakdown by entity and the percentage of the annual budget of the entity being funded.

As a final note, I should also say we are proposing to insert footnotes to clarify exactly what areas of the Department of Justice and Community Safety and the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action budget funding is being allocated to, reaffirming that only direct emergency response and recovery functions are being funded through the levy. I hope that allays some of the concerns and perhaps surmounts some of the extraordinary misinformation and distortion that is being perpetuated by those opposite.

**Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (00:37):** I must say that the member for Albert Park did not allay any of our fears – not even a little bit. We are here to debate suggested amendments – I think it is about the first time I have ever debated suggested amendments – and just when you think the government cannot get any worse, they do. They continue to get worse. This time they have got worse with the help of a section of the crossbench – the Greens in particular – who have really sold out, as we have heard, on renters, which is really disappointing. I listened to quite a bit of the debate and watched how they formulated the suggested amendments. As has already been canvassed, when the Treasurer was asked about costings and what the deals and the changes mean – I wrote down her quote – she said, ‘We are working through the announcements I have made today. We are working through them.’ I reckon the budget is already printed. Now all of these numbers in the budget are rubbery, because she has entered into some deals and because they needed to get this through to address that big black hole – that big budget deficit that they have got, which is rapidly hitting \$200 billion. This is a big new tax. When you look at the bill itself and the suggested amendments, it is under the guise of helping emergency services like the CFA, SES and Fire Rescue Victoria. It is under the guise of helping volunteers and our emergency services, but as I have said, the government has lost control of the budget and lost control of its spending, and it needs to grab another \$2.14 billion. That is a sizable amount of money that they have to grab to fill one of their black holes. I know how desperate they would have been to do any deals to get that through, because they did not know how they were going to fill that otherwise.

What appalled me during this whole debate was that the Treasurer said people can afford to pay. I can believe she said it, because as I said, just when you think it cannot get any worse, the government does get worse. We are in a cost-of-living crisis. I know the government knows that. They do not listen. They keep hearing it time and time again, but it goes in one ear and out the other. This is the 60th tax that they have introduced – and these people can afford to pay? The farmers who were to be slugged with a 189 per cent increase in the fire services property levy, do you reckon they are singing along thinking ‘Wow, it’s only a 150 per cent increase?’ The farmers in Mansfield, who have really severe drought conditions, and Murrindindi, where the dams are dry and paddocks have no feed on them, do you reckon they have got all this extra cash to fork out for this? In the Yarra Valley the price of an acre is quite hefty compared to other areas of the state. All of the vineyards and fruit growers down there, the orchardists, are not going to be dancing in the streets about a 150 per cent increase on what they were paying in the fire services levy. They are in drought. If you are a commercial operation and a home owner – double. People cannot afford to pay these costs during a cost-of-living crisis.

We have heard talk about the rebates for CFA members and the convoluted process that they are going to have to go through to get them. CFA members are in the emergency services and the volunteer brigades that the government looks to be talking about supporting. We have got them off line now; it is reported that a couple of hundred brigades are off line until Tuesday, and I have heard that Werribee is probably one of those. The member for Werribee bangs on about the Werribee CFA and about what a great member he was there. I am not sure that they believe that.

*Members interjecting.*

**Cindy McLEISH:** No, you had to make changes mid election for him. With what we have got here, one thing that we need to keep at the heart of this, which is again mentioned in the suggested amendments, is that not only are the CFA and so many farmers protesting, but core government services are going to be funded through this new tax. You should not be in such a position of financial incompetence that you have to tax everything just to pay for what you should be paying for already. There is the VICSES; Triple Zero Victoria, which last year had a budget cut of \$38 million but which now has got to get a little bit more to try and prop it up; the State Control Centre; Forest Fire Management Victoria; some functions in the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action; Emergency Management Victoria; and Emergency Alert – some \$1 billion. This should be paid out of general revenue, out of consolidated revenue, not a new tax of about \$1 billion that is going to pay for core government services. This is just financial negligence and incompetence.

We have our emergency services. We have Fire Rescue Victoria driving old trucks. What do they want? They want a rolling replacement program. That should be in place. Regardless of whether this goes through, the government needs to support our fire services, whether it is the paid career firefighters or the volunteers. I have volunteer stations that need upgrading, with trucks that also need to be replaced, that are just not getting a look in from the government, because they have gone broke. They cannot manage money and they cannot manage their finances, so they have got to put this new tax in there. This is just extraordinary. How much is the SES going to get out of this? How much is the CFA going to get? These are questions that could not be answered by the government. This is one of the most appalling and disappointing bills that I have seen before the Parliament. I am so disappointed in members of the crossbench. A member for Northern Victoria in the other place has ignored the conditions in Northern Victoria and the constituents that she represents. She has ignored them and sold out to the government. For what? I am not sure. As we said, the Greens have sold out. Who knows what deals have been done. 'Trust us on this,' says the government, I am sure. We have heard the government say before, 'We don't like the Greens. We don't believe in all of the things that they do,' but they are bedfellows and they cannot help themselves but continue to go back to get the support of the Greens to put in their additional taxes. We have the 60th tax coming into place, and this is a con job. It is a con because it is trying to fill the budget black hole. You should be able to fund our fire services and the core government services without such an enormous increase. This is shameful.

We have seen it with the mental health levy. The government wanted to fund mental health services by putting in a new tax. They are doing the same here. What is next? What will be the next tax that is in place to cover parts of the government that they cannot manage? This is just appalling, and I am so disappointed with this bill.

**John LISTER** (Werribee) (00:45): It looks like it was a liberal few hours in the bar earlier, but I shall not go too far into it. It is interesting that the member for Eildon wishes to cast aspersions on my role as a volunteer. I am saying that I was volunteering for them and turning out – well, I still am. In fact I am still so operational that around 9 minutes ago I received a page for a rescue call in Truganina to support the great staff at station 57, and this is the second rescue call that I have had since we have been here in this extended session. It is an honour to represent my community here, but it is also an honour to serve my community as a volunteer.

*Members interjecting.*

**John LISTER:** I think it is a pretty low demonstration of the respect they have for volunteers if they are yelling at someone talking about their volunteer experience.

I want to bring in a little bit of context. We are talking about some suggested amendments that have been made after some discussions and work that have been done in the upper house, and I thank those members in the upper house for their work. Those opposite say that this volunteer fund is going to cause deep damage to community. This is the same playbook that we saw a few years ago when again they had people on the front steps. They said that same thing. They had that same scare campaign when they opposed presumptive rights for firefighters, both volunteer and career. It is the same playbook, and it is shameful. They also opposed a combined fire agency for career firefighters.

*Members interjecting.*

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Order! You were so civil for a little while there. The member to continue without assistance.

**John LISTER:** I do not want to turn into the member for Brighton and yell a lot, but this is something that I am particularly passionate about. Seeing this same cynical playbook being used by those opposite, I would like to reflect on some of the advocacy that has been done by the union that represents our career staff. There are some things in here that do go to address some of those concerns, although there is still more work to be done. Having that \$40 million rolling fleet replacement program is really important. As someone who is also trained to operate and drive those div B pumpers, the Scania's, I understand some of the concerns they have. I would say the \$110 million that we will be putting towards that rolling fleet replacement program is really important as well. It is not a waste, like the member for Brighton said it would be, to have this fund. He said it would be a waste to fund things like those new rescue trucks for the VICSES. We need to also recognise that this fund is about expanding those agencies that will receive that money. I look forward to going on Monday to the Wyndham SES unit to help out with the personal training that they are doing around physical training.

One thing that I would like to say in this entire debate is that that principle that we work as one in the emergency services is being lost. One of those important things is not only supporting those agencies that are responding to the pagers but also supporting those services that support those volunteers. The State Control Centre – literally it is in the name. I am not going to go into it. Emergency Recovery Victoria is supporting not only the people who are dealing with disaster relief on the ground or the SES units that are going out to do the clean-up but also those very communities that are affected. That has been clarified in the suggested amendment, and I think it is really important to clarify that that is what this money is going towards.

There is the emergency alert program. I am sure many of those opposite have got the VicEmergency app on their phones, and if they have not I would highly recommend getting it. VicEmergency is one of those things that is funded through the emergency alert program, as well as the text messaging service that we have. Although it was a little bit obscure and I had to triple-check what it was, the emergency management operational communications program that EMV runs also goes towards replacing things, and those are tenders that we have for radio equipment, pagers and other technology that we use to communicate between the emergency services – all important things.

If those opposite actually thought about what these things are and went into the detail, they would already know this, but the issue is they have not done that. They just choose to cause division in our emergency services. They choose to do that. They talk a lot about those trucks that have been taken offline. Well, I have to say –

*Members interjecting.*

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Calm! The member for Werribee to continue in silence, please.

**John LISTER:** I thank all those volunteers that tonight are still turning out, including my comrades who are on that rescue truck right now.

I want to go back to the point that the fire services property levy does not apply to renters at the moment. We are not debating this being applicable to renters at all. It is a moot point. This is not something that I, as a renter, am looking for. This is something that we are doing to expand this fund and provide it to a range of emergency services, not just fire services. This is not about renting, this is about providing that guaranteed funding.

It is also good that amendments have come back to clarify that idea by taking out the words ‘up to’ and making sure that it is really clear that that is where the funding is going towards and that that funding for Fire Rescue Victoria is going from 87.5 to 90 per cent.

I note that I have probably spent the most time, compared to any of the speakers on that side, actually talking to the amendments. You might want to try it. I have only been here for a few months – those opposite might want to try it. In conclusion, I want to say that despite the noise from those opposite, people on this side will continue to work with our emergency services on what they need, and we will always go back to that principle that we are here to work as one with our emergency services workers, we are not here to divide them.

**Ellen SANDELL** (Melbourne) (00:52): In speaking to these amendments, I will start with a little bit of context. Increased bushfires, floods and storm events are the consequence of climate inaction by successive governments over decades. We are now starting to live through the very real consequences of that inaction, and as we all know, Victoria is one of the places that is the most vulnerable, particularly to bushfire. In this changed environment that we are all now living through it is critical that emergency services have the funding they need to keep the community safe and to help us recover after disasters, and we all expect that of our governments. Therefore these services need to be funded. We only need to look to the fires in Los Angeles to see what happens when emergency services are neglected and under-resourced for too long, and I do not think any of us want to be there. We wish that we were not living through a period of time of increased extreme weather, that we were not facing these increased risks and the costs that come with them, but we are. That is the reality of not taking action on climate change early enough. The Greens support fully and securely funding our emergency services, from career firefighters to volunteer firefighters and SES volunteers, because we need them and they need the vehicles, the radios and the equipment to keep us safe. As I mentioned –

*Members interjecting.*

**Ellen SANDELL:** Deputy Speaker, I think I deserve to be heard with a little bit of respect.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Order!

**Ellen SANDELL:** As I mentioned in my original speech on this bill, I have seen firsthand the work that our emergency services do. My dad worked in control centres during the Black Saturday bushfires in Marysville.

**Richard Riordan** interjected.

**Ellen SANDELL:** He has since passed away, member for Polwarth. I saw firsthand the work that our emergency services do when my community in Kensington was hit by floods in 2022. When I went to visit the SES, they had volunteers working out of a dusty shed filled with diesel fumes, with no phone coverage and no wi-fi, and we had a VicEmergency app that failed and was not able to give the community the warnings that they needed ahead of that flood. When the Greens first saw this bill a number of weeks ago we shared many of the concerns which have been raised by farmers and by firefighters about Labor’s changes to the fire services levy, about hardship, about farmers facing drought and about making sure the levy fully funds our emergency services and does not just pull the wool over Victorians’ eyes, and also the concerns from councils, which have not been canvassed quite as much in this debate, about the state government using them as a levy collection agency when they knew that residents would blame councils for a state government decision.

We have also had significant ongoing concerns about our firefighters, particularly our career firefighters, not having the safety conditions and equipment that they need to keep us safe. We were also concerned that money was going to be redirected from this levy to fund government administration while leaving key emergency services like firefighters without the basic funding to replace their fleet of ageing, unsafe fire trucks, which puts firefighters and the whole community at risk. That is exactly why we listened to those concerns and we pushed the government as far as possible to make significant changes to make the levy fairer and to ensure that it commits real additional funding to our emergency services and firefighters – amendments that you see before the house today. The amendments we have before us today, brought forward by the government – yes, at the request of the Greens – include increased and more secure funding for emergency services. Instead of the new levy providing no more than 87.5 per cent of FRV annual funding, which firefighters were concerned could potentially be a cut to firefighting budgets, it will now be required to provide no less than 90 per cent of FRV annual funding and no less than 95 per cent of funding to the CFA and SES, providing more ongoing security.

Other amendments and footnotes ensure the levy is strictly used for frontline emergency services and not for government administration. We also note other changes and commitments from the government in response to our concerns, including a guaranteed \$10 million every year ongoing for a rolling fleet replacement program for out-of-date fire trucks for FRV on top of the funds for rolling fleet replacement for the CFA and additional money for vehicles and appliances for the SES. This is something that firefighters have been calling for for a long time without success, but it is now a reality.

Exemptions for farmers experiencing hardship due to drought was a commitment that we sought and received, as well as a significant additional drought relief package for farmers, details of which I believe will be released imminently. We have also secured an additional \$15 million for support for farmers to reduce their energy bills to help with costs and transition away from expensive gas, which is only becoming more expensive, and a commitment to reducing the levy rate for primary production land, although I note that this bill and the amendments before us do not set the rate of the levy. That is set by the Treasurer separate to this bill; it is not something the Parliament has control over. All this legislation does is provide a legal tool to provide secure ongoing funding to our emergency services into the future, and that is what we are supporting. Another amendment that is before us today requires reporting on the money collected and allocated, which we also consider a good thing.

We also note a commitment and confirmation by the Treasurer in the other place that the government will not seek to reduce minimum firefighter crew numbers, which are vital to ensuring the safety of the community and our firefighters, which is separate from this bill but is obviously of great concern to firefighters and great concern to us in the Greens. We do remain concerned about other safety conditions for firefighters potentially being rolled back or undermined, and we will continue to fight for fair pay and conditions for the firies who keep us safe.

We also note commitments to councils to hopefully making administration easier, although we wish more changes would have been made to support councils in an environment where they are rate-capped and where we have cost shifting from the state government and where councils have not been treated with the respect from state government they deserve when they are working to serve their local communities. We ultimately felt that, although this is not the policy we would have designed or brought forward, we needed to make a decision on the bill and the amendments as they were brought before us. If we believe in greater funding for the SES, CFA, our career firefighters and our emergency services, which we do, we need to support legislation to make their funding secure.

I know there has been some commentary made in this place about renters, but it seems that the opposition has not read the legislation, because this levy is only levied on those who own property and have wealth in property, and it is progressive – the more wealth somebody has, the more they pay. This revenue measure, should it pass, gives the state Labor government the ability to fund the things we all need to live a good life here in Victoria, including well-resourced emergency services. Therefore the Labor government now has no excuse to cut jobs, services or programs that Victorians rely upon.

We also hope that, now seeing the consequences of climate inaction, this government and all governments will start to invest much more heavily in climate mitigation in order to do everything in their power to avoid the worsening impacts of climate change and more frequent and intense extreme weather events. Every 0.1 degree of climate warming matters to the quality of our lives and the quality of the lives that our children and grandchildren will live and the intensity of disasters that they will experience. The Greens will be supporting these amendments.

**Mary-Anne THOMAS** (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Ambulance Services) (01:01): I move:

That the question be now put.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Order! I note that the Nationals have only had one speaker. I am inclined to not put the question at this stage and encourage the Nationals, should they wish to speak, to try and get the call at the next opportunity before the question is put.

**Mathew HILAKARI** (Point Cook) (01:02): I am happy to speak on the bill. I speak on the suggested amendments to the Emergency Services and Volunteer Fund. The elements of the bill have been well canvassed, particularly by the member for Werribee. Some of the treatment of his contribution was less than what I would expect in a place like this. These amendments go to supporting the SES and other emergency services, but I just want to give a shout-out to the SES in Point Cook, who have recently had a new SES facility opened. They received as part of that, and as part of the effort by a number of MPs on this side of the house, a medium rescue truck, a light rescue truck, a twin-cab support vehicle and a storm trailer. I hope that this bill and the amendments to this bill –

**Cindy McLeish:** On a point of order, Speaker, we are here to debate the suggested amendments brought from the Legislative Council, and the member on his feet is just giving cheerios instead. I ask you to bring him back to the amendments.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** On the point of order, Speaker, I am speaking to the funding that is provided and will be provided through these amendments to the emergency services.

**The SPEAKER:** There have been a few members who have drifted away from the amendments that are before the house at the moment. I will give the member some leverage, but I do remind him about what we are here to debate this evening.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** What I specifically go to is by removing the words ‘up to’ I hope that the services and the emergency services that are in the community that I represent can be spread all across the state in the quality of the facilities and vehicles and the support for emergency services.

As the Deputy Speaker has indicated, we would like to see a Nationals member speak to this bill so we can further understand any contributions that they have to this place. I commend the speedy passage of these amendments.

**Mary-Anne Thomas:** On a point of order, Speaker, I rise to move that the motion be put, on the basis –

**The SPEAKER:** Order! Leader of the House, you cannot do it through a point of order.

**Mary-Anne THOMAS** (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Ambulance Services) (01:06): I desire to move:

That the question be now put.

**The SPEAKER:** You cannot debate it; you just have to put the motion.

**Sam Groth** interjected.

**The SPEAKER:** Order! I haven’t finished speaking, member for Nepean. Based on the ruling that the Deputy Speaker gave just a few moments ago, I think there is an indication to the house that we

will allow a few more speakers, particularly from the party of the Nationals, who have only had one speaker. We will give them an opportunity.

**Roma BRITNELL** (South-West Coast) (01:06): We have been hearing from the other side how the suggested changes show respect, and this is the most disrespectful thing I have ever witnessed for our volunteers. Over the last decade we have seen a lot of disrespect, particularly for our CFA volunteers, but I think this is absolutely the most disrespectful. This is a ghastly tax that every Victorian is going to be subjected to. Every home in Victoria will be subjected to this by paying double. Every renter will be affected by this. Every farmer will be paying an extra 150 per cent on what they have been paying in the past, and they are struggling. But to add insult to injury, the wind farms will be paying less – a reduction for the wind farms of a massive 96 per cent. So here are our volunteers, many of them in rural communities, paying twice as much as anybody else in Victoria and receiving the most disrespectful insult from this government. This is an assault on the farmers, on Victorians, on rural communities, on every Victorian. Everybody is opposed to this tax.

Volunteers cannot abide what they are being subjected to in the middle of a drought that is gripping our community in south-west Victoria, where it has not been this bad since we began taking records in Victoria, since the early 1900s. This is a government who thinks it is time to add more taxes on a community that is struggling, the rural community. Just today we had a fire in Hamilton at 11:32, we had a fire in Scotts Creek, we had a fire at Ecklin South, we had a fire in Port Fairy, we had a fire in Warrnambool and we had a fire on Woolsthorpe-Heywood Road. That many fires popped up on my app today, which my volunteer brigades and the paid firefighters in the Warrnambool brigade would have attended. Those farmers, those volunteers, those community members turned out and got on with the job today of protecting our community. Tonight those same people were inundating me with calls, saying, 'Are you listening to what's happening out there? Are you hearing that brigade after brigade is going off line?' The volunteers were revolting. They were revolting against this tax. The volunteers were calling in. One said to me, 'Tell the government to get Fire Rescue Victoria and the Forest Fire Management Victoria guys; they can fight fires – we've had enough.' Another farmer, a volunteer – a guy who I have known for a long time who has volunteered probably for 30 years on the back of a truck – said to me, 'Do you know how tough it is out here, Roma? Can you ask the Premier if she's prepared to watch the people on the ropes?' They are his words. He was saying there will be suicides, it is that bad out there.

The farmers do not have the money to pay for this. They do not have anything left. They are at the end of their tether. They are despairing. Have you ever actually faced a fire? Have you ever been on the back of a truck? Have you been on your farm and seen on the horizon the fire coming towards you? Have you ever been in a situation where you have had to open the gates and let every animal out because you just cannot see them perish and you hope that they can flee and fend for themselves? Have you ever had to make those decisions? We in the country do. I have. I have had to be evacuated. I have had to go to an evacuation centre. It is a significantly distressing time. Those volunteers go into the face of that fire, and they have had enough. They have worked for our communities with no thanks – not that they want it – but this slap in the face is just one slap too many. This is a government that has totally disrespected rural communities.

If this is not a tax that is bad, why is everybody revolting? Why are they handing in their keys to the Premier's office in Bendigo? Why are they saying they are going to do it? Furthermore, why are they saying that on Tuesday they are going to be on the steps again? Why were hundreds of firefighters, farmers who had left their farms, on the steps last week? These are people whose animals are not grazing at the moment. They are feeding every animal by hand. It is an absolutely back-breaking job. To give that message strongly to the government, they fed their animals at 4 o'clock in the morning or the night before, they drove the 3 or 4 hours here and then they drove home again to feed their stock. Why is the Allan Labor government ignoring the very people who have saved our countryside time and time again, from Black Saturday to St Patrick's Day to fires as far back as Ash Wednesday? These fires keep coming. They always have. They always will, so we need the surge capacity. We cannot

disrespect these people, and this is what this Allan Labor government have done. Every single Victorian will suffer because of this disgraceful assault on farmers, on Victorians, on every home, on renters. This is not what governments should be doing. This should be funded, and has always been funded, out of consolidated revenue. It is a double whammy tax, and that is in the face of a drought, so make of that what you will.

I did not hear farmers talking about their mental health, I really did not, but I am now. That is how bad it is. I have never seen it this bad. This is not the time to do what you are doing to our rural communities. These people put food on our tables, put clothes on our backs and bring in income for us a state. They export to countries all around the world a very clean and green product that is wanted everywhere, because food, as obvious as this is to state, is really necessary. We must not keep our struggling farmers from being able to do their job. As one farmer said to me last week, 'When you get a wage, you pay taxes. We haven't got any income and we're paying taxes.' How can that make sense? They need support. They do not need a tax on top of the land taxes and on top of the 60 taxes that this government has brought in over the last 10 years.

This government have failed at managing the economy, have failed at managing their own budget and cannot even work out how to present this budget. They have obviously printed it and now are trying to back-pedal and figure out a way to sell it on Tuesday next week. There are big gaping holes in it that will not add up or make sense, but they will spin their way out of that, just like they are experts at doing. There will be all sorts of secrecy, just like the lack of transparency that exists within this government. But no-one is fooled anymore. You do not fool people from the country. They are very respectful, but when they come in their droves like they are doing now, they are after you. They will not tolerate this. They have to wait another 560 days until they can make that message heard at the ballot box, but they will do that, because I think this is a step too far. In the middle of the worst drought in history, this is the debate we are having in this chamber tonight. It is beyond belief.

**Anthony CIANFLONE** (Pascoe Vale) (01:15): I rise to speak in support of this bill and these amendments that have come back from the upper house, and of course what we are not hearing from the opposition is that this is a bill and a set of amendments that are all about supporting our emergency services workers and volunteers. It is about supporting our SES. It is about supporting our CFA. It is about supporting Fire Rescue Victoria workers. It is about supporting Emergency Management Victoria workers. It is about supporting Triple Zero Victoria workers, particularly the frontline workers, call-takers and dispatchers at the coalface of the emergency services network, and it is about supporting the workers at the frontline of the State Control Centre. It is a bill that is about helping keep Victorians safe. It is a bill that responds – and we do not hear this from the opposition – to the consequences of climate change, which they deny. So on the one hand they deny the consequences of climate change when it comes to more extreme weather events, more bushfires, more floods, more extreme weather that we are seeing at the coalface and that Victorians are suffering from, and on the other hand they are opposing the very bill that would provide the funding for those emergency services to help mitigate those impacts of climate change and to help keep Victorians safe. I need to remind the opposition here that it is a bill that has been called for by the emergency services sector, particularly the SES, and I acknowledge Goldie Pergl from my local SES, who has been here tonight. We worked so closely with them to progress these reforms.

There are a number of amendments obviously that have returned from the upper house, all of which I refer to the opposition and to my colleagues who made previous contributions that detailed those extensive amendments, which provide a balanced, proportionate and fair way to progress this bill going forward to keep Victorians safe, to support our emergency workers and also to combat and mitigate the impacts of climate change. I commend the amendments.

*Members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER:** It is not too early in the morning for members to be removed from the chamber.

**Emma KEALY** (Lowan) (01:17): I tell you what this emergency services tax bill is; it is about filling a big budget black hole. It is about the Allan Labor government failing to manage money, and it is every single Victorian that will pay the price. It does not matter if you own a home, it does not matter if you are a renter, it does not matter if you run a business and it certainly does not matter if you run a farm and you grow food to feed Victorians, feed Australians and feed the world: you are the people that will pay the price – and this is after Labor has treated emergency services so badly in Victoria. Last year there was a \$400 million cut in the budget for emergency services. We have got short memories over here, don't we? We forget the cuts. We forget the way that you have treated emergency services over the years, and I tell you what, there are a lot of concerns as well –

**The SPEAKER:** Member for Lowan, through the Chair.

**Emma KEALY:** There is also – and I acknowledge Peter Marshall, who I understand has written some correspondence today.

**The SPEAKER:** Member for Lowan, I would ask you not to acknowledge people in the gallery. It is against the standing orders.

**Emma KEALY:** This letter has been made public – a letter to the Greens. If you look at what has happened, it is not just the Allan Labor government who have sold out every single Victorian, who have sold out emergency services workers in this state, they have also been supported and aided and abetted by the Greens and those micro-parties and independents who were desperate to get this across the line because they have got no conscience and have sold their soul for the sake of a little bit of glory and maybe a secret deal that we will catch the consequences of somewhere down the track – a little secret backroom deal that none of us know about. None of us know anything about it, and we would like to know what it is. I can tell you one thing: it is not worth \$2 billion extracted out of the pockets of Victorians who are struggling with cost-of-living pressures. They cannot afford to keep a roof over their head. We have got farmers in the midst of one of the worst droughts in decades, if not for a century, who are under so much pressure at the moment they cannot make ends meet. They cannot get fodder in Victoria to keep their stock alive. They cannot source water anywhere. Do you know where a lot of the water went? I will tell you where it went in western Victoria: it was put on the Grampians bushfire and the Little Desert fire. Any surface water that we had in western Victoria was used for putting a fire out, so we do not have any surface water.

*Members interjecting.*

**Emma KEALY:** A fabulous question. Who put the fires out? The volunteers. The emergency services workers and Forest Fire Management Victoria. We have to acknowledge all of them. They worked so hard. They gave up their Christmas, they gave up their New Year's Eve, they gave up their public holiday on Australia Day, they gave up their summer holidays and they gave up their time on their farms to volunteer to be on the back of a fire truck. They paid for their staff to be on the back of a fire truck. They stopped and reduced their productivity on their farms because they were off their property trying to protect our natural assets and protect other farms. I think it is one of the most inflammatory things that has ever been said by the Premier or by any of the backbenchers, who have just gone on and followed the speaking notes today, that this is all about the problem we have got of having more fires. How hard do you think that is to hear when you are one of the 42 residents of Pomonal who lost their home to bushfire last year? 'It's your fault. You've had to process more fires.'

**The SPEAKER:** Member for Lowan, through the Chair. I would ask you not to use 'you'. You are reflecting on the Chair.

**Emma KEALY:** I am referring to the people of Pomonal, Speaker. How are they supposed to feel when they have lost everything they own in their residential property? They have lost childhood memories. They have lost baby photos and wedding photos. They have lost everything, and now they have to pay more in taxes – so that they can do what? What do they get out of it? They get a great big tax bill because it is the Allan Labor government who cannot manage money, and it is Victorians that

are paying the price. It happens time and time and time again. I want to refer back to a piece of correspondence that has come by my desk from the United Firefighters Union, written by Peter Marshall, and I will quote some of that, if I may:

**This evening, the Victorian Greens sold out Victorian firefighters and the Victorian community they protect.**

**Sadly, every Victorian will suffer the consequences.**

**There will no doubt be consequences for the Victorian Greens at the 2026 State Election, for acting as the artificial lung of a dying Labor Government.**

That is a reflection on the Victorian Greens, who are not fighting for this money to go into making sure we are better managing our forests out there. You are not fighting to make sure that we are doing more cool burns to reduce the fuel loads in our forests, so we do not have those dirty great big hot fires that take out our old-growth trees. You are not fighting for any of that. We are not seeing that from the Victorian Greens at all. They are just selling their souls and they are happy, though I bet you what will happen at the next election is we are going to see the little love tryst come up again and reignite between Labor and the Greens. There are not many people over on the Labor benches who would not be here today if it was not for those preferences of the Greens. It is the little red and green love tryst, where they do not like each other until it comes to election time, and then they are bosom buddies. It is the most bizarre thing I have seen. It is so grossly unfair that just 0.5 per cent of the funding that is raised through this tax will go back into rolling stock. There is no change. How on earth can we think that it would be fair that only 0.5 per cent –

*Members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER:** Leader of the Opposition, I would ask you to stand and apologise for reflecting on the Chair.

**Brad Battin:** Sorry.

**Emma KEALY:** Only 0.5 per cent of the money that is raised through this dirty great big new tax is going to go back into rolling stock. We have got so much money; this is \$2 billion. There should not be a truck in all of Victoria that is not replaced in the next 12 months, and yet we have got this tiny, little, short list. I did not see any new stations in there. Henty needs a new station. That was not on the list. Charlton needs one. There we go. It is really strange, because we have seen some significant investment by the Labor government in some fire stations – like Bendigo. That is a pretty flash set-up, isn't it? Yet it sits empty. There is nobody using it. There was money to throw out at that one, but nobody is even using it. What a perfect example of Premier Allan and the Labor government, who are happy to just throw money out.

They cannot manage money. They have not been able to manage their infrastructure and their assets, including the rolling stock of the CFA and Fire Rescue Victoria, and it is Victorians that again will pay the price. If you could not manage the last budget, how on earth are you going to be trusted to spend \$10 billion of Victorian taxpayer money? We are never going to see where it goes. We know what happens with any of the taxes that Labor bring in: 'We promise we're going to spend all the mental health tax on mental health. Oh, hang on, we're going to throw it somewhere else and we're not going to tell you where it goes.'

It is a disgrace that at the time that this bill is being debated CFA volunteers are standing down. We have got emergency services in Victoria stepping down and walking away. We have got a disastrous collapse of emergency services in Victoria, yet we have got a Labor government which is asleep at the wheel. They are deliberately ignoring the will of the Victorian people, particularly the will of farmers, particularly the will of CFA volunteers and particularly the will of people who work in emergency management, and that is an utter disgrace for every single member of the Labor government, of the Greens and of those independents who did a dirty deal to get this deal across the line.

**Mary-Anne THOMAS** (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Ambulance Services) (01:27): I move:

That the question be now put.

**Assembly divided Mary-Anne Thomas's motion:**

*Ayes (52):* Juliana Addison, Jacinta Allan, Colin Brooks, Josh Bull, Anthony Carbines, Ben Carroll, Anthony Cianflone, Sarah Connolly, Chris Couzens, Jordan Crugnale, Lily D'Ambrosio, Daniela De Martino, Gabrielle de Vietri, Steve Dimopoulos, Paul Edbrooke, Eden Foster, Matt Fregon, Ella George, Luba Grigorovitch, Bronwyn Halfpenny, Katie Hall, Paul Hamer, Mathew Hilakari, Melissa Horne, Natalie Hutchins, Sonya Kilkenny, Nathan Lambert, John Lister, Gary Maas, Alison Marchant, Kathleen Matthews-Ward, Steve McGhie, Paul Mercurio, John Mullahy, Danny Pearson, Tim Read, Pauline Richards, Tim Richardson, Ellen Sandell, Michaela Settle, Ros Spence, Nick Staikos, Natalie Suleyman, Meng Heang Tak, Jackson Taylor, Nina Taylor, Kat Theophanous, Mary-Anne Thomas, Iwan Walters, Vicki Ward, Dylan Wight, Belinda Wilson

*Noes (27):* Brad Battin, Jade Benham, Roma Britnell, Tim Bull, Martin Cameron, Chris Crewther, Wayne Farnham, Sam Groth, Matthew Guy, David Hodgett, Emma Kealy, Tim McCurdy, Cindy McLeish, James Newbury, Danny O'Brien, Michael O'Brien, Kim O'Keeffe, John Pesutto, Richard Riordan, Brad Rowswell, David Southwick, Bill Tilley, Bridget Vallence, Peter Walsh, Kim Wells, Rachel Westaway, Jess Wilson

**Motion agreed to.**

**Assembly divided on motion:**

*Ayes (52):* Juliana Addison, Jacinta Allan, Colin Brooks, Josh Bull, Anthony Carbines, Ben Carroll, Anthony Cianflone, Sarah Connolly, Chris Couzens, Jordan Crugnale, Lily D'Ambrosio, Daniela De Martino, Gabrielle de Vietri, Steve Dimopoulos, Paul Edbrooke, Eden Foster, Matt Fregon, Ella George, Luba Grigorovitch, Bronwyn Halfpenny, Katie Hall, Paul Hamer, Mathew Hilakari, Melissa Horne, Natalie Hutchins, Sonya Kilkenny, Nathan Lambert, John Lister, Gary Maas, Alison Marchant, Kathleen Matthews-Ward, Steve McGhie, Paul Mercurio, John Mullahy, Danny Pearson, Tim Read, Pauline Richards, Tim Richardson, Ellen Sandell, Michaela Settle, Ros Spence, Nick Staikos, Natalie Suleyman, Meng Heang Tak, Jackson Taylor, Nina Taylor, Kat Theophanous, Mary-Anne Thomas, Iwan Walters, Vicki Ward, Dylan Wight, Belinda Wilson

*Noes (27):* Brad Battin, Jade Benham, Roma Britnell, Tim Bull, Martin Cameron, Chris Crewther, Wayne Farnham, Sam Groth, Matthew Guy, David Hodgett, Emma Kealy, Tim McCurdy, Cindy McLeish, James Newbury, Danny O'Brien, Michael O'Brien, Kim O'Keeffe, John Pesutto, Richard Riordan, Brad Rowswell, David Southwick, Bill Tilley, Bridget Vallence, Peter Walsh, Kim Wells, Rachel Westaway, Jess Wilson

**Motion agreed to.**

**The SPEAKER:** A message will now be sent to the Legislative Council informing them of the Assembly's decision.

***Business of the house***

**Postponement**

**Mary-Anne THOMAS** (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Ambulance Services) (01:35): I move:

That the consideration of remaining business be postponed.

**Motion agreed to.**

*Adjournment*

**The SPEAKER:** The question is:

That the house now adjourns.

**Emma Kealy:** On a point of order, Speaker, it is my understanding that taking photos in the chamber is not allowed according to the standing orders. It has been reported to me that the Minister for Health took a photo of me speaking to somebody in the gallery during that period of time. I would ask you to acquire the member's phone and direct her to remove any such photos.

**The SPEAKER:** I will review the footage and come back to you, member for Lowan.

**Emma Kealy:** On a further point of order, Speaker, in regard to photos that were taken which were outside of the procedures of the house, should those photos be published in any way, would that be a breach of parliamentary standards? I am happy for you to return and get back to me.

**The SPEAKER:** Order! Member for Lowan, it is inappropriate to ask the Chair questions in the chamber. I will review the footage, and I will come back to the member for Lowan. If the member for Lowan seeks clarity about rulings, she is welcome to speak to me outside of the chamber.

**Hindmarsh Shire Council community assets**

**Emma KEALY (Lowan) (01:37):** (1141) My adjournment matter is to the Treasurer, and the action I seek is for the Treasurer to approach the Hindmarsh Shire Council to ensure that there is a purchase of their SES buildings and land at Nhill and Dimboola, which are owned by Hindmarsh Shire Council. Hindmarsh Shire Council has an extraordinarily low rate base. Their rate base is around \$8 million a year, and they have a vast number of community assets that are run by the council, particularly their road network. It is an extensive road network and they do an incredible job managing as many hundreds of kilometres as they do, but it is a huge burden on that council when they get very little support from the state government for those projects and for infrastructure projects like Nhill's Davis Park. Now they are also facing paying a huge amount under the just-passed emergency services volunteers tax. How is it fair that a tax will take about \$5 million from the Hindmarsh Shire Council area, where they have got a rate revenue of just \$8 million, and you are slugging the council and taking away that council's opportunity to invest in that local road network, their pool assets and the other council assets?

Of course Hindmarsh is not the only council in this situation. We also have a situation in Horsham, where similarly they own land which houses the Horsham SES. There are many councils across the state that are in a similar situation, where there are state government buildings which are utilised by services operated by the state government but on land that is owned by a council that is looking at paying a huge increase on the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund. I am asking therefore for the Treasurer to take action to acquire these buildings. These are buildings that are certainly no longer required to be owned by councils. It is something that is going to be an escalating and ongoing cost for those councils into the future. It is something that therefore will take more and more money out of those small local communities and local economies, which do such an amazing job; they employ so many people. We have got great initiatives happening out in that Hindmarsh region. I would like to acknowledge the great work of Chan and the team who are behind the Wimmera Steampunk Festival – an amazing festival in Dimboola which, honestly, is becoming an iconic event for all of Victoria. We need to make sure our councils are supported, so I put that to the Treasurer: please purchase and acquire these lands.

**Monash Demons All Abilities Football Club**

**Matt FREGON (Ashwood) (01:40):** (1142) My adjournment this evening is for the Minister for Community Sport, and I ask that the minister join me down at Jordan Reserve in my Ashwood electorate to visit the Monash Demons All Abilities Football Club. The Monash Demons are an awesome club. All-abilities football is an important part of our community, bringing inclusion and

opportunity to many people, whether it is on the field or off the field. This club proudly calls Jordan Reserve home, and it is a fantastic local park that is part of our wonderful open space down in Ashwood. Last year in this house – and we talked about this – we introduced the George Soles memorial trophy, which is presented to the winning team between the Mazenod Panthers, who are in the member for Glen Waverley’s electorate, and the Monash Demons, so there is a bit of friendly rivalry there. This trophy recognises the contribution of George Soles, who was a beloved volunteer who dedicated his weekends for years and years and years to go and score for the Demons. They are a fantastic club, and it would be just great to have the minister come down, visit them, just see what an important part of our community it is and say g’day to Peter Willoughby, who is the secretary down there and who, by the way, won the 2021 Outstanding Advocate of People with Disabilities at Monash council. I look forward to the minister’s response.

#### Active transport

**Tim READ** (Brunswick) (01:42): (1143) My adjournment speech is for the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC, and the action I seek is for the minister to amend the Road Safety Act 1986 so that riders and pedestrians injured in crashes involving bicycles or scooters are covered by the TAC, regardless of whether a motor vehicle is involved. Matthew is a constituent of mine who was riding in a bike lane when he swerved to avoid a pedestrian and hit a concrete lane divider. Matthew suffered multiple fractured ribs, along with scrapes, sprains and bruises in the ensuing crash. If a train, tram or car – even an unregistered one – had been involved, Matthew would have been covered by the TAC. Even if he had hit a parked car, he would have been covered, but he was swerving to avoid a pedestrian, not a car. As I am sure the minister would agree, transport has evolved since the Road Safety Act was first drafted. More of us use bikes, scooters or walk to get to work, school or the shops, especially in the inner suburbs. As Melbourne grows, we want more people to use public transport or bikes rather than adding their cars to our finite road space, and that means more people walking or scooting to train stations or bus stops. E-bikes are now common.

Matthew, like many who ride bikes, has owned a registered car for many years and would have contributed a substantial sum to the TAC in that time. His car spends most of its time sitting in the driveway while Matthew rides his bike. Accidents that do not involve a motor vehicle are generally less severe than those that do because the speed and vehicle mass are lower, so the cost of TAC coverage would not be enormous. If it is necessary to fund such an increase, this might be an opportunity to increase the TAC contribution paid by drivers of oversized utes and SUVs, which are proliferating on our roads and are much more dangerous for vulnerable road users. As it is, the TAC pays a sizeable dividend to the government, so it should be able to afford to cover some bike-related injuries. Matthew’s decision to ride his bike is reducing emissions, improving his health and reducing road congestion, and it should be applauded. We should keep working to make our roads safer, but in the meantime let us show our gratitude to people like Matthew who are making socially and environmentally conscious transport decisions by ensuring that they too can have TAC cover when they need it.

#### Westjustice

**Luba GRIGOROVITCH** (Kororoit) (01:44): (1144) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Education, and the action that I seek is for the minister to provide dedicated funding to support the expansion of the highly successful school lawyer program into government schools across both the Brimbank and Melton areas. The school lawyer program, delivered by Westjustice, embeds a qualified lawyer within a school’s wellbeing team. These lawyers provide free, accessible, confidential and trusted legal advice to students on a range of complex issues. Funding would enable the expansion of this vital program to additional schools in the west, reaching hundreds more students with individual support and thousands through education. I urge the minister to commit to funding this impactful program so that more young people in Kororoit can access this legal support, which they so very much need, and thrive in education.

### Health services

**David HODGETT** (Croydon) (01:45): (1145) My adjournment is for the Minister for Health, and the action I seek is for the minister and her department to facilitate an appointment for my constituent with the ophthalmology unit in the outpatient sector at the Austin Hospital. Minister, my constituent obtained a referral from his GP and has been waiting 18 months for an appointment with the ophthalmology unit for a blocked tear duct. He has been in contact with the Austin regarding waiting list status and can never get a direct answer. He has also been in contact with their patient experience team, who have informed him that unfortunately, due to high demand, the ophthalmology unit there have no current available appointments.

My constituent is only 60 years old. He works full time in mechanics, which requires fine eye detailing. With his eye filling up with water constantly, blurred vision and irritation, this is adversely affecting his work. He must regularly stop his tasks to wipe his eyes, which is causing delays and affecting his mental health. It is also impacting on his day-to-day life as it is causing frustration, stress and anxiety. In desperation he has contacted my office. Minister, an 18-month waiting period just to get an appointment is totally unacceptable. I will be happy to provide further details of my constituent confidentially to you in order for you to provide the necessary assistance. Again, I ask the Minister for Health to facilitate an appointment for my constituent with the ophthalmology unit in the outpatient sector at the Austin Hospital.

### Middle East conflict

**Kathleen MATTHEWS-WARD** (Broadmeadows) (01:47): (1146) My adjournment is for the Minister for Multicultural Affairs, and I request an update on the valuable support the Victorian government is providing for the new arrivals from Gaza. Today is Vyshyvanka Day. I wear this in unity with our brothers and sisters in Ukraine as they fight for freedom, justice and self-determination. I pray that peace talks today went well. Standing on the beaches at Gallipoli on Anzac Day I reflected on the tragedy of war and of the mostly young lives that were lost. It breaks my heart that wars continue across the globe, but what appals me even more is that the lives of civilians now seem to be a target. The killing of innocent men, women and children has become commonplace in so many conflicts around the world, such as in Sudan, Myanmar, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Ukraine.

The UN has observed a significant increase in civilian casualties, with a 72 per cent increase in 2023. The latest security report states that the proportion of women and children killed doubled and tripled respectively, while sexual violence has increased by 50 per cent. Over two-thirds of recorded deaths have occurred in Palestine, primarily among women and children, making it the deadliest conflict for civilians in 2023. And 2024 was the deadliest year on record for journalists, with 124 reporters killed across 18 countries. Both surges in fatalities were largely driven by the war in Gaza, where over 400 aid workers and 175 journalists have been killed since the beginning of the conflict. According to the UN no-one is spared – not the children, persons with disabilities, nursing mothers, journalists, health professionals, aid workers or hostages. Since breaking the ceasefire Israel has killed hundreds of Palestinians, peaking on 18 March with 600 casualties in 24 hours, 400 of whom were children. Hundreds of thousands were displaced, homes were reduced to rubble and food and water have been cut off for months, inducing starvation, dehydration and disease under the blockade. I have spoken about the atrocities in Gaza in this place many times. The killing of civilians and starving of populations is reprehensible, indefensible and unforgivable.

Australia has supplied millions in aid, doubling funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, and approved thousands of visa applications. I thank the many in my community that have supported these refugees. Our federal Labor government has a proud record of voting at the UN, and despite misinformation, Australia has not supplied weapons to Israel during the conflict. State government arrangements with SIBAT and Elbit Systems have ended. Labor's own 'Doc' Evatt played a key role in creating the United Nations after the tragic loss of over 6 million Jewish

lives in the Holocaust. I stand here today imploring governments around the world to recommit to the noble aims of the UN and the protection of civilians in accordance with international law.

### **RSPCA Victoria**

**Chris CREWETHER** (Mornington) (01:50): (1147) My adjournment matter at 1:50 am is for the Minister for Agriculture, and the action that I seek is that the minister commit to better supporting the RSPCA with more powers and resources to do their job properly. The RSPCA is an integral part of this nation's and Victoria's animal support network, with RSPCA Victoria playing such an important role in protecting and caring for animals through its animal care centres, vet clinics, programs and advocacy. Recently the demand on their services has been escalating. Between 2017–18 and 2021–22 the number of animals seized by or surrendered to the inspectorate more than doubled from 1035 to 2172. This trend is expected to continue, with projections estimating over 3340 animals will require care by 2027. Compounding these challenges are increased operational costs, a decline in donations and a significant reduction in volunteer numbers.

RSPCA is currently forecasting a nearly 25 per cent increase in animal cruelty reports this financial year, with a small team of 28 officers across Victoria now dealing with over 10,000 complaints of animal cruelty a year. Following serious alleged animal neglect issues reported to my office in Mount Eliza as well as in nearby locations such as Devon Meadows and elsewhere, I recently met with RSPCA representatives, who reported to me that the state Labor government's ongoing annual payment to them is only about \$2.5 million a year, well under the \$10 million a year that they need. This means that they are operating at a deficit of over \$7 million a year, which has eaten into their backup savings. They are desperate for the state Labor government funding to increase in this year's budget next week. Otherwise, they report that from August they may need to narrow their services to the 21 worst LGAs for animal cruelty, which would exclude the Mornington Peninsula shire, and no longer do horse enforcement matters, which take up significant resources.

After this major issue in Mount Eliza, they also pointed out that this would actually impact quite a number of horses across the state. They also noted that if they are forced to give up areas of enforcement due to lack of resources, then it will cost the state government much more to do it without them. They estimate the cost to be \$270 million a year to do what the RSPCA does for \$10 million a year. This is because they already have the existing infrastructure, systems and know-how. They also mentioned that seizure and other powers under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986 are insufficient for their officers. I hope that the state Labor government does the right thing and provides RSPCA Victoria with the funding and resources they desperately need in this upcoming budget.

### **Transport infrastructure**

**Sarah CONNOLLY** (Laverton) (01:52): (1148) My adjournment is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure, and the action I seek is that the minister explain to me how the Sunshine station superhub paves the way for electrification of the Melton and Wyndham Vale lines in my electorate. As the minister knows, the federal election has resulted in a resounding win for the Sunshine station superhub in my electorate of Laverton, to be delivered as part of Melbourne Airport rail. This station sits at one of the most notorious, complex and critical rail junctions in Victoria and services over 70 per cent of our current V/Line network. The Liberal Party went to this election threatening to cut \$2 billion from the Sunshine station superhub and set back electrification for decades. I am not sure what world they are living in, and clearly neither are the majority of Australians. These works are about delivering a station prepared to accommodate our Melbourne Airport rail project, which is back on track. But they are also about what the station needs to accommodate the future of our rail network, including electrified services to Melton and Wyndham Vale, which rely on works at Sunshine to be made possible. So my community in Melbourne's outer west and I would greatly welcome an in-depth, considered explanation on how these critical works will deliver the upgrades we need to our rail network sooner rather than later.

### Housing

**John PESUTTO** (Hawthorn) (01:54): (1149) I rise to raise a matter for the Minister for Housing and Building concerning the safety of residents in and around community housing properties in my electorate of Hawthorn, including those who reside in those community housing facilities. The action I seek from the minister is twofold: first, to ensure that cases involving serious violence or threats are fast-tracked through VCAT so that dangerous behaviour and antisocial behaviour are dealt with swiftly, and secondly, to provide community housing providers with the tools, authority and wraparound supports they need to act decisively where the safety of their residents is at risk. The issue has arisen from specific and serious cases in my electorate that have been brought to my attention, and I would be pleased to share those details privately with the minister.

Community housing is a crucial part of our housing system and is there to offer stability and dignity to all Victorians facing hardship, and for many it does. But when a small number of tenants engage in repeated and persistent violent behaviour or intimidation and harassment and the system fails to respond, it is everyone else, especially those living in those same community housing facilities, who suffers. In recent months I have been inundated with complaints from constituents who are living in fear inside their own homes. They have endured repeated outbursts, threats, damage to property and even physical assaults, all at the hands of a very small minority of tenants whose behaviour has at times become quite dangerous. Despite contacting police and despite reporting incidents to their housing providers, these residents find themselves caught in a web of delay, inaction and fear.

In raising this issue I commend the community housing sector and its community housing tenants more broadly. I know community housing staff are under extreme pressure and doing a great job. I know tenants often face immense challenges, and they deserve our understanding and compassion. That is why it is so important to ensure that all who live in these facilities can be provided with a safe place to live, with the dignity that they all deserve.

### Hampton Park Uniting Church

**Gary MAAS** (Narre Warren South) (01:56): (1150) The adjournment matter I wish to raise is for the Minister for Carers and Volunteers and concerns the Hampton Park Uniting Church. The action that I seek is that the minister join me to tour the facility and inspect the important work the church undertakes supporting those in need in my electorate of Narre Warren South. Hampton Park Uniting Church is the beating heart of my local community, and over many years the dedicated team of volunteers and staff have supported countless people to access support services, including domestic violence assistance and food relief.

Until his retirement last year the church was led by Reverend Ric Holland, known fondly as Reverend Ric. Sadly, Ric died recently at the age of 77, losing his fight to lymphoma after a really long and tough battle. I considered Ric a dear friend, and his passing has been a loss for me and so many in our community. Ric lived a life of compassion, kindness and service. He was guided by social justice, inclusion, equality and his devout Christian faith. His work spanned 53 years of service to communities in the UK and Australia, concluding with five years at Hampton Park Uniting Church. Ric's career began in the UK with an honours degree in theology at the University of London. He later undertook ministerial training and ordination in the UK Methodist Church. In the 1970s as a young Methodist minister in Glasgow he established and built up a community program which included the city's first free community legal clinic, amongst other services. He was a big fan of The Who. He loved their music, and you would often hear that music played at the church's events. He worked in radio and television, producing programs on social justice for community service volunteers throughout the UK, work which led him to be accepted into the Uniting Church in Australia in 1989. He went on to have a 15-year tenure as CEO of Melbourne City Mission as well as CEO of Lort Smith Animal Hospital. He pioneered Sleep at the 'G and helped lead the campaign for marriage equality, even performing the very first Australian church wedding under the new marriage equality laws, at St Michael's Uniting Church. His impact has truly been extraordinary.

At Hampton Park Uniting Church Ric led a church where everyone was welcome. During Ramadan, this Christian church would even host Iftar dinners. He worked together closely with me during his time there, and we helped bring his plans to fruition and helped to strengthen the impact of the church's services. Unfortunately Ric passed away in April, and it was two days after the funeral that he planned for himself. He almost made it – he passed away two days after – but it was a terrific celebration and he was there. His legacy is one of care, support and love, and his vision was always one of a just and inclusive world. He is a true inspiration. It was an honour to know him. I miss him. Vale, Reverend Ric Holland.

### Responses

**Mary-Anne THOMAS** (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Ambulance Services) (01:59): I thank the member for Croydon for raising the issue of his constituent who is seeking an ophthalmology appointment at the Austin Hospital. I welcome the member writing to me and providing details of his constituent, and I undertake to follow that up for him. A number of members raised matters for the attention of various ministers, and I will refer those matters to the relevant ministers for their attention.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Thank you, Minister and members. Can I just say before we leave: it has been a long day. I thank the clerks, the attendants, our Hansard people and especially our wonderful catering people for keeping us alive.

**House adjourned 2:00 am (Friday).**