



Hansard

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

60th Parliament

Wednesday 18 February 2026

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

David Southwick (from 28 January 2026)

Sam Groth (from 27 December 2024 to 28 January 2026)

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 ⁸	Werribee	ALP
Allan, Jacinta	Bendigo East	ALP	Maas, Gary	Narre Warren South	ALP
Andrews, Daniel ¹	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 ²	South Barwon	Ind	O'Keeffe, Kim	Shepparton	Nat
Cianflone, Anthony	Pascoe Vale	ALP	Pallas, Tim ⁹	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 ¹⁰	Warrandyte	Lib
Edwards, Maree	Bendigo West	ALP	Southwick, David	Caulfield	Lib
Famham, Wayne	Narracan	Lib	Spence, Ros	Kalkallo	ALP
Foster, Eden ³	Mulgrave	ALP	Staikos, Nick	Bentleigh	ALP
Fowles, Will ⁴	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 ⁵	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 ^{6,7}	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 ¹¹	Warrandyte	Lib
Hutchins, Natalie	Sydenham	ALP	Westaway, Rachel ¹²	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

¹ Resigned 27 September 2023

² ALP until 29 April 2024

³ Sworn in 6 February 2024

⁴ ALP until 5 August 2023

⁵ Resigned 13 February 2026

⁶ Greens until 1 November 2024

⁷ Resigned 23 November 2024

⁸ Sworn in 4 March 2025

⁹ Resigned 6 January 2025

¹⁰ Resigned 7 July 2023

¹¹ Sworn in 3 October 2023

¹² 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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Wednesday 18 February 2026

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 and orders of the day**

The SPEAKER (09:34): General business, notice of motion 65 and order of the day 10, will be removed from the notice paper unless members wishing the matter to remain advise the Clerk in writing before 2 pm today.

*Petitions***Water safety**

Chris CREWITHER (Mornington) presented a petition bearing 46 signatures:

Petition summary and background

We the undersigned residents of Victoria draw to the attention of the House community support for greater action on the regulating and policing of jet ski users travelling at speed from the shoreline in a dangerous and careless manner around swimmers and families.

Action petitioned for

We, the undersigned residents of Victoria therefore request that the Legislative Assembly of Victoria call on the Victorian Government to urgently implement regulatory reform and increasing police patrols around the usage of jet skis and their impact on the safety of coastal communities.

Ordered that petition be considered tomorrow.

Rosebud Hospital

Chris CREWITHER (Mornington) presented a petition bearing 202 signatures:

Petition summary and background

We the undersigned residents of Victoria draw to the attention of the House community support to redevelop the Rosebud Hospital to address its dated infrastructure and inadequate facilities. The Rosebud Hospital continues to be a project of immense importance and a key development in the health and wellbeing of residents on the southern peninsula.

Action petitioned for

We, the undersigned residents of Victoria therefore request that the Legislative Assembly of Victoria call on the Victorian Government to fund the much-needed redevelopment of the Rosebud Hospital to help fix the health care crisis on the southern Mornington Peninsula.

Ordered that petition be considered tomorrow.

*Documents***Documents****Incorporated list as follows:**

DOCUMENTS TABLED UNDER ACTS OF PARLIAMENT – The Clerk tabled:

Auditor-General – Ravenhall Correctional Centre: Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Prisoners – Part 2 – Ordered to be published

Planning and Environment Act 1987 – Notices of approval of amendments to the following Planning Schemes:

Ballarat – C255

Boroondara – C413 Part 1

Greater Geelong – C414

Hobsons Bay – C146

Murrindindi – C78.

Bills

Justice Legislation Amendment (Vicarious Liability for Child Abuse) Bill 2025

Council's agreement

The SPEAKER (09:34): I have received a message from the Legislative Council agreeing to the Justice Legislation Amendment (Vicarious Liability for Child Abuse) Bill 2025 without amendment.

Motions

Motions by leave

Jess WILSON (Kew – Leader of the Opposition) (09:36): I move, by leave:

That this house condemns the Premier, who has prioritised \$15 billion for bikies and criminals over vital funding for health, housing, education and reducing the cost of living for Victorians.

Leave refused.

Anthony CIANFLONE (Pascoe Vale) (09:36): I move, by leave:

That this house notes that new One Nation member Barnaby Joyce has revealed multiple members of the Victorian coalition are in secret discussions to defect to One Nation.

Leave refused.

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: The member for Pascoe Vale will leave the chamber for an hour and a half.

Member for Pascoe Vale withdrew from chamber.

Gabrielle DE VIETRI (Richmond) (09:37): I move, by leave:

That this house notes that:

- (1) President Herzog's delegation, welcomed by the Premier last week, included the chair of the World Zionist Organization and its head of settlement, which is involved in the illegal expansion of Israeli settlements in Palestine; and
- (2) an Israeli real estate expo by a company selling illegally occupied Palestinian land was held in Melbourne to coincide with the visit.

Leave refused.

Sarah CONNOLLY (Laverton) (09:37): I move, by leave:

That this house:

- (1) condemns the federal leader of One Nation for comments made on Sky News questioning the existence of 'good Muslims'; and
- (2) condemns the Leader of the Opposition for refusing to rule out a secret deal with them.

Leave refused.

Danny O'BRIEN (Gippsland South) (09:38): I move, by leave:

That this house condemns the Minister for Emergency Services for continuing to support a Premier who has prioritised \$15 billion for bikies and criminals over vital funding for firefighters in Victoria.

Leave refused.

Pauline RICHARDS (Cranbourne) (09:38): I move, by leave:

That this house notes that One Nation is in secret discussions with coalition members to defect and that One Nation has recently opened a branch in Evelyn and calls on the member for Evelyn to reveal if she is considering jumping ship.

Leave refused.

David SOUTHWICK (Caulfield) (09:38): I move, by leave:

That this house condemns the Minister for Planning for continuing to support a Premier that has prioritised \$15 billion for bikies and criminals over funding for getting more homes for young families in Victoria.

Leave refused.

Mathew HILAKARI (Point Cook) (09:39): I move, by leave:

That this house notes the One Nation federal plan to wind back the national disability insurance scheme and condemns any policy or party that supports balancing budgets by stripping dignity, support and independence from people with disability, their families and carers across Victoria.

Leave refused.

Emma KEALY (Lowan) (09:39): I move, by leave:

That this house condemns the Minister for Agriculture for continuing to support a Premier who has prioritised \$15 billion for bikies and criminals, and let us not forget the strippers, over vital funding for Agriculture Victoria to support hardworking Victorian farmers.

Leave refused.

Belinda WILSON (Narre Warren North) (09:40): I move, by leave:

That this house notes that the Liberals have voted with One Nation 98 per cent of the time in the Legislative Council, demonstrating they already have a secret shared cuts agenda.

Leave refused.

James NEWBURY (Brighton) (09:40): I move, by leave:

That this house condemns the Attorney-General for continuing to support a Premier who has prioritised \$15 billion for bikies and criminals over vital funding to clear the backlog of repeat offenders going through Victoria's court system.

Leave refused.

Dylan WIGHT (Tarnait) (09:40): I move, by leave:

That this house notes that the Leader of the Opposition's hero Jeff Kennett has called for the coalition to do a secret deal with One Nation and that the Leader of the Opposition is yet to rule it out.

Leave refused.

Brad ROWSWELL (Sandringham) (09:41): By leave, I move:

That this house condemns the Minister for Education for continuing to support a Premier who has prioritised \$15 billion for bikies, criminals and state-sponsored strippers over vital funding for teachers, schools and students in Victoria.

Leave refused.

Nina TAYLOR (Albert Park) (09:41): I move, by leave:

That this house notes One Nation's proposal to cut the Department of Education and the Department of Health, condemns any attempt to abolish these departments and calls on the Leader of Opposition to rule out these cuts as part of her secret deal.

Leave refused.

Bridget VALLENCE (Evelyn) (09:41): I move, by leave:

That this house condemns the Minister for Finance for continuing to support a Premier who has prioritised \$15 billion for bikies, criminals and sexual exploitation of women over vital funding for lowering the cost of living and lowering Victoria's record debt.

Leave refused.

Gary MAAS (Narre Warren South) (09:42): I move, by leave:

That this house calls on the member for Narracan to explain why he got so defensive in question time yesterday when questions were asked about Liberal defections to One Nation.

Leave refused.

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (09:42): I move, by leave:

That this house condemns the Minister for Women for continuing to support a Premier who has prioritised \$15 billion for bikies, criminals and state-sponsored strippers over vital funding for protecting victims of domestic abuse in Victoria.

Leave refused.

Kathleen MATTHEWS-WARD (Broadmeadows) (09:43): I move, by leave:

That this house notes that One Nation is in secret discussions with coalition members to defect and One Nation has recently opened a branch in Warrandyte and calls on the member for Warrandyte to reveal if she is one of the coalition members considering jumping ship.

Leave refused.

Brad BATTIN (Berwick) (09:43): I move, by leave:

That this house condemns the Minister for Police for continuing to support a Premier who has prioritised \$15 billion for bikies and criminals over vital funding for police officers, PSOs and 24-hour police stations in Victoria.

Leave refused.

John LISTER (Werribee) (09:43): I move, by leave:

That this house notes One Nation's proposal to withdraw from the Paris agreement, condemns an agenda that denies climate reality and calls on the Leader of the Opposition to reveal if this policy is on the table as part of her secret deal with One Nation.

Leave refused.

Matthew GUY (Bulleen) (09:44): I move, by leave:

That this house condemns the Minister for Public and Active Transport for continuing to support the Premier, who has prioritised \$15 billion for bikies and criminals over vital funding for upgrading growth area rail, such as extensions from Frankston to Baxter and Cranbourne to Clyde, or following through with the delivery of the *Western Rail Plan*.

Leave refused.

Tim BULL (Gippsland East) (09:44): I move, by leave:

That this house condemns the Minister for Carers and Volunteers for continuing to support the Premier, who has prioritised \$15 billion for bikies and criminals over vital funding to back our hardworking volunteers in this state of Victoria.

Leave refused.

Nicole WERNER (Warrandyte) (09:44): I move, by leave:

That this house condemns the Minister for Youth for continuing to support a Premier who has prioritised \$15 billion for bikies, criminals and crooks over vital funding for youth services in Victoria.

Leave refused.

Tim McCURDY (Ovens Valley) (09:45): I move, by leave:

That this house condemns the Minister for Consumer Affairs for continuing to support a Premier who has prioritised \$15 billion for bikies and criminals over vital funding for tackling illegal tobacco law in Victoria.

Leave refused.

David SOUTHWICK (Caulfield) (09:45): I move, by leave:

That this house condemns the Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs for continuing to support the Premier, who has prioritised \$15 billion for bikies and criminals over vital funding for legitimate jobs here in Victoria.

Leave refused.

Members statements

Yvonne Kernan

Danny PEARSON (Essendon – Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs, Minister for Finance, Minister for Government Services) (09:46): I rise to remember the life of Yvonne Kernan. I first met Yve when I moved to Ascot Vale and I joined the Ascot Vale branch of the party. Yve was a passionate, committed community activist who always – always – put the community first. I found Yve to be worldly. She was thoughtful, she was considered, she was generous and she was kind. The celebration of Yve's life was held at the Carlton Football Club. It is often the way that you just learn so much more about the many facets of a person's life – a life which was well lived.

Yve's family, while starting from humble beginnings, became quite affluent – her brother indicated he was a strong supporter of the Liberal Party – while Yve, who was a veteran of the Labor club at Monash in the 1960s, was anything but. One day, I think it was back in the 1990s, her brother saw Yve protesting by the Tullamarine Freeway, and I suspect it was probably about the Kennett government's decision to put tolls on the freeway. Her brother rang her up and said, 'Yve, where have you parked the Mercedes?' But for Yve it was always about protecting the community from overdevelopment and from the destruction of heritage-listed homes and buildings, and it was about ensuring that community linkages and connections were at the core of what made us who we are. Her cousin Tony Isaacs talked about her passion for bluestone heritage homes and grey racehorses. Yve was just such a wonderful person. Her loss has impacted all of us, but we are all the better for knowing Yve. She was just such a wonderful person. Vale, Yve Kernan.

Government performance

Emma KEALY (Lowan) (09:47): When the Premier was first appointed to that role in this state she proudly said she was from regional Victoria and would be a Premier for regional Victorians. Yet here we are, with money being funnelled to bikies and criminal gangs and to use strippers to motivate men for overnight shifts, instead of money being spent on the things that rural and regional Victorians need. Our roads are falling apart. The Western Highway is in a dilapidated state, and that \$15 billion that has been wasted on corruption could have been spent to fix that. It could have been spent on fixing our hospitals or recruiting teachers and childcare workers to our rural and regional areas of Victoria, where we cannot access those supports. It could have been invested in so many things, but instead it went down the gurgler and the Premier is not taking any steps to find that money and get it paid back to the government. It is rightful that that should be back in the hands of the government to spend on the services that we need in Victoria. Instead, the Premier quickly went out to establish an emergency services tax to slug farmers the greatest amount – to put a land tax on productive land – and gouge them. These are the same farmers who are on the back of fire trucks. They are the same farmers that

are out there responding to their own medical incidents when there is an event on a fireground. They then go home to pay a bill that is a huge slug to pay for core government services. It is unfair and it is unjust. At the end of November Victorians will have a clear choice.

Laverton electorate infrastructure projects

Sarah CONNOLLY (Laverton) (09:49): In November we opened the Metro Tunnel for Melbourne's west. In December we opened the West Gate Tunnel for Melbourne's west. And today, Westies, guess what, we have just opened Footscray Hospital.

Members interjecting.

Sarah CONNOLLY: That deserves a 'Yay' I think. I have spoken so many times in this place about this project and how it will improve health care in Melbourne's west, and the benefits cannot be overstated: an additional 200 beds, 15,000 more patients and 20,000 more people able to be seen by the emergency department. That is huge. That is more patients being able to be treated, reduced wait times and better patient outcomes – delivered by this new hospital. And, for the first time, this new hospital will offer Victoria's first ever publicly funded pathology services, meaning faster diagnostics for all of Western Health's hospitals. This is the biggest health infrastructure investment in Victorian history. Labor promised it, and now Labor has delivered it. And for folks in the west there is still more good news to come. We have still got Werribee Mercy to complete its emergency department upgrade later this year, and works continue on the new hospital in Melton. Right across Victoria we are getting on with improving and strengthening our healthcare system, and this is absolutely true when it comes to Melbourne's west, because under Labor we do not cut and we do not close hospitals; we build and we invest in them.

Australia Day

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (09:50): Australia Day provides an opportunity for us to celebrate the achievements of wonderful community members both locally but also through the Australia Day awards. Gordon Simpson of Alexandra was recognised for his roles in the CFA and tourism. Not one to seek the limelight, Gus gets the connection between a thriving local community and tourism. He has been the backbone of so many events – truck shows, fishing, rodeos – and as a business operator, he is always there to support the town in so many ways. Graeme Robb at Thornton is another quiet lifetime achiever. Committed to emergency services, he was a volunteer ambulance officer and an ambulance community officer at Eildon for almost 50 years, and he spent longer at the CFA, where he commenced in 1966. Geoff Penny from Terip Terip – this is bittersweet – received a gong for his long-time CFA involvement and his local work with the cemetery and young farmers at the same time as his community was decimated by the fires. Cr Jim Child's love and commitment for the Upper Yarra is evident. For decades he has advocated for services in that area. It is inspiring to see the community hub members within the Murrindindi shire spearheading recovery post bushfires. They are the boots on the ground, organising and sorting donations and working with external services. It is all about fencing at the moment, and I urge the government to support these communities by helping fund coordinators who are working voluntarily.

Country Fire Authority Bass electorate brigades

Jordan CRUGNALE (Bass) (09:52): More than 200 fires in the landscape, communities threatened, homes and structures burnt, precious life taken and livestock gone – the hottest day on record was so marked. In our Bass electorate, CFA brigades from Pearcedale to Pound Creek formed strike teams deployed across the state. This is the second iteration for the public record: Pearcedale – Kevin Sullivan, Adam Carrigg, David Stewart, Ethan Stewart, Ashleigh Ellis, Andy Gray, Jack Harkness, Don Gibbon, Robyn Murphy, Jack McClelland, Alistair Errey, Geoff Carter, Jason Jones, Stephen Jones, Terry Prentice, Maddox Gibbs; Devon Meadows – Tim Vriend, John Sanderson, Richard Watson, Jeff Knight, Jon Wainwright, Peter Van De Laarschot, Brodie White, Justin Stackpole; Warneet–Blind Bight – Mark Konieczny, Mellani Harris, Ken Eakins, Chris Hayes, Luke

Bowman; Heath Hill–Yannathan – Clayton Chauvin, Hailey Chauvin; Kernot–Grantville – Andrew Blackney, Daniel Blackney, Shawn Curry, Russell Day, Michelle Venten, George Blum, Greg Jennings; and Dalyston – Stephen Ross-Bryant, Jarrod Minihan, Carolyn Milnes, Roger O’Brien. I also thank the collective at San Remo and Wonthaggi brigades. To all our extraordinary volunteers across districts 8 and 9, who are called out locally on standby, undertaking training, deployed afar; to their partners, families and employers, who get their spirited essence to help, protect and serve; and to our SES units and lifesaving clubs, who also had a busy summer: thank you for your exemplary service, commitment and camaraderie. You are valued and appreciated and the best of us.

Harkaway Primary School

Brad BATTIN (Berwick) (09:53): This year is 150 years of the Harkaway Primary School, a great primary school that has had so many wonderful people go through. I know we are not allowed to have props in here, but today I do wear my house captain badge. Believe it or not, it is the house captain badge from 1986, which I have managed to still keep. And yes, I did hold that leadership position for 12 months, so that was actually a good opportunity there. It is a wonderful school. I had the pleasure of going out there and meeting with Harry and Summer, who are the school captains this year. I know that they have got some amazing plans for this year to celebrate all the things that have happened at Harkaway Primary and the people that have gone through. Also, to the captains of Melrose, which was my house at the time, Zamaan and Oliver: thank you so much for making sure you keep the legacy going. Harkaway Primary School has not just had an influence on many people’s lives but on mine specifically, with some of the teachers, like Stuart Daly, Diane Forsythe, Lynne Pentland and the late Lyn Prendergast – so many people who make a difference in our lives. These are the primary school teachers that can guide and work with you. I was very lucky, because it was a small school. When I was there, we went down to as low as 60-odd students, and it went as high as 200. But you got to know everybody, and you truly learned what it was about: giving back to the community and that the best benefits that you get for yourself are by giving back more to your community. I congratulate Harkaway Primary on their 150 years, and I wish them the best in their celebration.

Lunar New Year

Natalie SULEYMAN (St Albans – Minister for Veterans, Minister for Small Business and Employment, Minister for Youth) (09:55): Happy Lunar New Year to all those that are celebrating. I had the honour of joining the Premier and many of my colleagues to welcome the ringing in of the Year of the Horse at the Quang Minh Temple. Thousands lined up at the temple for this joyous occasion. Lunar New Year is a special time for my electorate of St Albans; every street across Brimbank lights up and families, friends and neighbours come together to celebrate. I want to thank Quang Minh Temple, Thic Phuoc Tan, Hai Pham, Andy Nguyen, Selina Chenh, Phuc Nam Pham, the Vietnamese Community in Australia, the Vietnamese Museum Australia, the Australian Vietnamese Women’s Association and all of the fantastic organisations that work each and every day to support the Vietnamese community. I want to thank all the Vietnamese businesses in St Albans in particular, who are the beating heart of our community and who transformed our streets with marigold flowers. Like the famous Ben Thanh market in Saigon, Alfrieda Street has become the Ben Thanh market of Melbourne, and many people far and wide travel to St Albans to experience the fantastic atmosphere. I am committed to delivering so much more for the St Albans business precinct to ensure that it is safe and vibrant and of course to acknowledging the contribution of our Vietnamese community and continuing to make sure that St Albans is the best in the west.

Kokoda Track

Martin CAMERON (Morwell) (09:56): It is that time of year again where Kokoda is in the forefront of everybody’s mind in the Latrobe Valley, because the Marsh/Tierney scholarship, which is run through my office, is now open again for year 11 students right across the Latrobe Valley. There are a lot of people and members in this place that have actually been across the Kokoda; we bring children across in year 11 and they spend five days over there trekking from one end of Kokoda to the

other. The greatest thing that the kids are most concerned about when we go over is their access to wi-fi. They are a little bit worried about that; I can say there is no wi-fi at all. But on the most pleasing side, when we get back from Kokoda we have to actually force them to let their parents know, by using their phone, that they have made it back safely. It costs \$8000 to get a scholarship winner across there. The member for Gippsland East runs the show, and it is well worthwhile going over. His knowledge of what happened over in Kokoda and the way he relays and tells the stories brings a tear to everybody's eye as they walk through. You are walking in the footsteps of soldiers from your electorate that have paid the ultimate price and sacrificed their lives. So the Kokoda scholarship is open.

Hazel Glen College

Lauren KATHAGE (Yan Yean) (09:58): It was a real privilege to be at the Hazel Glen College awards ceremony and see so many outstanding young people recognised, from the VET achievement awards to the academic excellence awards and of course our college dux Samuel Matthews. The talent on display was impressive. I had the honour of presenting the Yan Yean award to Olivia Sorensen, and it was special to see her being recognised by the school community for her compassion and leadership. Watching the 2026 college captains Peyton Condon and Sarah Yelland receive their badges and put on their special jumpers was another highlight, and the pride was not just in us but in their families as well – a special moment for them. Afterwards I spent time speaking with students and their families, and I was really struck by the different paths that each student was going to take according to their interests. Creative industries, trade, sport – each had a sense of purpose. Hazel Glen College and its principal Anthony Stockwell should be incredibly proud. Well done to Sophie Nemer, Kade Kovacevic, Lachlan Rowbotham, Jaxon Kueffer, Nova Smallwood, Grace Scott, Olivia Morales, Adam Janakievski, Oliver Berry, Nathan Wayne, Jordan Herney, Raghav Vasdev, Samuel Matthews, Gurteg Singh, Tania Joshy, Ziggy Cattapan, Maria Peter, Mitchell Evans, Onethra Kiridena, Joe Furber, Madison Cameron, Joanne Dib, Hugh Stonehan, Kai Egan and Lachlan Rumley.

Government performance

Michael O'BRIEN (Malvern) (09:59): This Labor government is corrupt, and every Victorian is paying the price – corrupt because this Labor government turned a blind eye to criminal activity on Big Build sites that stole \$15,000 million out of the pockets of hardworking Victorians, money stolen to benefit rotten unions, outlaw bikie gangs and drug dealers; corrupt because the same CFMEU thugs who stole the money from Victorians paid protection money to the Labor Party in the form of political donations so they could continue their rorts and rip-offs. \$15 billion of Victorians' money was stolen by Labor's mates on Labor's watch – money that could and should have gone to reopen closed police stations, to fill potholes, to open closed hospital beds and to ease Labor's taxes. Under Labor, corruption is covered up; it is in their DNA. Under the Liberals it will be cleaned up because that is in ours. Labor wants to shoehorn 14 planning activity centres into my Malvern electorate – high rise and high density for all, like it or not. Labor will not remove Malvern's level crossings, but they are removing our right to object to 16 storeys next door. Labor thinks that activity centres are so good that the Premier has not a single one in her electorate, nor does the Minister for Planning. But, what, Malvern deserves 14 of them? This Labor government is a hypocritical joke.

Bushfires

Martha HAYLETT (Ripon) (10:01): This Sunday marks two years since the Bayindeen–Rocky Road bushfires tore through communities across Ripon. For more than two weeks those fires burnt relentlessly. Over 22,000 hectares were lost across 34 communities from Warwick and Mount Buangor to Mount Cole, Raglan, Waterloo, Elmhurst, Amphitheatre and so many others. More than 2000 volunteer firefighters stood on the front line, supported by Forest Fire Management Victoria crews, Fire Rescue Victoria staff and 20 aircraft working overhead. Their courage saved lives, but the losses were profound. Seven homes were destroyed, along with farm sheds, stock, crops and fodder.

Our much-loved Mount Cole and Mount Buangor were left scorched. Families who lost everything are still rebuilding their lives, and the emotional scars remain deep.

Two years on, recovery continues in our forests, on our farms and in the hearts of those who were hit hardest. While our communities have rallied with the support of councils, agencies and countless volunteers, the truth is that healing takes time. My thoughts remain with every person still feeling the weight of that devastating period, especially as we also reflect on the more recent Streatham fires in January. These anniversaries can stir up difficult emotions. I want to again acknowledge the tireless efforts of our emergency services: thank you for everything you do to keep Victorians safe. To anyone who is struggling, please remember that support is available.

Emma Johnston

Ellen SANDELL (Melbourne) (10:02): I want to acknowledge with deep sadness the passing of Professor Emma Johnston, who passed away just after Christmas. Emma was a giant of academia and marine ecology and was the first woman to serve as vice-chancellor of the University of Melbourne. She was a trailblazer for Australian women in science. As a woman who studied science myself, I was inspired by her work, and I know so many other women who were too. Her achievements are many. She was on the board of the CSIRO and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. She authored 185 peer-reviewed journal articles and was the chief author of the current state of the environment report for Australia. She won multiple awards, including the Eureka Prize for science communication, and was deservedly made an officer of the Order of Australia. Underneath all that was a deep love for understanding and protecting marine ecosystems, a love Emma developed early growing up near the sea in Williamstown. She revolutionised our understanding of human impacts on marine ecosystems. As a keen scuba diver and environmentalist, I am so grateful for everything that she did to protect our incredible marine ecosystems and the creatures that call our oceans home. Emma leaves behind a truly astonishing legacy as well as a beloved family, friends, colleagues and students. My condolences go to Sam, her children, her colleagues, her students, and the many, many people who loved her.

Emma Johnston

Nathan LAMBERT (Preston) (10:04): I would like to echo the remarks of the member for Melbourne regarding the sad passing of Emma Johnston. Our thoughts are with her loved ones.

Reservoir Neighbourhood House

Nathan LAMBERT (Preston) (10:04): I would like to update the house on a little fundraiser that we ran last year in which I attempted to jog all 426 public streets in Reservoir. I am pleased to report that the run got done and we raised \$4700 for Reservoir Neighbourhood House. A big thankyou goes to all of the team there, including Craig Liddell, Gillian Wood, Jenny Gailans, Margaret Styles and Kate Hatton, who joined us for part of the jog on her rollerskates. And a thankyou goes to some other generous donors: Cr Matt Arturi; Snowy Stacy; Roslyn Hunter; Maria and Geoff Thompson; the member for Broadmeadows; the member for Pakenham; Jacinta Ermacora in the other place; Ged Kearney; Alys Gagnon; Emma Cunningham; Ruth McCall of Preston Rotary; Jim Shen, who ran a great local Lunar New Year festival last week; Louise Kenney-Shen; Nathan Fradley; Paul Culhane, a long-time Preston Reservoir local; Thomas Leslie of Darebin Brass Band; Peter Kemp; Sarah Lucia; Dylan Vigilante; Daniel Scoullar; Cr Kristine Olaris; Patrick Wood of Reservoir United and St Joseph the Worker; Graham Mills from West Preston Lakeside; Dorothy Sofra and Tinnie Ramirez from the Damayan Society; Philip Bouchier; Imelda Murphy, who ran a great BrigidFest event the other week; Geraldine Wood; Janelle Kwon; Matt Cowgill; Dave Stoneman, one of our local firefighters; Danny Reddan; Alexandra Gill; Vix Penko; Jess Richardson of Friends of Edwardes Lake; and Theresa Bradley, who I know would like me to express her opposition to duck hunting. Thank you to everyone who donated and supported Reservoir Neighbourhood House.

The Local Umbrella

David HODGETT (Croydon) (10:05): I rise today to speak about The Local Umbrella, a sensory-friendly and inclusive cafe located a few doors down from my office in Croydon. The Local Umbrella was created to be a safe, accessible, welcoming space for everyone in the community, particularly families, neurodivergent individuals and people living with disability. The Local Umbrella offers affordable, nutritious food and drinks in a calm environment where people can relax, connect and feel a sense of belonging. It is a great space for parents who want to have a relaxing coffee while the kids are entertained with toys, fidgets, books, Lego, board games and drawing supplies. The Local Umbrella also offers inclusive programs and pathways to employment for people of all abilities, fostering meaningful social connection and empowerment. Beyond the cafe itself, The Local Umbrella offers the Umbrella Club after-school program, neurospicy ladies' nights and community networking brunches. They support people with disabilities to achieve their employment goals, as well as running inclusive DJ nights and offering ongoing day-to-day social work support. Their focus is simple: to be there for the community. Next time you are in Croydon come along and enjoy what The Local Umbrella has to offer, all while supporting social enterprise and supporting local business.

Taylors Lakes Tennis Club

Natalie HUTCHINS (Sydenham) (10:06): I am really pleased to update the house on the exciting developments that we have seen across the Sydenham electorate in our tennis community, and a huge shout-out to Tennis Victoria. Over summer I visited Taylors Lakes Tennis Club to welcome the Singha K-Swiss Thai junior team to the club. They were staying in Melbourne, visiting from Thailand, and what an inspiration it was to see the locals hosting these talented young international players and fostering cultural exchange and everyone sharing their passion for tennis. The club was warmly hosting all involved. Events like this highlight our outstanding volunteers. In November last year Tennis Victoria named Rick Dal Bon, the president of the Taylors Lakes Tennis Club, their community champion of the month, and he richly deserves it. Rick has given the club 18 years and has been the president for the past eight.

Footscray Hospital

Natalie HUTCHINS (Sydenham) (10:08): I would also like to touch on the visit I made to Footscray Hospital along with many members in this house just yesterday, and the Premier. How amazing the new hospital is in terms of the facilities and the fact that it has so many beds and will support 15,000 more patients, along with the 20,000 more that will be able to visit the phenomenal emergency department there every year.

Sri Lanka Independence Day

Gary MAAS (Narre Warren South) (10:08): I was honoured to recently represent the Premier and the Minister for Multicultural Affairs at an event hosted by the Consul General of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka in Melbourne to celebrate their 78th anniversary of independence. It was held at Box Hill town hall. The event acknowledged and celebrated Sri Lanka's history and achievements through speeches, food, dancing and performances. It was a wonderful display of multiculturalism in our fantastic state of Victoria. It was very special to connect with this part of my cultural identity on this important occasion celebrating when the country gained political independence from British rule back in 1948. The Sri Lankan community in Victoria is the largest in Australia and one of the largest outside of Sri Lanka, and their cultural, social and economic contributions to our state only enrich each and every single one of us. It was particularly important to come together this independence day to recognise those lost in the devastating floods that Sri Lanka experienced last year. That was due to Cyclone Ditwah. The cyclone had a huge impact on lives and properties over there, and many in attendance at this event informed me that they were so grateful for the support that was received from Australia. The outer south-east, including my electorate in Narre Warren South, has a great and vibrant Sri Lankan community that I am very proud to represent. I thank Pradeepa Saram, the consul general, for the invitation.

Lunar New Year

John MULLAHY (Glen Waverley) (10:10): As we continue to celebrate Chinese New Year, I want to acknowledge the extraordinary staff members in my office who help me support and engage with our vibrant Chinese community. Glen Waverley district is proudly multicultural. The language skills, cultural understanding and lived experience within my team are not just helpful, they are essential to how we genuinely connect with and serve our community. Kimberly Huang joined my office in 2024 and has quickly become an integral part of our work. Her professionalism, insight and outstanding media skills ensure that my correspondence, speeches and social media communications are clear, respectful and reflective of the diverse community we represent. I also want to recognise someone very special, my office manager Rachel Tian. Those who know Rachel understand that her contributions extend far beyond her title. For more than a decade she has dedicated herself to supporting parliamentary representatives with fortitude, tenacity and an unwavering sense of duty – including you, Deputy Speaker. Rachel brings wisdom, cultural insight and deep community relationships that strengthen everything we do. Her steady leadership ensures our office runs smoothly and that every constituent is treated with care and respect. Born in the Year of the Horse, with her birthday next week, Rachel truly embodies strength and perseverance. I wish you a happy Chinese New Year. Here is to another year of friendship, growth and proudly serving our community together. We serve at the pleasure.

Lunar New Year

Meng Heang TAK (Clarinda) (10:11): I extend my very best wishes to all those celebrating Lunar New Year 2026. With its spirit of renewal and hope Chinese New Year is something that resonates with all Victorians and is something that we as Victorians can all celebrate in the spirit of togetherness. From my family to yours, from Bright Moon temple to Hoa Nghiem temple, let us continue to celebrate. We saw this on the weekend at the Springvale Lunar New Year celebrations. This year's celebrations were again a roaring success. It was wonderful to join and celebrate with community together with many of our colleagues from this place and others, from the local member for Mulgrave Eden Foster to the upper house member for the south-east Lee Tarlamis, the Minister for Small Business and Employment, the local mayor and many councillors from different councils. Congratulations and thank you to the Springvale Asian Business Association; their president Daniel Cheng – once again you did it; many of the former presidents – Hoang Tran, Martin Lee, Stanley Chang, Tom Huynh and Frankie Chen; and all the executive and volunteers – another wonderful festival, and everyone involved should be extremely proud. This year we welcome the Year of the Fire Horse, a powerful symbol of energy, independence and determination inspiring us to move forward with confidence, courage and purpose. These traditions remind us of the importance of connection, gratitude and hope.

Emma Johnston

Mathew HILAKARI (Point Cook) (10:12): I too align myself with the words of the member for Melbourne in acknowledging the life of Emma Johnston, the former vice-chancellor of the Uni of Melbourne, who was a great supporter of the Werribee campus of the University of Melbourne.

State Emergency Service Point Cook unit

Mathew HILAKARI (Point Cook) (10:13): I rise to acknowledge the Victorian SES in Point Cook and the volunteers, who are so hardworking and appreciated by the community that I represent – people who dedicate their time in training and effort but particularly over this summer dedicated their time to the bushfires, which have really significantly affected Victoria. I want to acknowledge really directly Tyler Smith, Alvaro Faba De La Maza, Peter Tester, Adam Moffat, Scott Plover, Michael Denning, Dan Zaccaria and Jaymes Oldani. Thank you, Japinder Sandhu, for sending these names through. Your efforts across the community and across Victoria have not gone unnoticed. I also want to thank their families because I know they miss their partners and their parents while they are away

onsite, and I really appreciate how difficult that is over the summer as well. Thank you to all the volunteer groups, especially Sikh volunteers as well, who have been out on the firegrounds.

Shree Swaminarayan Temple, Rockbank

Mathew HILAKARI (Point Cook) (10:14): Recently I attended the opening of the Swaminarayan temple in Melbourne, a beautiful new temple, a wonderful place of learning and cultural exchange. Thank you for the invite to the inauguration. I look forward to many visits ahead.

Ramadan and Lent

Iwan WALTERS (Greenvale) (10:14): Ramadan mubarak. We are entering the holiest month of Ramadan for Muslims in Greenvale and indeed around the world – a sacred time of compassion, community and spiritual reflection. This has been a difficult time for the Muslim community, and I want to thank and recognise the tens of thousands of residents and vibrant mosque communities in Greenvale who live their Islamic faith through charitable works and service to others and contribute so much to our Victorian society, founded as it is on decency, harmony, mutual respect and inalienable freedoms. It is an incredible privilege to be invited to join with families, mosque communities and schools across Greenvale to break the fast at iftar dinners and to be part of a journey of faith for so many. To my friends in Greenvale and around the world, I wish you a peaceful and fulfilling holy month. Ramadan mubarak.

This week is a particularly important time for so many across Greenvale, with many eastern Christians having observed Clean Monday or Ash Monday earlier this week and others, including my family, marking Ash Wednesday and the start of Lent today. Irrespective of liturgical or doctrinal differences, Greenvale's diverse Christian communities are united in fasting and contemplation during this Lenten period of renewal and reflection. I am grateful to represent a community where different faith traditions are deeply important to so many. The alignment of Lent and Ramadan underscores that significance while emphasising shared values of charity, compassion, peace and love.

Greenvale Tennis Club

Iwan WALTERS (Greenvale) (10:15): It was wonderful to join the Greenvale Tennis Club community open day on Sunday. President Liz Tektonopoulos and an amazing team of volunteers do so much for our community. I am thankful to be part of this great club, which is being upgraded as we speak thanks to the tenacity, vision and advocacy of Liz and the club community.

Cranbourne mosque

Pauline RICHARDS (Cranbourne) (10:15): I would like to acknowledge the extraordinary work of the Cranbourne mosque, which raised \$10,000 for bushfire-affected communities. Ramadan Mubarak. I do want to say how grateful I am to have this extraordinary community make this amazing commitment and show generosity to those who need it most. It is so typical of our very strong Cranbourne community. Thank you very much.

Statements on parliamentary committee reports

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Inquiry into Fraud and Corruption Control in Local Government: A Follow up of Two Auditor-General Reports

Mathew HILAKARI (Point Cook) (10:16): I rise to speak on the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee's *Fraud and Corruption Control in Local Government: A Follow up of Two Auditor-General Reports*. This is the second time I have spoken on this report, and I am so proud to do so, because it is a substantial and weighty report which has a series of recommendations, 31 in fact, and 58 findings.

One of the things that has happened since the time that I last spoke on this report is unfortunately the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee has lost its deputy chair. The member for South-West Coast had three months of service as the deputy chair on the committee, and her presence was very hard to miss at all points on the committee. We do have the opportunity, however, to welcome the member for Hawthorn as the new deputy chair, and we hope to look forward to such long service as well from the member for Hawthorn. I do want to acknowledge that this report actually featured neither of those deputy chairs, unfortunately. I did acknowledge the previous deputy chair Nicholas McGowan. I think that is three in about 3½ months. I saw Nick McGowan last night, and we had a good discussion. We did not cross this too much in fact. I would say that there have been some steadying hands on this committee, including Jade Benham, the member for Mildura, and member for North-Eastern Metropolitan Region Mr Welch from the other place. You will get your chance to be deputy chair at some point as well, so I look forward to that.

Steve McGhie interjected.

Mathew HILAKARI: I will take up your interjection, member for Melton. They do turn over leadership positions, and we have seen a few of them in this place and up in Canberra recently as well.

As I said, there were 31 recommendations and 58 findings. I did talk about some of them last time I was in this place, and you will remember well particularly the discussions around regional and rural councils. We have 79 councils across this state, and those councils in particular identified – those regional and rural councils, those smaller councils – the real challenges with dealing with corruption and fraud control within local government. They had some real challenges particularly around finding the right personnel – because it comes with a particular skill set – and providing the training to those in local government. When we have a large turnover of members of local government, providing that training is incredibly important.

I will take us to recommendation 2, which is that:

Local Government Victoria update the *Guidance on the mandatory training for Mayors, Deputy Mayors and Councillors* to make the learning domain on ‘Preventing fraud and corruption’ a mandatory part of Councillor induction training.

I think this is one of those recommendations that would strike us as just absolutely normal, something that we would have thought would be part of the systems already at all councils. Not all councils have been providing prevention of fraud and corruption training as part of their induction of new councillors, and new councillors do have a really significant role to play in the building of infrastructure and in making decisions about who runs that local infrastructure. I know in the community that I represent the very first basketball court, a single basketball court only, was opened in Point Cook, and a community group is running that at the moment. Making sure that fraud and corruption control is at the heart of the decision-making of local councillors, particularly where there is a conflict of interest that may be at stake – it is really important that that is part of the mandatory training. This is a really strong recommendation about how people can just better understand their obligations to the community, because it is ratepayer funds. Everything that councils do is related back to ratepayer funds and should always be in the interest of the communities that councils represent.

Recommendation 3 is that:

Local Government Victoria consult with sector stakeholders to facilitate a more streamlined approach to the provision of training on fraud and corruption prevention and awareness that:

- avoids duplication of effort –

if we can do this across one government body rather than 79, that is an important way that we can save money for all ratepayers across our community –

- optimises cost-efficiency for Councils
- ensures a minimum standard of quality –

and I would always like to see that as the maximum standard of quality, not the minimum standard of quality –

- is scalable across the various Council contexts ...

for example, if you are one of the very small councils, you may have different requirements and those councils that spend, in a literal sense, hundreds of millions of dollars every year. I will come back to this. (*Time expired*)

Environment and Planning Committee

Inquiry into Securing the Victorian Food Supply

Nicole WERNER (Warrandyte) (10:21): I rise to speak on the Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee's report – a bit of a throwback – on securing the Victorian food supply. It was actually the first committee that I served on and the second report that I was part of from start to finish. The member for Wendouree has gone now, but she is the chair to this day; the member for Ripon is on it, and I think the member for Bass is still on the EP committee. I served with them, and this report examined population growth, urban sprawl and overdevelopment issues that go to the heart of Victoria's and specifically my electorate's future. It examined and looked at findings around the green wedge. I am a proud defender of the green wedge. It is a Liberal idea that came from former Premier Rupert Hamer, who spoke about the green wedge being the lungs of Melbourne, something that I mentioned in my maiden speech and something that I am an ardent supporter and defender of, because it is so vitally important.

In a seat like Warrandyte the backdrop of our electorate is the beautiful Warrandyte State Park and state forest, a beautiful area. If you have not checked it out, I would encourage people to go and check it out because it is beautiful. It is live on all trails – lots of different trails that you can take there – and it is to that end that I rise to speak about this committee report today, given that parts of the electorate are in these bushfire-prone areas because of the state forest, because we do have large acreages and because it is what is considered a peri-urban area. In fact there was a fire there yesterday in my electorate, on Tindals Road in Warrandyte. This is why it is so pertinent that we look at these matters and we examine them, because these are areas that are at bushfire risk. On that note, there was a fire that happened yesterday where more than 21 trucks turned out. There were all of our local CFA crews – the North Warrandyte crew, the South Warrandyte crew, the Warrandyte crew and I believe the Wonga Park crew – as well as many others from neighbouring areas to fight this fire. I give a big shout-out today to them and all of our amazing CFA volunteers who do the incredible work that they do and are so selfless in giving up their time but also sacrificing. Sometimes it is putting their lives on the line to be able to defend our communities. It was in this instance a grass and brush fire that could have escalated and gotten much worse if it had not been for the responsiveness of captain Will Hodgson, so I thank our local community and all of our local CFAs for their work there. This is why I will always stand with my community.

All of these findings that we have, and all of these committee reports that look to defend the green wedge and defend these environmental areas from overdevelopment – this is why I stand with my community. We have to consider these risks. We have to consider the bushfire risk zones. These environmental protections are there for a reason. This is why we do not densify the area with population – because it is at risk of bushfires – and I will defend my community and their right to be consulted and to have a say. I will fight for appropriate development and for it to fit in with neighbourhood character. Despite whatever misconstruing of our words on this side of the house that the government would love to use against us, the fact of the matter is clear: on this side of the house we stand with our communities. We stand with Victorians. We stand on the side of our communities and their right to have a say, their right to have community consultation, whether that is the Park Orchards Ratepayers Association, who I recently met with and we talked about these planning matters as per recommendation 9 on amending the green wedge zone, or whether it is the Warrandyte community association that I got to meet with and speak to. These are incredible advocates for our

community that indeed this report spoke to in chapter 6, discussing how community owned and led groups have the best on-ground knowledge when it comes to development in their area. This is what we believe on this side of the house. So let that be known.

On indulgence, in the final moments of today, as it will be the only time I think I will be able to say this today, I would like to wish everyone a very happy Lunar New Year, happy Chinese New Year, xī nián kuài lè, gōng xī fā cái, kung hei fat choi, nián nián yǒu yú. And to everyone that celebrates of Asian heritage, including me, I hope you had a most wonderful day for your family reunion dinner on Monday night, the first day of Chinese New Year. Yesterday I did not get a chance to speak, so I am going to take this chance now to wish everyone a very happy Lunar New Year.

Electoral Matters Committee

Inquiry into the 2025 Prahran and Werribee By-Elections

John LISTER (Werribee) (10:26): It has been one year since I had the honour of being elected by the people of Werribee to this place, and I wanted to take this opportunity to speak to the Electoral Matters Committee report into the 2025 Prahran and Werribee by-elections. You can see where I am going here. By-elections are never easy, and I feel for the people of Nepean, who are about to be forced to do it twice in one year. As this thorough and well-considered report notes, the tight timeframes and Victorian Electoral Commission preparedness caused some issues. However, the by-elections as a whole were conducted fairly and democratically. I did not participate in the review. Instead, I was focused on standing up an electorate office and getting on with the job that I was elected to do. However, I thank the committee for considering all the evidence from the different parties, some members of the public as well as the VEC, and the leadership of my electorate neighbour, the member for Tarneit, in establishing solid recommendations for future elections.

I do just want to have a look at some of the different findings and recommendations from the report. In particular, one thing came up as I was out on the doors talking to people. Quite often, the second question you get after ‘Who are you?’ is ‘How do I vote?’ I had a lot saying to me, ‘I’ve got lots of kids. I’ve got one kid who may have sensory issues. It’s very difficult to take them to pre-poll, particularly when we’ve got different parties all vying for attention as well as the space being quite busy, particularly some of the pre-poll locations in Werribee, which were quite cramped. So I don’t necessarily want to go down then.’ There are also a lot of people who of course are entitled to vote but may also have sensory issues as well. I really do commend the VEC, the electoral commission, for running the trial of the low-sensory voting centres as part of the by-election, particularly in Werribee. I spoke about that a lot on the doors, and I know from that feedback from punters who went down there just how much they appreciated having a chance to vote in peace and quiet, because it is a very important thing, a by-election. It is making a choice for your community about who represents your community. There are a lot of other discussions around by-elections – about what they mean for government or what they mean for the opposition – but in the end it is about who you want to represent your towns.

The other finding that I wanted to comment on is finding 14 around the 10-day period of pre-polling. I think everyone here in this chamber, or almost everyone here, spent a bit of time at pre-poll in the heat in Werribee and up in Wyndham Vale. The finding says that the 10-day period was excessive, and their recommendation to the government is that they look to amend the Electoral Act 2002 to reduce the early voting period to seven days and mobile voting to nine days before the election day. I think it is particularly important that we do have pre-poll. It is an important chance for people who may be working. I represent a town that very much has people who are shiftworkers, who work a lot on weekends in different fields, so it is important to have pre-poll. However, the length of pre-poll and what can happen in those 10 days around the discussions, the commitments – we did not get many commitments from the Liberals, but the commitments certainly from us change what the discourse is. I think it is a little bit unfair that in that 10-day period, if you vote early on the first day of early voting,

you may wish to change your mind before what is actually election day. There is a reason why we call it election day.

Finding 23 also spoke to the behaviour of some of the voting centre staff, and I want to quickly reflect on this a little bit, as I saw firsthand what was referenced in the report, particularly around Manor Lakes on the day of the election. I was quite shocked to see Jeff Kennett rolled out and see the behaviour of one VEC official singing the praises of the Liberal Party. Look, we all have very eclectic supporters in our parties, but I did not expect them to be wearing a VEC vest, so I think it is particularly important to have that training there.

Despite some concerns around VEC processes, I would like to again thank the staff at the VEC for their diligence and hard work. Many of them are Wyndham locals committed to democracy and fairness. In reflecting on campaign volunteers as well, I would like to thank all the Labor members and families and friends who join me every day to share with the people of Werribee how Labor is on their side. In the 12 months since being declared the member I have worked hard to get our new law courts open, stronger bail and safety laws, a huge public transport uplift and major road projects out of the ground, like our Ballan Road upgrade. By-elections can send a clear message that the community sees what is being done, but we always need to have our eye on what is next. As I committed at that by-election, I commit again that I will be out every day working in government, fighting for our community.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Report on the 2023–24 Budget Estimates

Tim BULL (Gippsland East) (10:31): On a committee report this morning I want to make reference to page 49 of the 2023–24 budget estimates, and the topic that I want to talk on is: key issues in the agriculture portfolio. It is a wild dog or dingo issue that I want to speak on, one that I have mentioned many times in this chamber and one that annually costs Victorian farmers between \$13 million and \$18 million. I want to talk about some of the research in this area.

A couple of years back there was some research done where we were told that all of the dingoes in Victoria were primarily purebred animals. Dr Kylie Cairns completed some work – and actually sent me an email – that said that updated DNA testing using 195,000 DNA markers found that in Victoria 87 per cent of the animals tested were dingoes with no dog ancestry, with the remaining animals all carrying more than 85 per cent DNA. It was pretty clear. I was told that the evidence was in and it needed to be accepted. This of course was challenged by a number of local farmers who believed that was not the case. In an area I know you are familiar with, Deputy Speaker, up in the Tambo Valley, where your ancestors hailed from, I attended public meetings in Omeo and also up at Gelantipy, where this was refuted, but the clear message was: accept the science.

However, just prior to Christmas a new report was released. This was led by Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich geneticist Lachie Scarsbrook and 26 other researchers, and it had some very interesting findings. It is very, very current, given it is only about seven weeks old. Some of the findings of the study are:

We also showed that many dingoes, particularly those from Southeast Australia –
that is our area –

experienced admixture with European dogs ... the majority of gene flow events coincided with the initiation of landscape-scale population control in the 1960s.

...

European dogs (including kangaroo hounds) are known to have accompanied colonists who traversed Australia's interior and coastline, and Edward John Eyre's expedition reached the Nullarbor region as early as 1841 ... European expeditions, livestock stations, and Aboriginal trade networks could have all acted as sources of domestic dog ancestry. We also detected significant –

gene –

... sharing between dingoes and the kangaroo hound ... as well as an Australian Cattle Dog ...

Interesting. It seems to be in direct contrast to the finding of Dr Cairns. It says that many dingoes, particularly those from south-east Australia, experienced admixture with European dogs:

Our results illustrate how European colonization, through the introduction of dogs, invasive species, and land use changes, impacted both the ancestry and ecology of dingoes.

Finally, it says:

... Our study ... reveals evidence for widespread interbreeding across Australia prior to the 21st century.

It seems that the study that was originally done by Dr Cairns did not include precolonial dingo DNA. I emailed Dr Cairns over a month ago to ask her about what appear to be conflicting findings, and surprisingly I have not had a response to that. But I did note one comment she made in a recent article, and that was:

We want dingoes left in national parks for the benefits to the ecosystem and not living on farms where they can do damage.

We certainly agree with that. They are important to our ecology – no argument there. But we also must be allowed to control their numbers on the farmland interface, where they are killing stock. That is a discussion that I will not get into this morning but one that I will cover off on in a contribution over the next few sitting weeks, because we still have very, very, very significant stock losses occurring now in East Gippsland, with dog numbers out of control.

Before I finish, I wish to refer to page 133 and the reference to the mining industry in Victoria. I was going to come into the chamber today to ask the minister to ensure the Fingerboards proposal in my electorate underwent a full environment effects statement, but I was told this morning that it actually got announced yesterday afternoon. As the minister knows, I have written to her twice in recent months asking for this to occur, given that there was a previous project in the same area that failed the EES. It is the outcome that my community wants, and I now hope for full transparency in that process.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Report on the 2025–26 Budget Estimates

Lauren KATHAGE (Yan Yean) (10:36): When the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee examined the 2025–26 budget estimates, the economic outlook was positive. Growth was strengthening, real wages were forecast to return and unemployment remained low even in the face of global uncertainty. The government set out a five-step fiscal strategy which is recorded in the report: creating jobs; returning to an operating cash surplus, which we have done; returning to operating surpluses, which we are doing next; stabilising debt as a share of the economy; and then reducing debt. At that point, when the report was published, the numbers told us that improvement was underway. The updated figures now show that improvement is holding and strengthening.

Household consumption has risen in the most recent quarter and is up more than 2 per cent over the year, business investment is contributing to stronger state final demand, and since June 2020 there are 123,000 more businesses operating in Victoria. That shows a very resilient economy. Over the year to December, nearly 60,000 more Victorians are in work, our participation rate is one of the highest in the country, regional unemployment has fallen dramatically compared to a decade ago and, while employment growth is moderating from its post-pandemic highs, unemployment remains low by historical standards. The report notes that wages were expected to grow faster than inflation for the first time since 2019–20, and that is now occurring. Real wages are returning for families. That means relief, it means more confidence and it means stability.

At the same time, we are strengthening the budget. The report highlighted that 2025–26 would see a return to an operating surplus, and we are delivering that surplus. Surpluses are projected across the

forward estimates. Net debt as a proportion of gross state product peaks and then begins to fall. That is not accidental, it is the result of disciplined fiscal strategy. And it is important to remember what that borrowing funded, which is referred to in the report. We supported families and businesses during COVID, and we invested in productive infrastructure that grows the economy and makes daily life easier. For communities like Yan Yean, that is not an abstract thing. When we upgrade roads, when we invest in public transport connections and when we build new schools, expand local health services and introduce free kinder, we reduce the real cost of living. Shorter travel times mean less fuel spent. Reliable public transport means cheaper commuting. New schools close to home mean less time in traffic and more time with family. Expanded health services reduce long trips across the city to see doctors for appointments. That is economic policy in practical form.

The report made clear that stabilising debt depends on growing the economy. That growth does not happen in isolation; it happens when growth corridor communities like mine are connected, supported and able to participate fully in the workforce. When parents can get to work more easily, when young people can access education locally and when businesses can move goods efficiently, productivity rises, participation rises and economic output rises. That is how you strengthen the denominator in the debt-to-GSP ratio that the report refers to. Our economy today is nearly 30 per cent larger than it was in 2015. By the end of the forward estimates it will approach \$780 billion. As the economy grows, our capacity to service debt grows with it. So yes, we borrowed, but we borrowed to build. We are now seeing the return: jobs growth, business formation, real wage recovery and a budget back in surplus. The committee's report set out the framework, and we can see from the numbers since then that that trajectory has been confirmed. That economic strength, fiscal discipline and investment in making life easier for families is the story of the budget of this government and for my community in Yan Yean.

Electoral Matters Committee

Inquiry into Victoria's Upper House Electoral System

Tim READ (Brunswick) (10:41): I am speaking on the Electoral Matters Committee report into Victoria's upper house electoral system, in particular recommendation 1: that the government reform the upper house voting system by introducing legislation amending the Electoral Act 2002 to eliminate group voting tickets. I will just remind members that not all of us will be here next year. It is important to note that Victoria is the only remaining state in the Commonwealth – and that is including the Commonwealth – where voters are prevented from directing their own preferences when voting above the line. Group voting is undemocratic and needs to go, and the Greens have recently introduced a bill into this Parliament to achieve just that.

Today I want to dispel some common myths about group voting that obscure the clear case for reform. The first myth is that group voting will keep One Nation out of Parliament. There is already a One Nation member in the upper house. A recent article in the *Age* quotes Glenn Druery saying that if we abolish group voting tickets it will be Christmas for One Nation. I assume Mr Druery's rationale for this view, apart from the abject self-interest of a yacht-dwelling con man with the most to benefit from the status quo, is that under the current system if One Nation do not have enough primary votes for a full quota there is a real possibility that they will miss out to a micro-party with a fraction of the same vote. The Greens are as ideologically separate from One Nation as I am from my hair, but the bald truth is that supporting an undemocratic system in the hope that a guy who manipulates it for profit will keep the bad guys out is straight out of the MAGA playbook.

The sad truth is that if One Nation perform at the next state election as they are currently polling nationally they will get enough votes to make quota in their own right in multiple upper house electorates. One Nation's support is a barometer of the nation's dissatisfaction with politics, and our job therefore is to connect with these disaffected voters and win them back with laws and policies that can genuinely improve their lives and restore their faith in politics. That is easier said than done, I know, but we should not be propping up an undemocratic system to keep them out. Democracy means

allowing voters to choose, and Victorians – even Victorians we disagree with – should be allowed to allocate their preferences above the line.

The second myth I want to address is that reform can wait. In 2018 the Electoral Matters Committee, while raising concerns about group voting tickets, recommended that the Parliament refer an inquiry to the committee to consider possible reforms, and that referral never happened. In July 2024 the committee's inquiry into the conduct of the 2022 state election recommended that Victoria should scrap group voting tickets without delay. Naturally Labor then proceeded to delay for a year and a half until another committee report landed in December last year. It will come as no surprise that that report recommended we should implement the 2024 recommendation as soon as possible. We have endured eight or more years of delaying tactics so Labor can avoid articulating a stance on the most important flaw in our state's democracy. We cannot delay reform of a system which leaves roughly 8 to 10 per cent of voters completely unrepresented in a system designed for proportional representation.

The third myth I want to address is that our push to abolish group voting is solely about getting more Greens elected. Had group voting been abolished prior to the 2022 election, there may have been more Greens elected and they would have been elected with a far higher proportion of the primary vote than the micro-party candidates who were elected in their place, but the same can be said for the Labor Party and the Liberal Party alike. Psephologist Kevin Bonham estimated that both Labor and the coalition would have won one more seat each in the 2022 state election had Victorian voters been allowed to direct their preferences above the line. Uncontroversially, we think election results should reflect voter intention, and this principle applies equally to the almost 400,000 Victorians who vote Greens as it does to those who give their vote to another party. Victoria's voters deserve better than a Parliament that is more representative of Mr Druery's dodgy backroom deals than of the citizens of Victoria.

Bills

Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2026

Statement of compatibility

Danny PEARSON (Essendon – Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs, Minister for Finance, Minister for Government Services) (10:47): In accordance with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006, I table a statement of compatibility in relation to the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2026:

Opening paragraphs

In accordance with section 28 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*, (the Charter), I make this Statement of Compatibility with respect to the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2026.

In my opinion, the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2026, as introduced to the Legislative Assembly, is compatible with human rights as set out in the Charter. I base my opinion on the reasons outlined in this statement.

Overview

The proposals contained in the Bill which interact with the Charter are summarised below.

The Bill amends –

1. the *Local Government Act 2020* to:
 - a. reintroduce the two-year restriction against former councillors becoming council Chief Executive Officer (CEO) after leaving office, and
 - b. expand the sanctions that Councillor Conduct Panels can apply upon a finding of misconduct against a councillor so that they align with the sanctions that can be imposed by an arbiter for a finding of misconduct, and
 - c. align the ground of serious misconduct relating to the disclosure of confidential information with the offence provision in the Act

2. the *Circular Economy (Waste Reduction and Recycling) Act 2021* to:
 - a. enable the Environment Protection Authority to ‘stop the clock’ when it is not reasonably practicable to determine an exemption application from any provision of regulations or a service standard within a 28 day period (e.g. due to the need to request further information) rather than being required to restart the process or make a decision without adequate information
3. the *Environment Protection Act 2017* to:
 - a. ensure the registered owner can nominate another person for littering from a vehicle, so the registered owner of a vehicle is not unduly held accountable for an offence which they did not commit, and
 - b. provide for more specific requirements for a written statement, when nominating another person responsible for a littering offence, instead of demonstrating ‘reasonable belief’, and
 - c. enable the Environment Protection Authority, a litter authority or a litter enforcement officer to vary or revoke a notice to remove or dispose of waste that was issued to the occupier in circumstances when the depositor could not be located as new information regarding the littering or illegal dumping of waste becomes apparent
4. the *Spent Convictions Act 2021* to:
 - a. clarify that the conviction period (noting the proposed amendment above to replace this term with waiting period) will recommence only where a subsequent conviction occurs within the conviction period for the original conviction, and
 - b. improve consistency in the treatment of convictions by enabling convictions with a ‘convicted and discharged’ outcome in the Children’s Court to be spent immediately, and
 - c. simplify the process for applying for a spent conviction order by removing the requirement for personal service on the Attorney-General and Chief Commissioner of Police
5. the *Conservation, Forests and Lands Act 1987* to remove the requirements for:
 - a. landholders to display a prominent, on-location physical notice of a land management co-operative agreement, and
 - b. the Secretary to keep hardcopies of an agreement available and replace with requirement to publish digital copies of the agreement and provide hardcopies upon request.
6. the *Victorian Conservation Trust Act 1972* to replace the terms ‘Chairman’ and ‘Deputy Chairman’ with modern terms, and gendered pronouns with updated, precise language where the Office of the Chief Parliamentary Counsel considers appropriate.

Human Rights Issues

Human rights protected by the Charter that are relevant to the Bill

These proposed amendments will engage one or more of the following human rights under the Charter:

- right to recognition and equality before the law (section 8);
- right to freedom from forced work (section 11);
- right to privacy and reputation (section 13);
- right to freedom of expression (section 15);
- right to take part in public life (section 18);
- property rights (section 20);
- rights of children in the criminal process (section 23);
- right to a fair hearing (section 24); and
- right not to be tried or punished more than once (section 26).

For the following reasons, I am satisfied that the Bill is compatible with the Charter and, to the extent that any rights are limited, those limitations are reasonable and demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society having regard to the factors in section 7(2) of the Charter.

Right to recognition and equality before the law

Section 8 of the Charter provides that every person has the right to recognition as a person before the law, to enjoy their human rights without discrimination and that every person is equal before the law.

The proposed amendment in Part 8 would align the sanctions which may be imposed upon a finding of misconduct by a councillor under both the internal arbitration process, overseen by an arbiter, and a Councillor Conduct Panel (CCP) hearing, provided for under the *Local Government Act 2020*. This will ensure that persons subject to a misconduct hearing receive equal treatment and consistency in the sanctions which may be applied. At present, it is possible for two councillors who are both found to have committed misconduct under the same circumstances and facts to receive different, and potentially differently severe, sanctions based on the different types of sanctions made available by the Act to either an arbiter or a CCP. This scenario is counter to the right to equal treatment before the law, and there is no procedural justification for this to be the case. The proposed amendment, by making available sanctions consistent, would promote the right to equality before the law.

Part 10 of the Bill proposes to replace the terms ‘Chairman’ and ‘Deputy Chairman’ in the Victorian Conservation Trust Act 1972 with updated language to reflect current language practices. The right to recognition and equality before the law prohibits discrimination on the basis of the attributes set out in section 6 of the Equal Opportunity Act 2010, which include gender identity and sex. The proposed amendment would promote these rights by replacing the current terms with gender neutral language to signify these appointments to the Trust, giving recognition to different gender identities and sex, rather than the implied presumption that only one gender will occupy this role.

Accordingly, this Bill is consistent with the right to recognition and equality before the law.

Right to freedom from forced work

Section 11 provides that a person must not be made to perform forced or compulsory labour.

The proposed amendment under Part 8 to align the available sanctions under the *Local Government Act 2020* which may be imposed upon a finding of misconduct made by either an arbiter or a Councillor Conduct Panel (CCP) will result in certain additional sanctions being available through the CCP process.

These sanctions include directing the Councillor to attend a specified training or counselling, which may be construed as limiting a person’s right to freedom from forced or compulsory labour, although these are quite distinct from the nature of forced labour which this right is principally directed at. As provided under subsection 11(3)(a) and (c) of the Charter, this right does not apply to work or service that is part of normal civil obligations and does not include work or service normally required of a person who, under a lawful court order, has been ordered to perform work in the community. As councillors are members of local government, they are subject to civil obligations in this role, and sanctioned attendance in training or counselling falls within those obligations, or to address the failure to meet those civil obligations. Applying these sanctions upon a finding of misconduct is also analogous to court orders requiring a convicted individual to perform community service work. A CCP is already empowered under subsection 167(6) to direct a Councillor to attend training or counselling if they find that remedial action is required.

The proposed amendment does not interfere with this right as it concerns attendance of training or counselling as part of a councillor’s civil obligations, to which this right does not apply and as such, is compatible with the right to freedom from forced work.

Accordingly, the Bill is consistent with the right to freedom from forced work.

Right to privacy and reputation

Section 13 of the Charter provides that a person has the right to not have their privacy, family, home or correspondence unlawfully or arbitrarily interfered with; and to not have their reputation unlawfully attacked.

Part 9 of the Bill includes a proposed amendment to the *Spent Convictions Act 2021* to clarify that a relevant subsequent conviction must occur within the conviction period for the original conviction in order to trigger a recommencement of the conviction period. A conviction period determines how long a person needs to wait and remain crime-free (with the exception of some minor offences) before a conviction is eligible to be spent. In that time, a conviction remains disclosable on a person’s police check; the person is required to disclose their conviction in certain circumstances, and agencies, such as employers, can request information about the conviction. The proposed amendment ensures that a person’s conviction can be spent at the conclusion of the prescribed conviction period, rather than be restarted by a subsequent conviction that occurs outside of the conviction period. This supports a person’s right to privacy and reputation, as enabling a conviction to be spent ensures that a convicted person’s privacy and reputation is not unfairly affected by a historical conviction beyond the intended length of the conviction period.

Part 9 also includes a proposed amendment to the *Spent Convictions Act 2021* to clarify that convictions recorded as ‘convicted and discharged’ in the Children’s Court are eligible to be spent immediately. A ‘convicted and discharged’ sentence is low on the sentencing hierarchy, below a fine, and arises when the court chooses to record a conviction but not impose any other penalty.

The proposed amendment ensures that a young person who receives a convicted and discharged sentence is not subject to a conviction period. This supports the right to privacy and reputation, as it ensures that a person's privacy and reputation is not unfairly affected by their conviction, considering proportional treatment relative to the sentencing hierarchy.

Accordingly, the Bill is consistent with the right to privacy and reputation.

Right to freedom of expression

Section 15 of the Charter provides that persons have a right to freedom of expression, which includes the freedom to seek, receive and impart information.

Part 4 of the Bill proposes an amendment to the *Conservation, Forests and Lands Act 1987* which will remove the requirement upon the Secretary to display a public notice of the making of a land management co-operative agreement on the land to which the agreement applies. This may be construed as limiting public access to information with regard to the making of these agreements on land within a person's community. However, notice and information on the content of the agreement remain available on the Government Gazette, the Victorian Public Notices Website, and through the Register of Titles. The requirement to place a physical notice on the land subject to an agreement has also been a source of stress, safety and wellbeing issues for landowners of the land in question in instances where there is opposition in the community to using the land for conservation, preservation and other related purposes. These agreements also have minimal, if any, detrimental effects on adjoining parcels of land.

Part 4 of the Bill also includes a proposed amendment to the *Conservation, Forests and Lands Act 1987* to replace requirement on Secretary to keep hardcopies of land management co-operative agreements with a requirement to give access through digital copies of the agreement on the Department website and provide hardcopies if requested by a member of the public. This will improve the accessibility of the agreement, as a person would previously have to go to one of the specified offices to retrieve a hardcopy, and this amendment therefore reduces the burden to attain the information. As such, this supports the right to freedom to seek and receive information.

The proposed amendment to the *Local Government Act 2020* under Part 8 of the Bill will align the definition of serious misconduct with the equivalent offence provision for disclosing confidential information. This does concern the restriction of a person's freedom of expression, however this does not substantively increase or decrease the strictness of the pre-existing prohibition on disclosing confidential information.

The right to freedom of expression, under subsection 15(3) of the Charter, may be subject to lawful restrictions reasonably necessary to respect the rights and reputation of others or for the protection of public order, health or morality, as well as the lawful limitations in accordance with section 7(2) of the Charter. Restricting the disclosure of information which is legitimately characterised as confidential is a reasonable limitation to impose on the right to freedom of expression.

As such, the potential limitations to the right to freedom of expression are reasonable, justified and proportionate given the circumstances.

Accordingly, the Bill is consistent with the right to freedom of expression.

Right to take part in public life

Section 18 of the Charter provides that every person has the right and is to have the opportunity to participate, without discrimination, in the conduct of public affairs, either directly or through freely chosen representatives. Every eligible person has the right and is to have the opportunity to participate, without discrimination, to vote and be elected in State and municipal elections and have access to the Victorian public service and public office.

A number of proposed amendments to the *Local Government Act 2020* under Part 8 of the Bill engage the right to take part in public life.

One proposed amendment will expand the types of sanctions a Councillor Conduct Panel (CCP) may impose upon a finding of misconduct to align with the sanctions available to an arbiter to impose for misconduct. The sanctions in question include:

- suspension of the Councillor for up to 3 months
- directing Councillor to not attend or participate in specified council meeting
- direction that the Councillor is ineligible to hold the office of Mayor or Deputy Mayor for a period up to 12 months.

These sanctions constrain a Councillor from certain instances of participation in public affairs and denies them the opportunity to be elected in municipal elections for a time. However, I consider these limitations to be reasonably justified, with respect to section 7(2) of the Charter, as the purpose of these limitations is to

ensure Councillors act lawfully and the sanctions are targeted and not excessive, being subject to relatively short time limits in line with the weight of a finding of misconduct. The CCP is also already equipped for hearings of greater significance than an arbiter, being empowered to make determinations on alleged serious misconduct, which attracts more severe sanctions.

Another proposed amendment will reintroduce the two-year restriction against former councillors being appointed as CEO of a council after leaving office. This does limit a person's opportunity to participate directly in the conduct of public affairs and access the Victorian public service and public office. However, this is a necessary and reasonable limitation to ensure that the separation of functions between the council and administration is maintained, to ensure integrity and good governance in councils. In addition, former councillors were previously prevented from being appointed under section 102 of the *Local Government Act 1989*, but this provision was not carried over to the current act due to an oversight. For the same reasons of integrity and separation, the current Local Government Act already contains provisions barring a CEO from appointing a former councillor as a member of council staff within two years of the person ceasing to hold office and a holding that a person is not eligible to be a councillor if they are a member of council staff.

Amendments which improve the accessibility of government services enhance a person's right to access public services. The proposed amendment to the Conservation, Forests and Lands Act 1987 in Part 4 of the Bill to require the Secretary to provide digital copies of land management cooperative agreements upon request instead of making hardcopy versions available in the prescribed locations will make this service more accessible to the public.

The proposed amendment to the Circular Economy (Waste Reduction and Recycling) Act 2021 in Part 2 of the Bill will enable the Environment Protection Authority to 'stop the clock' when it is not reasonably practicable to determine an exemption application within the 28-day period. For example, this will enable the Environment Protection Authority to pause consideration of an application in order to request more information from the applicant. This will ensure a more efficient process for applicants with reduced delays and costs, as at present an incomplete application must be rejected and the process restarted each instance that more information is required. Process improvements will make exemptions more accessible to applicants.

Under Part 9 of the Bill, the proposed amendment to the *Spent Convictions Act 2021* will remove the requirement for personal service of spent convictions applications and instead enable court registries to provide filed applications to the Attorney-General and Chief Commissioner of Police. Numerous applications to date have been improperly served due to the complexity of the current multi-step application process. This amendment will simplify the process and thereby improve the accessibility of the spent convictions scheme.

Other proposed amendments to the *Spent Convictions Act 2021* will support the right to participate in state and local politics and public administration and generally take part in public life. The proposal to ensure that a 'convicted and discharged' outcome in the Children's Court is eligible to be spent immediately means that a young person will not have this type of conviction displayed on their police check, unless an exemption applies. The proposal to clarify that the conviction period will not restart unless the subsequent conviction occurs within the original conviction period ensures that a person does not unfairly retain a historical conviction on their record. Criminal convictions are frequently a barrier to accessing various aspects of public life, such as housing, employment and training opportunities, not only on the basis of official eligibility requirements but also due to unfair discrimination. As such these proposed amendments can improve a person's ability or opportunity to take part in public life.

Accordingly, the Bill is consistent with the right to take part in public life.

Property rights

Section 20 of the Charter provides that a person cannot be deprived of their property. This applies both with respect to ownership and usage.

In Part 4 of the Bill, one proposed amendment to the Conservation, Forests and Lands Act 1987 will remove requirement on the Secretary of DEECA to display a notice of a land co-operative agreement on the land which is subject to the agreement. Consequential to this, a provision empowering the Secretary, with any assistance required, to enter the land to which the agreement applies for the purpose of arranging display of a notice will also be revoked. This promotes property rights of Victorians by removing an instance where the government is empowered to access private property where it is no longer necessary.

Accordingly, the Bill is consistent with property rights.

Rights of children in the criminal process

Section 23 of the Charter provides that a child who has been convicted of an offence must be treated in a way that is appropriate for that child's age.

The proposed amendment to the Spent Convictions Act 2021, in Part 9 of the Bill, will ensure that a ‘convicted and discharged’ outcome in the Children’s Court will be eligible to be spent immediately rather than being disclosed as part of a person’s criminal history. This will support the rights of children by removing barriers to accessing employment, training and housing opportunities.

Accordingly, the Bill is consistent with the rights of children in the criminal process.

Right to a fair hearing

Section 24 of the Charter provides that a person has the right, whether in criminal or civil matters, to a fair and public hearing decided by a competent, independent and impartial court or tribunal.

Certain proposed amendments in the Bill, while not applying directly to the hearings in a court or tribunal, do support fairness of civil penalties and fairness of outcomes in an alternative dispute resolution setting.

The proposed amendment to the *Local Government Act 2020* in Part 8 of the Bill will align the sanctions available to a Councillor Conduct Panel (CCP) with the sanction available to arbiters upon a finding of misconduct. Currently, a person may be subject to different sanctions, and possibly different severity, for a finding of misconduct under the same circumstances. By ensuring the consistency of the sanctions which a person may be subject to, this amendment strengthens the fairness of the hearings.

Proposed amendments to the *Environment Protection Act 2017* under Part 5 of the Bill regarding littering offences will provide further provisions ensuring penalties are directed at the person who actually committed an offence. One amendment will ensure that an owner of a vehicle will not unduly be held accountable for the unlawful deposit of waste including when the responsible person can be nominated and held liable. Another amendment will expand and clarify the prescribed requirements for a written statement which identifies another person as responsible for a vehicle littering offence, where the person providing the statement, for instance the owner or driver of the vehicle, would otherwise be held responsible. This will ensure that requirements of a written statement are better aligned with what the person has knowledge of, to provide a stronger basis for the nomination of the person responsible. A third amendment will provide for the variation or revocation of a waste abatement notice requiring the occupier of the property to remove or dispose of waste. This means that if new information becomes available, for instance the identity of the person who deposited the waste, the regulatory obligations can be removed or reassigned to the responsible person, and the occupier is not unfairly burdened. These proposed amendments support the fairness of the process of assigning regulatory penalties and obligations.

Accordingly, the Bill is consistent with the right to a fair hearing.

Right not to be tried or punished more than once

Section 26 of the Charter provides that a person must not be tried or punished more than once for the same offence for which they have already been convicted or acquitted.

The proposed amendment to the *Spent Convictions Act 2021* under Part 9 of the Bill clarifies that a conviction period will recommence only where a subsequent conviction occurs before the conviction period for the original conviction concludes. This proposed amendment will ensure that a convicted person is not inappropriately subjected to an extended conviction period for an offence. This is in keeping with the right not to be punished more than once.

Accordingly, the Bill is consistent with the right to a fair hearing.

The Hon. Danny Pearson MP
Minister for Finance

Second reading

Danny PEARSON (Essendon – Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs, Minister for Finance, Minister for Government Services) (10:47): I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

I ask that my second-reading speech be incorporated into *Hansard*.

Incorporated speech as follows:

The Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2026 (the Bill) before the House today demonstrates the Victorian Government’s commitment to improving the lives of Victorians by undertaking the vital work of ongoing regulatory reform. Regulatory reform contributes to increased economic productivity, makes it easier to do business in Victoria, and protects consumers, community health and safety, and the environment.

Reform bills such as this one ensure that Victoria has a modern, adaptive and fit-for-purpose regulatory system. It contains over 40 proposals across 13 different Acts and seven ministerial portfolios that will benefit Victorians in the following ways.

First, the Bill will support effective and efficient regulation.

In 2023, the Commonwealth government announced that payment infrastructure will be modernised through the phaseout of cheques by the end of 2028. The proposed amendment to Victoria's *Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013* and the *Accident Compensation Act 1985* will be the first change to legislation to bring Victoria into line with the Commonwealth's decision. The proposed amendment replaces a reference to cheques with a technology-neutral term and will make it easier for Victorians by enabling the use of more efficient and cost-effective payment methods such as ATM, eftpos, credit and debit card transactions, online payments and internet and mobile banking.

This Bill also amends the *Circular Economy (Waste Reduction and Recycling) Act 2021* to give the Environment Protection Authority the express power to incorporate documents into certain legislative instruments and exemptions issued under the Act.

These instruments include service standards, guidelines and the Circular Economy Risk, Consequences, and Contingency Plan (CERCC). This amendment will provide greater flexibility in the instruments that the Environment Protection Authority prepares, as it allows the Environment Protection Authority to utilise relevant materials published by other bodies, for instance Australian Standards. This type of material supports more effective regulation by providing regulated entities in Victoria with further guidance and resources to clarify their obligations when complying with these instruments. This will make it easier for businesses to comply, strengthening environmental practices and protections.

The Bill amends the *Environment Protection Act 2017* so that where a person receives an infringement notice for depositing waste from a vehicle but someone else was responsible, liability is more easily attributed to the offender.

The second objective of this Bill is to streamline processes and reduce administrative burden for government, businesses and individuals by making simple and uncontroversial changes to legislation.

This Bill seeks to make the process for Victorians applying for a spent conviction order more accessible, particularly for unrepresented applicants. The existing process is unnecessarily complicated. Applicants must first apply to the Magistrates' Court to obtain a 'sealed' copy of their application and then separately email it to the Attorney-General and the Chief Commissioner of Police. Because of this, applications are commonly lodged incorrectly and court registries have had to develop work arounds to provide sealed copies of applications to the Attorney-General and Chief Commissioner. The amendment proposed in this Bill will remove the requirement for applicants to obtain a sealed copy and send it to the Attorney-General and the Chief Commissioner, and instead formalise the existing arrangement between the court, Attorney-General and Chief Commissioner for conveying spent convictions applications. The change brings the process into line with the findings from the review of the *Spent Convictions Act 2021* completed in 2023 which recommended simplifying this process. Improving the accessibility of this scheme will ensure Victorians can successfully lodge their applications and could encourage more individuals with certain historical convictions to apply to have their convictions spent, thereby improving their access to employment, training and housing opportunities.

This Bill also enables the Environment Protection Authority to 'stop the clock' when it is not reasonably practicable to determine an exemption application within a 28 day period. For example if the Environment Protection Authority requests further information for a fee waiver application, they do not need to restart the process if the 28-day period is insufficient. By not being able to halt or extend the deadline, the Environment Protection Authority must refuse the application, restart or decide on the application based on the information they have. Enabling the Environment Protection Authority to 'stop the clock' will save applicants time by not having to prepare another application, reducing wait times for applicants while also leading to time savings for government.

The Bill amends the *Circular Economy (Waste Reduction and Recycling) Act 2021* to streamline the consultation and drafting process for the preparation and amendment of a Victorian Recycling Infrastructure Plan. The current consultation process is rigid and inflexible, requiring discrete stages of revisions and prescribing who should be consulted and how at each stage. This includes persons and bodies that no longer exist under Machinery of Government changes. The amendments will remove redundancies in the prescribed list of stakeholders that must be consulted. It will also streamline the process so that the Environment Protection Authority can carry out consultation in accordance with government best practice and allow greater flexibility to respond to practical issues arising in the drafting process.

Amendments to the *Conservation, Forests and Lands Act 1987* also look to reduce administrative burden by removing the requirement for landowners to display a notice of agreement on the land that is subject to that agreement. This requirement causes landowners stress, safety and wellbeing issues, particularly where there is opposition in the broader community to using the land for conservation, preservation and other related purposes. There is no benefit that is evident from this requirement, as the notice must already be published in the Government Gazette and in a newspaper circulated throughout Victoria. This amendment will remove an unnecessary administrative burden as well as remove a source of concern for landowners.

Amendments to the *Conservation, Forests and Lands Act 1987* will replace the requirement to provide access to hardcopies of an agreement with access to digital copies. Land management co-operative agreements need to be available for inspection by the public, and this amendment ensures that the public can request a digital copy of an agreement from the Secretary rather than needing to go to designated offices to access a hardcopy, making the agreements more accessible to the public.

Third, this Bill aims to promote consistency and provide clarity with other legislation and existing government policies.

The Bill clarifies that the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) is to hear disputes regarding an election result in its original jurisdiction, preventing disputes about this and ensuring that the integrity of local government in Victoria is maintained. Making this explicit in the legislation will reduce delays to the substantive consideration of the matter and reduce uncertainty experienced by communities about their Council representatives.

The Bill seeks to ensure consistency in the enforcement of restrictions on the conduct of Councillors. The *Local Government Act 2020* enables a Councillor Conduct Panel (CCP) to hear an application that alleges serious misconduct by a Councillor. The definition of serious misconduct includes disclosure of confidential information by a Councillor. However, there is also an offence provision under the same Act for disclosure of confidential information by Councillors.

These two enforcement mechanisms frame the prohibition of disclosure of confidential information differently, leading to uncertainty and delays when allegations are made and it is heard by the CCPs. Aligning the definition of serious misconduct with the offence provision will remove any legislative uncertainty for CCP proceedings and, consistent with the original intention of these provisions, ensure Councillors are held to the same standards regardless of which enforcement mechanism they are subject to.

The term 'conviction' in the *Spent Convictions Act 2021* differs between sections of the Act. The term is used interchangeably to mean both a sentencing outcome and a finding of guilt by the courts regardless of whether a conviction was recorded. This amendment will provide clarity and consistency in the usage of the term 'conviction' throughout the Act. This will make it easier for Victorians to understand how provisions pertain to their circumstances when applying to have their convictions spent.

It also seeks to provide clarity for the term 'conviction period' in the Act by replacing this term with 'waiting period', as a more precise and self-explanatory phrase to improve understanding and accessibility of the scheme. The term 'conviction period' is used to mean the length of time a person needs to wait before a conviction becomes eligible to be spent, either automatically or through court application. Replacing this with 'waiting period' better reflects the intended meaning and will make it easier for Victorians to understand the scheme and whether they are eligible.

This Bill seeks to replace in the *Competition Policy Reform (Victoria) Act 1995* the outdated references to 1995 National Competition Policy (NCP) agreement that was superseded when the Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) on National Competition Policy was approved in 2024. Due to the implementation of the 2024 IGA, members of the NCP steering committee were advised that next steps would need to be taken to address any outdated references in legislation to the 1995 agreements. This amendment will ensure that references to the outdated agreement occur in the appropriate transition period (31 December 2026) so that there is not an inconsistency in the future.

This Bill also amends the *Grain Handling and Storage Act 1995* to account for the revitalised 2024 National Competition Policy (NCP). It currently refers to the National Competition Principles contained in the now superseded 1995 Competition Principles Agreement. And like the Competition Policy Reform (Victoria) Act 1995 amendment, this Bill seeks to amend sections in the Act to refer to the current 2024 IGA and updated National Competition Principles.

Lastly, this Bill seeks to make several minor updates and corrections to existing legislation.

The Bill seeks to correct a reference to incorrect subsections of the *Local Government Act 2020* under the definition of electoral material. At present, the definition of electoral material refers to a subsection which describes the meaning of the term 'election' instead of the 'electoral material'. This amendment will ensure the correct subsections are referenced.

The Bill will remove a provision in the LGA that references VCAT imposing a financial penalty following a review of the declaration of an election result. VCAT does not have the power to find an individual guilty of an offence under a review and therefore it is not possible for a financial penalty to be applied. This removes any confusion.

This Bill seeks to replace an incorrect reference in the *Gas Industry Act 2001* to a section of the Act to ensure that licensees are directed to the appropriate subsection. This will ensure easier navigation of the legislation.

This Bill aims to modernise outdated terms used in legislation, providing better clarity. In the *Victorian Conservation Trust Act 1972*, the terms Chairman and Deputy Chairman are used through various provisions to reference a chair. This amendment will replace these with terms consistent with other Victorian legislation and modern language usage.

This Bill aims to correct the omission of provisions from the previous *Local Government Act 1989* in the current *Local Government Act 2020* due to an oversight. This amendment seeks to reintroduce the restriction against former councillors from being appointed as CEO of the council within two years of leaving office. Whilst a current councillor cannot be a member of council staff (including the CEO) and a person who was a councillor in the previous 2 years cannot be employed by the CEO as a member of council staff, a person who was a councillor in the previous 2 years is not currently prevented from being appointed by the council to be the CEO. This amendment will reintroduce an important governance integrity measure to ensure the separation of the roles of councillors and the CEO.

The amendment to provide consistent enforcement for Councillor misconduct in the *Local Government Act 2020* will align the available sanctions which may be imposed for a finding of misconduct made either by an arbiter or a CCP. This Bill seeks to update the legislation so that arbiters and a CCP can impose the same sanctions and Councillors are subject to consistent treatment. Recent amendments to this Act expanded the available sanctions an arbiter may impose for misconduct by a Councillor, however the list of sanctions which may be imposed by a Councillor Conduct Panel (CCP) for the same finding were not updated accordingly, meaning that the sanctions which could be imposed on a Councillor for the same finding of misconduct vary depending on the type of hearing.

The Bill amends the Environment Protection Act 2017 to correct the criteria the Environment Protection Authority must consider when determining whether to amend or refuse an application to amend a permit.

This Bill also makes amendments to the *Circular Economy (Waste Reduction and Recycling) Act 2021* consequential to the Entities Legislation Amendment (Consolidation and Other Matters) Bill 2025. This includes minor administrative changes to allow the Environment Protection Authority, which will absorb the functions of Recycling Victoria, to disclose information or data to carry out their functions or exercise powers in collaboration with the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action.

This was not previously included in the Circular Economy Act, because the Head, Recycling Victoria was administratively contained within the Department.

Other consequential amendments ensure the correct sequencing of Circular Economy Risk Consequence and Contingency (CERCC) Plans and Responsible Entities Risk Consequence and Contingency (RERCC) Plans as intended under the Circular Economy Act. The Entities Bill amended both these plans to be three yearly, instead of annual. This amendment ensures that CERCC Plans are published first, with RERCC Plans required to be submitted later in the same year, informed by the most recent CERCC Plan. It also ensures responsible entities have adequate time to complete their RERCC Plans and associated statements of assurance.

As you can see, this Bill addresses a wide range of matters, ranging from the phase out of cheques, an initiative at the federal level, to modernising outdated terms like 'chairman' in legislation. However, in all the initiatives I have described for you today, there is a single common thread, which is the commitment of this Government to bettering the lives of Victorians by making simple, straightforward improvements to legislation. This Bill provides important benefits – such as clearer, fairer and more modern laws and regulations, improved accessibility of government schemes, strengthened integrity measures for local governments and refined regulatory tools for agencies, which do such important work to protect our environment and community.

I commend the Bill to the house.

Bridget VALLENCE (Evelyn) (10:47): I move:

That the debate be adjourned.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned.

Ordered that debate be adjourned for two weeks. Debate adjourned until Wednesday 4 March.

Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025*Second reading***Debate resumed on motion of Ben Carroll:**

That this bill be now read a second time.

Nicole WERNER (Warrandyte) (10:48): I rise to speak on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025, and I want to start my remarks by making the point today that there is nothing a government does that is more important than protecting those who cannot protect themselves. We have seen that this has been an issue where it pertains to children in care in settings like childcare centres, and we have seen that is of absolute importance to our communities and the electorates that we represent, but it is even more important when the state has assumed responsibility for a child. The children that this bill is seeking to support are the most vulnerable children in our society. These children are in the system because something has gone wrong in their lives. When the state intervenes and removes a child, it assumes the role of guardian. That is an extraordinary power, and it carries an extraordinary moral obligation. If we get this wrong, the consequences can last a lifetime. Children only get one chance at a childhood. I have said that before, and I will say that again. For the children that our systems and our governments are there to be the parent for, essentially, when they assume that responsibility, that is so crucially important because these children only get one chance; they do not get another. They get one chance at a childhood.

Unfortunately, there is a recurring theme I hear everywhere I go from those who work in and around this system: that the system is broken. Stakeholders say it, frontline workers say it, carers say it and young people who have lived through it say it, and I have people contacting my office time and again who say it. We know things need to change. We also know this sector is filled with some of the most kind-hearted people imaginable, the most incredible people in our communities, who give up their lives and give up so much of their time to be able to support vulnerable children in the out-of-home care system. We have got foster carers, we have got kinship carers and we have got permanent carers in all of our communities who open their homes to children they may have no relation to and carry burdens most of us will never understand. They are the heroes of this system and they must be upheld and supported. If we want to have any hope of fixing this broken system, we must properly resource foster care by lifting allowances, ending arbitrary payment downgrades and treating carers as respected partners in the system. We must reduce the risk in residential care settings by strengthening safeguards, improving therapeutic capability and ensuring children under 12 are placed in family-based settings whenever possible. In fact it was the Minister for Health – and I would not often quote the Minister for Health in this place – that said, as she debated government business yesterday, that it is imperative that children should go into families, that children deserve to go into families. That is what we believe on this side of the house. To add to that, we also must close the service gaps in housing, mental health, drug treatment and family violence support so that reunification is properly supported and not prolonged with delays and system failure. Flourishing, healthy children and families are the backbone of a stable society. When we protect children well, we strengthen communities; when we fail them, the consequences ripple for generations.

To the bill at hand, it looks to introduce the supporting stable and strong families scheme, and as the bill introduces this, it is to promote a whole-of-government approach to supporting vulnerable children in the child protection system, their families and care leavers. It is based on the principle that when the state takes responsibility for a child, responsibility for that child's wellbeing extends beyond child protection to other parts of government. It comes from the Scottish model. At first glance the bill sounds reassuring and has a comforting title: 'supporting stable and strong families'. Unfortunately, nice titles do not guarantee good outcomes, and that has been the case with this bill at hand. The consistent feedback from stakeholders – and we have spoken to so many and had responses from so many stakeholders, carers and Aboriginal community controlled organisations – was this: the intent sounds good, but where is the mechanism that guarantees better outcomes for children? The best that

I can say from the summary of the responses from stakeholders was that there were varying degrees of scepticism as to whether this bill will have any impact on improving outcomes. When you strip away the rhetoric, what remains in this bill looks more like plans and reports rather than any enforcement, and there certainly is no clear accountability. When you read this bill closely, when you strip away the rhetoric and the ambition – and we applaud the ambition – the plans and the reports, what you are left with is a scheme that offers little guarantee that it will deliver anything more than mountains of paperwork.

The coalition position on this bill is that we do support the ambition. We support a whole-of-government focus, we support recognising care leavers up to 25, and in principle there are many elements of this bill that are very good and that we are supportive of. However, it is important to note and to reflect the views of stakeholders that, unfortunately, ambition does not always lead to reform. Beyond the noble intentions, our concern is that this bill only creates the appearance of reform and does not fix the service gaps that delay reunification. It does not properly resource carers. It does not address the systemic failures pushing children into inappropriate placements. It does nothing about the roughly 50 children who are under 12 that are placed in residential care each year, which is not best practice, nor the broader residential care system, where around 500 children at any time face environments that we see in the media all the time, that are linked to drugs, to abuse and to criminality. These are not places where we should be putting children if we can create systems of reform that can actually keep them from going there in the first place.

While the coalition will not be opposing the bill, we remain sceptical on the side of stakeholders that it will deliver meaningful change unless the hard reforms are still yet to come. To now outline the concerns with the bill: firstly, this is a framework that avoids accountability. The government describes this bill as a whole-of-government response to child vulnerability, and that is not an unreasonable aspiration. As we said, we applaud the ambition. Children in care do not experience government services in silos. They are often failed precisely because these systems do not work together. However, it is unclear how this bill will remedy this effectively. There is a weakness in the bill that it explicitly creates, and I quote, ‘no legal rights’ and gives rise to no enforceable obligations. It means that when a department fails to deliver what is promised in a plan, there is no recourse for the child, no avenue for a carer and no remedy for a care leaver who has been left without support.

The bill also prioritises every other statutory function over these new responsibilities in this bill, meaning that ministers, department heads and other partners are told that they are not required to consider their supporting stable and strong families responsibilities if doing so conflicts with their primary duties. So then what is to stop an SSSF partner when challenged on why they failed to uphold their responsibilities from simply saying ‘It conflicted with our other obligations’ and leaving it at that? In practice it could give every decision-maker a built-in justification for inaction. How can this framework genuinely create accountability when it provides a ready-made list of excuses for noncompliance? That is not meaningful shared responsibility. What it is is a responsibility that exists on paper but evaporates the moment it becomes inconvenient, costly or difficult. Multiple stakeholders have raised this very concern with me, because their current experience is that it is a system that already fails to meet its responsibilities. Stakeholders have expressed to us that they have seen the government fail vulnerable children over and over again, and stakeholders know that good intentions do not lead to good outcomes. They want to see something that holds the government to a standard, and unfortunately, that is not the case in this bill.

Another concern of ours is a lack of genuine collaboration and a mechanism that is built in. One of the central claims about this bill is that it will improve coordination across government, but when you examine the detail there is no meaningful mechanism to make that collaboration happen. At best, the collaboration contemplated under this model occurs at the planning level. Ministers may prepare joint plans where responsibilities overlap, but they are not required to. There is no obligation to resolve conflicts between plans. There is no enforceable requirement that housing, health, education, justice and child protection actually work together when delivering services to vulnerable children and

families. Planning together is not the same as working together. The government may say that the Children's Services Coordination Board will help align and standardise these plans, but this board that they are referring to comprises departmental secretaries and the Chief Commissioner of Police, who are some of the busiest public servants in our state. Simply placing them around a table to oversee documents does not guarantee operational alignment on the ground. What is missing entirely is collaboration at the service delivery level where it actually matters.

There is no requirement or encouragement for the SSSF partners to collaborate in the exercise of their functions, to co-deliver services, to pool funding or to share operational responsibility for outcomes. That stands in stark contrast to the Scottish model, as previously mentioned, that this bill claims to draw inspiration from. Section 60 of the equivalent Scottish legislation requires:

Corporate parents must, in so far as reasonably practicable, collaborate with each other when exercising their corporate parenting responsibilities or any other functions ...

including but not limited to information sharing, funding activities jointly or coordinating activities. There is no equivalent obligation in this bill that we are debating in the house. If vulnerable young people are to be genuinely supported, they need departments working together operationally, not simply drafting separate documents and tabling them in Parliament.

This feedback from the Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative is emblematic of much of the feedback we have received. They said:

BDAC's experience is that multi-agency collaboration for children is already extremely difficult. The Bill does not identify a regulating or oversight body, consequences for non-compliance, or any mechanism to compel agencies to genuinely collaborate. Without an accountability framework and independent oversight, improved collaboration will not occur in practice.

The Foster Care Association of Victoria has told me that one of the greatest frustrations that carers face is navigating a maze of fragmented government systems. Who do they call? Which form do they fill out? Which department is responsible? Carers are crying out for services that work together. For those that we have spoken to, this bill does not give them much hope that this will change. The core flaw in this bill is that it risks becoming a tick-box exercise for departments – a compliance framework that generates plans, reports and paperwork but very little real change. We already see hundreds of reports tabled in this Parliament every year, allegedly exposing failure, that are quietly released on what we call 'dump day' to avoid scrutiny. They bury us in a mountain of reports that we, as the opposition, are meant to comb through to find that these accountability mechanisms in Parliament are actually working. Well, I would not think so. In five years time, will the SSSF reports join the same dump day pile as ministers try to bury the gap between their grand promises and the reality that nothing has changed on the ground?

We have seen examples of how plans like this have not led to change. In 2020 the government released the framework to reduce criminalisation of young people in residential care. That did not work, because, according to Victoria Legal Aid:

... 51.3 per cent of children in residential care accrued criminal charges within two years of placement.

There was no meaningful change, even with that plan. I can give examples again and again of different plans, different intentions and different ambitions that in practice and in reality did not lead to outcomes.

Personally, I think the greatest issue that speaks to the core of the issue in the Allan Labor government is the fact that the consultation that allegedly took place about this bill was a sham. It is the most shameful aspect. You would know about this, member for Gippsland East. The most shameful aspect of this legislation is the absolute arrogance of the government regarding consultation. We have before us a government that treats consultation as a tick-box exercise, not as a genuine opportunity to listen to the community. Whether it is in the disability sector or whether it is in planning in people's own backyards, community consultation is absolutely absent in this Allan Labor government. The

government has stood before us and before the sector claiming to have consulted broadly. They have produced lists of forums and reference groups to create a veneer of consensus. But let us be very clear: this is a sham. It is a bureaucratic fiction designed to manufacture consent when none exists. It has happened here in this bill – and I am going to outline it – and it has happened time and again in so many facets of their alleged community consultation.

When we the opposition actually spoke to the stakeholders listed on the government's own consultation list, many of them said they had never heard of it. For example, the Foster Care Association of Victoria, the key body representing the very people who open their homes and hearts to vulnerable children, told us directly they 'didn't know the bill was coming' prior to its introduction. Then it gets worse. The government listed one specific organisation not only as a party briefed on the legislative proposal but as one to whom they provided follow-up information when they showed interest. Yet when we asked this organisation if they had been consulted, they said that the proposal was mentioned only 'briefly and without context at a meeting unrelated to this specific legislative reform'. Here is the badge of shame that unfortunately the minister must wear: this group said that despite 'expressing clear interests' in further information and consultation, the very first time they had been 'contacted around this legislation was from the opposition's office' – from my office. The government said that they had consulted, but that was the first the organisation had heard about it. It does sound familiar that the government did not call them, the department did not engage, and they did not get any follow-up information despite wanting it and despite the government saying they had provided some. Yet they were on the list as having been consulted. The government merely ticks the box, as they always do. Another group was listed as an attendee at legal reference groups, yet this group explicitly told us that the process was 'inadequate' and that the government 'did not seek advice' from them on the bill. This speaks to a culture of paternalism and, honestly, corruption that rots this government from the head down. They talk at carers, never to them. They talk down to the sector, telling them what they need rather than asking them what will work. The member for Gippsland East will tell you that is the case in the disability sector, and unfortunately that is true.

Our carers are crying out for respect. They are crying out to be viewed as partners, not as resources to be managed. They just want to be listened to. They just want to be heard. They want the practical, frontline solutions to be assessed, but instead this government hides behind cherry-picked stakeholder claims of sector support while ignoring the frontline agencies, the legal services and the foster carers who are actually doing the heavy lifting. They then tell the sector what to do. They fail to listen to the warnings, and they turn around and tell a mistruth to the Parliament and say they have consulted. It is performative, it is disrespectful and it is a betrayal of all the people who hold our broken child protection system together. That leads me to my point that this bill and the previous bill, the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025, seek to reform and work together to remedy what is happening in the child protection system. On this side of the house we would contend that they ignore the glaring problems in the child protection system and the areas that actually need systemic overhaul and reform.

I want to take us to, in the time that I have left, the crisis that is taking place in our residential care system – it is a crisis. The stories and the exposés that come out of the horrors that take place in residential care homes are truly horrifying. There are 50 children under 12 on average at any point in time in residential care units. Kids under 12 should not be housed in residential care, not when Victoria Legal Aid showed that over 50 per cent of them end up in criminality within two years. Lots of these children could be better suited with good families, but too often there is no foster family available; too many are fleeing the system. What we have seen in the residential care system is that it is a pipeline to crime. There are pathways to drugs, there is violence, there is teen pregnancy and there is grooming that happens in these houses. It is a pipeline to the youth justice system.

A report from the ABC on 6 January tells a story of a 13-year-old-girl who fell pregnant in the residential care system:

Court documents reveal that, at the age of 13, Sadie was leaving residential care to “travel across Victoria at night to meet a variety of different men and women”.

Workers reported that Sadie was spending time with two “known male persons of interest to Child Protection”.

I have no words for that.

Not long after, Sadie reported being “sexually assaulted and raped” by the same two males, aged 17 and 19.

That same month, Sadie reported another sexual assault and rape, this time from an “unknown male”.

Sadie became pregnant at 13 years old.

Sadie’s mum said the state care system is ruining lives.

Then last year whistleblowers from the child protection system told the *Herald Sun* that scores of young gang members and repeat offenders were under government care, with many allegedly criminalised while living in state units. One caseworker said that children as young as 10 were becoming recidivist offenders. Children as young as 10 are in these homes where there are reports of children being groomed, taken out and prostituted in these residential care units – children as young as 10, when the state is responsible as their guardian. Other reports in the *Herald Sun* last year tell us of how vulnerable children in state care say they live in constant fear of violence or sexual abuse amid shocking claims youths are being raped, coerced into sex work, threatened with murder and firebombed. A girl with special needs is alleged to have been raped by a teenage boy who was housed with her after claims he had molested her were ignored for several months. This speaks to the systemic issues within our child protection system. Whistleblowers have told of pimps menacing both workers and youths in unsupervised homes, with some consequently forced into sex work, and a residential care unit was targeted in an arson attack where several teens were inside. While we laud the ambition of the bill before the house today, where does it go to and where does it speak to this crisis that is taking place in our residential care units? Why is the government not doing anything to improve outcomes there? Why is this not the core of the bill, when reforms are so desperately needed in our residential care units?

There are again reports from within the sector of staff having to be driven home after work because of being drug affected, second-hand drug affected, because of the use of illicit drugs by the children that are housed in these homes. There are children that have gone missing from these homes. There is story after story that proves that the residential care system is broken and urgently, desperately needs to be fixed because of the vulnerable children that are housed there, who are our responsibility in government. This also speaks to the case that if we supported the sector, if we supported foster carers, permanent carers and kinship carers like they have been begging to be, then there would be more placements to put them in foster care so that we could stop the flow of how many need to end up in residential care.

The truth is that Victoria has the lowest-paid foster carers in the country. In real terms, they are worse off than they were years ago because payments have not kept up with inflation. The base rate is just \$458 a fortnight, around 20 per cent below the national average. It is no wonder that carers feel undervalued. In fact Victoria suffered the largest loss of foster care households in Australia, down 1383 households in just the four years to 2023–24, leaving only approximately 1500 households. That is nearly half that have disappeared from the system. That is a system that is driving carers out.

To add insult to injury, last year the government moved to effectively cut allowances for children with complex needs by quietly downgrading their need categories. Children with high psychological, medical, physical or behavioural needs have been quietly downgraded from the top levels of need, 4 and 5, to the lowest level, 1, decreasing their allowance. One example, as reported by the ABC, was of a carer, Mary, who was told that her \$1800 fortnightly allowance for 12-year-old Emily was under

review to ensure she was – and get this – ‘not just doing fostering for the money’. What an utter insult. Her payment could be slashed to \$520 per fortnight, while Emily has intense emotional and behavioural needs, including aggression and violence. How dare the government tell carers who take on difficult situations like this that they are just in it for the money? Another foster carer, Sara, who quit last year after 18 years, said, ‘In the 18½ years I’ve done foster care, I’ve never felt so disregarded, disrespected and unappreciated.’

Foster carers are extraordinary people who open their homes to children in crisis, yet too often the government treats them as an inconvenience. If we want to give vulnerable children a better life, that starts with properly supporting those who are willing to open their homes and their lives to them. The emails that I get into my office from different carers: permanent carers, kinship carers, foster carers, from the different stakeholders that represent all of these individuals – there are mountains of emails that I get that tell story after story of the disdain that these foster carers specifically have written into me about, the disdain that they are treated with, the disrespect that they say they are treated with. Can I put to you the words of the carer that wrote to my office, who said:

I believe the State Government outwardly stating there is no policy change here is merely them passing the buck and not taking responsibility for a struggling system in crisis ... Whether this is an acknowledged policy change, it is occurring and this is only part of the cutbacks the state government are making to these vulnerable children and their carers.

I have noticed over time, there are more and more restrictions being placed on Carers and the Foster Care agencies due to limited funding, and additionally there are many significant issues with the foster care and child protection system that are not only contributing the complexity of children in care, their mental health and wellbeing but are leading to record numbers of Victorian Foster Carers leaving the sector.

This carer wrote to me and said:

The longer I am a Carer, the more it feels that the whole system and the Department have turned its back on these children.

Another email from another carer who wrote to me says:

I would appreciate confidentiality, as I fear retribution. I wish to continue to be a foster carer, and we have been threatened that if we speak out we will have our children taken away from us.

This is the cover-up culture, where there cannot even be a level of accountability so carers can speak out about their concerns about what is going on in a broken system – the fear of the fact that they will not be able to foster children, when they have found it in the goodness of their hearts to be able to do this for our community and for vulnerable children who deserve love and care and who belong in families. This is disgraceful. The fact that foster carers feel like they are gagged from being able to speak out about the instances of abuse and the instances of –

Tim Bull interjected.

Nicole WERNER: Absolutely, it is tantamount to blackmail. Can I read this from this foster carer, who says:

Even the base level allowance doesn’t come close to covering actual costs. We are being asked to not only provide 24/7 care to traumatised children but to pay for their basic needs out of our own pockets.

No wonder they are leaving in droves. No wonder that I have case after case of complex needs, of different emails that come into my office where foster carers simply do not feel supported. They wrote to me, saying:

We need your help. The system is unsustainable. Carers are leaving faster than we can recruit them. Those of us who remain are being asked to do the impossible: provide therapeutic, trauma-informed care while being financially penalised for doing so and while being denied the resources and support we need to help these children heal.

This is a system in crisis. This is a system that, while there are ambitions in this bill and ambitions in the prior bill, is broken – that needs more than ambition to fix. This is a system that we on this side of

the house are determined to fight for – for these vulnerable children, these children who deserve to be protected under our care. This bill allows the government to look active without actually being accountable. It allows ministers to table plans and progress reports while avoiding responsibility for outcomes. It creates a structure that can generate significant administrative activity without guaranteeing meaningful change for the children it is meant to serve. Children in care do not need another framework. They need safe placements, stable relationships, timely services and a government that is prepared to accept responsibility when things go wrong. This bill does not deliver that, and while the opposition will engage with it responsibly, we will not allow it to be used as a shield.

Nathan LAMBERT (Preston) (11:18): I rise in support of the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. I might, if I can, turn to some of the comments by the member for Warrandyte, maybe in chronological order. I suppose we can at least agree with the comments she started on. I was pleased to hear her comments about the dedication, hard work and professionalism of our child protection workers. I am not sure if the member for Warrandyte was here, but I had a slightly different exchange with the member for South-West Coast on a previous bill, the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025. There seems to be a bit of a difference of opinion between the member for Warrandyte and the member for South-West Coast, as in fact we saw recently apparently a disagreement of opinion between the member for Warrandyte and the Liberal candidate for Malvern on the subject of housing. But on both those topics I agree with the member for Warrandyte and thank her for her contribution on that particular front.

I was also pleased to hear that the opposition will be supporting the bill and, as the member for Warrandyte said, are supporting the ambition of the bill – indeed its noble intentions, as she called them. She did, as members have just heard, set out what sounded like the outline of a further very significant reform program, and I just hope that further speakers from the opposition will provide more detail on this significant reform program they are apparently announcing today. Certainly I will make it very clear, as all government members know, that this is not our first bill in the children portfolio – I think it is Minister Blandthorn's ninth bill in this portfolio, and I am sure it also will not be her last – and we look forward to any further suggestions coming from the opposition in terms of future reforms.

As the member for Warrandyte is aware, this bill implements a very specific program, one that is well known in the sector and has a well-known history, particularly in Scotland, where it is called the corporate parent scheme. It has been in effect there, I think, for 12 or 14 years – for a significant period of time – and, I should add, has achieved or has contributed to a very significant reduction in the number of children in care in their system. They do have a different system, but that significant reduction in care holds out great promise, I think, for the particular bill that we have here in front of us today.

The member for Warrandyte talked at great length about accountability and effectively claimed that the accountability mechanisms in this bill were meaningless because, while the reporting components were mandatory, actions were not mandatory and people could not take a legal action through courts or through an appeal process to enforce actions. I would point out to the member for Warrandyte and to the opposition that in fact that is the character of many accountability mechanisms in government, indeed ones we are all very familiar with. To take an obvious example, question time does not create legally enforceable actions. You cannot take a minister to court or through another appeal process because they do not take an action out of question time. I do not think any of us would suggest that question time is not valuable to our democracy. We would not suggest that the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearings are not valuable to our democracy. I could go on and on about many, many government programs where we have seen very significant, positive accountability and transparency outcomes that have led to actions even though there is not strictly a mandatory requirement for people to implement those actions. I would suggest to the member for Warrandyte that that is in fact the nature of most of our transparency and accountability mechanisms. There is certainly good reason – which I will come to – for that particular design element of the bill in front of us today.

I will address also the member for Warrandyte's comments on collaboration. She may, I hope, have noticed that the Premier, Jacinta Allan, has made this an absolute focus of her work in this area. The Premier knows that the development and wellbeing outcomes of a child are not separately the product of their education, their health, their family circumstances, their housing or their cultural circumstances but are the result of all those things interacting. That is why she has established the children portfolio in the way she has done. That is why, to her great credit, she has brought together the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, the Department of Education and the Department of Health in this one portfolio so that we can do exactly that. I would make the point to the member for Warrandyte that, as many of us know from our working lives, it is sometimes said that when everyone is responsible nobody is responsible, and there is great value in making a single person know they have a single requirement to do. One of the strengths of this bill is it very clearly sets out the supporting stable and strong families partners – the specific people who have obligations – and gives them very specific obligations in order to ensure that we will get those reports. All of those people will collaborate in order to get to the mandatory outcome areas that are set out in the bill, but I think that direct, one-on-one accountability is a feature of the bill, not a flaw.

Finally, if I can, the member talked about consultation, and I do not believe her facts were correct. Having said that, she was also somewhat vague in her language. I would point out to her that the nature of the bill that we have in front of us is that it sets out what is to be achieved. We can all read the mandatory outcome areas, and it is very clear what we are trying to get to. It very deliberately does not set out the 'how'; that is left for department heads, ministers, the Chief Commissioner of Police and the other partners to determine, and they will no doubt determine it in ways that involve consultation. They will – and I think this is directly in the bill – determine it in ways that involve self-determination for our First Nations people. All of us read the *Yoorrook for Justice* report, which touched on that particular topic – well, it did not touch on it; it covered that topic in significant detail. That 'how' is to be decided, and that is an important part of the way that this particular bill is designed.

As the member for Warrandyte herself conceded, the fundamental aim taken from the Scottish corporate parent example, which she specifically referred to, is one upon which the sector agrees, we agree and she herself said she agreed in her opening remarks on the bill. She said she supported the ambition and its noble intention. If she supports the outcome, as she has said, then she should surely be happy with the fact that we have set that outcome down in stone, in legislation, whilst leaving the 'how' of how a department, a minister, the Chief Commissioner of Police or anyone else tries to get to that outcome as something that is to be determined by them in the plans they produce under this bill and then the reports that will come here for all of us in Parliament to read.

I will turn to some of the other remarks towards the end of the member for Warrandyte's speech in a moment. I suppose, just as an important point of clarification, I have talked about the supporting stable and strong families (SSSF) partners that are involved in this bill, but I think it is very important to be clear about the groups who will be supported through the bill: children under 18 who are either currently involved in the child protection system or have previously been; children under 18 who have previously received services from a community service as defined in the act, or those who require such care; children whose primary family carer meets those criteria; as the member for Warrandyte said, care leavers who have left the care of the secretary of the department and are under the age of 25; and then finally, parents and family members of children subject to family preservation orders and family reunification orders. As anyone familiar with the area will know, there is significant overlap between those categories I have just gone through, and they do describe children and young people in a wide variety of circumstances. As the member for Warrandyte touched on, often those children or young people are being supported by wonderful kinship carers, foster carers, permanent carers and other carers. Very often they are being supported by fantastic staff through our child protection system or community service teams or family service teams. But as all of us as MPs know, sometimes those children are facing very, very difficult circumstances, and I know they are the driving force behind the minister's reforms in this area.

The other day we had an unfortunate video circulated that sensationalised public housing in Reservoir, and part of it was that the people making the video went into some unoccupied, untenanted buildings and showed pictures of the squatting that had been going on. We went down and had a look, as a result of that video, at a couple of other properties. It was very, very confronting to walk into these properties and see smashed furniture, smashed windows and drug paraphernalia and to see, as I did in one, children's books – a *My First Numbers* book, those books for young children – and to think of the circumstances that that child might have been facing. The member for Warrandyte touched on some other very confronting circumstances. They are the driving rationale for why it is that the minister is bringing this reform forward.

We know that when you see those very confronting circumstances, they are the product of multiple factors. They are not because one thing has gone wrong for that child or that young person, because lots of things together have gone wrong. That is why we have the bill and why I think the minister is to be credited for bringing a bill forward that requires all of us, across all of government, across the child's health, across their education, across their housing, across their cultural circumstances, across their family circumstances, across their need for cultural recognition and the need for Aboriginal self-determination, if that applies – all of those things are in the bill before us. I think her push for a whole-of-government response that recognises the complexity and difficulty of some of those most challenging circumstances is absolutely to be commended. I think the bill is a fantastic piece of work, and I commend it to the house.

Annabelle CLEELAND (Euroa) (11:28): I also rise to speak on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. I do not envy your role, Acting Speaker. This is going to be a huge few hours, but it is important to make sure that all of our opinions and debate go towards improving the lives of very vulnerable children, as well as foster carers and the whole support system. So I appreciate your role in navigating the next few hours.

There is nothing a government does that is more important than protecting children who cannot protect themselves. When the state removes a child from their home, it does take on the role of a parent; it is not a supervisor, not a coordinator, but a parent – someone to nurture it, to keep it safe and to make sure it has the best opportunity in life. It is a hard role. As all of us as parents know, you always wonder if you are doing a good job. But if the state takes on that role, that is the expectation as well. It is an extraordinary power that comes with extraordinary responsibility, because if we get it wrong, those consequences last a lifetime, and it can go on and have a generational impact.

I want to start by acknowledging the foster carers across Victoria, including many in my electorate, who open their homes to children they have never met before and love them as their own. They attend school meetings, they manage trauma and they sit through sleepless nights and difficult behaviours and do it all while navigating a very complex system that often makes their job harder and not easier. I want to take this moment to thank Michelle in my electorate, Michelle from Murchison, who has fostered 15 children – a remarkable woman who reached out to me and said 'I really need you to understand the cracks and the issues in the system' as she stepped away from being a foster carer after changing the lives of 15 children. She inspired my work with a parliamentary intern, Sheridyn Sandford, who did a report for me focusing on regional carers and the challenges that we have keeping out-of-home care strong in Victoria. What went on to become research to inform changes for regional foster parents was quite alarming about the neglect of our foster parents, the issues around payments and the cost that is incurred, and why we have seen such a rapid decline in foster parent carers in Victoria. Foster parents are the backbone of the system and we must listen to them at every step of the way, but too many are walking away, as we have heard.

This bill introduces the supporting stable and strong families scheme. On the surface, as we have heard, it sounds good. It is a whole-of-government approach – tick – with shared responsibility across departments and plans to improve those outcomes. No-one in this place is going to disagree with that ambition, but we need to make sure it is practical, it is effective and it involves speaking to those that it is going to actually impact, because ambition is not reform. We heard that from the member for

Warrantdyte. Who are we speaking to to make sure it is actually going to have a tangible impact on the lives that this legislation is going to impact? We cannot just be focused on more bureaucracy if we are already hearing from the foster carers that that is not working or about the children in residential care that that is not working. It does not create enforceable rights for children, it does not require departments to act and it does not compel agencies to work together, so it does not fix the real problems pushing children into unsafe and inappropriate placements. It risks becoming another structure in a system that is already failing. No-one can argue that the system is failing in Victoria, because the stories are heartbreaking and they are too frequent.

The biggest issue raised with me by carers, caseworkers and organisations is that the system is too fragmented. If a child needs housing support, that is one department; mental health support, another department; school support, another department; and family violence, another department. Everyone has a role, but in this legislation no-one is responsible. The bill says agencies should collaborate but it does not require them to, so if a department fails to deliver what is promised, nothing happens. There is no recourse for the child, no avenue for the carer and no consequence for a system that is failing our vulnerable children. That is the central weakness here, and that is something I think that the government must listen to, because we come with good faith that we want to protect our most vulnerable children. They do not need more plans and they do not need more bureaucracy; they need a system that is helping them and listening to them.

Last year I had the privilege of attending the opening of Odyssey Victoria's Circuit Breaker rehabilitation program in Molyullah in my electorate. My family have had a really close association with this facility, which is absolutely a circuit breaker. It allowed my sister to be reunified with her children after my parents stepped in to help her through a really, really hard time. She is remarkably brave, and she stepped up and asked for help when she needed it. I met so many parents like her. It is so brave to make that hardest decision a person can make. I could not comprehend being that brave to say, 'I can't parent my children right now, but I really want to; I need to, but I need to make sure I am healthy enough to do that first.' They stepped away from parenting so they could become healthy again. This was not because they did not love their children; it was because they loved their children that they did that. Every single parent I spoke to was there for one reason – to reconnect with their children and be the parent that they know they need to be. They trusted that temporary care, properly supported, would protect their children while they rebuilt their lives, and that is what the child protection system should be, not bureaucracy but a bridge back to family, to allow them to get healthy enough and be the parents that they know they can be.

The risk, the crisis in the bill, is that it does not address so many of the issues that we are actually talking about. It is actually adding more bureaucracy, and we are losing foster carers at such an alarming rate. Carers are telling us they are undervalued, unsupported and financially stretched, and many effectively subsidise the state to care for its own children. When carers leave, children do not disappear, they end up in residential care – children under 12 in residential care units. Something is wrong. We need them in homes. We need them nurtured and loved.

This bill does nothing to address the workforce collapse in family-based care. There is no meaningful action on carer support, no structural change to recruitment and retention, no serious resourcing reform. We cannot fix child protection while ignoring the people who actually care for the children. We have had strategies before. We have had Parliament intern reports before. We have had plans before, and we have had reports. The same issues keep getting raised, and we are skirting around the edges when it comes to substantial reform, with workers spending more time navigating the process than helping families and carers spending more time filling out forms than supporting their children.

Young people leaving care say they fall into a gap the moment they turn 18. The bill expands recognition of care leavers to 25, and that is welcome. I want to do a shout-out to Alex, a branch president in the Nationals, who has also guided us. He was a foster child himself, and he spoke so passionately at one of our state conferences about the need for that safety net post 18. He is a

remarkable human because he had remarkable foster carers that carried him through his young, formative years.

A young person does not need to be recognised as vulnerable. They need housing, they need mental health support and they need stability. One of the most concerning elements in this legislation explicitly allows agencies to prioritise their existing duties over these responsibilities. Every moment coordination becomes difficult, costly or inconvenient, departments can simply say their primary obligation comes first. That is deeply concerning.

Please, we actually need reform, and we need to make sure that we measure success in the child protection space by outcomes in children's lives, not reports on a table, because every time we prioritise process over people, a child in Victoria is paying the price. This legislation is a step, but it is not the reform the industry is crying out for.

Nina TAYLOR (Albert Park) (11:38): We are all agreed, I would hope, on the premise and the fundamental underpinning of the imperative of reforms in this space, and that is to provide the best protection and stable homes for Victorian children. The vulnerability element goes without saying. I would like to think that there is a positive and definitely good will. This is more than goodwill, I say, an underpinning of the driver to see the best possible outcomes now and into the future.

I will pick up on some points raised by the opposition. I think it is important for the purposes of debate here that we really examine what this bill is seeking to deliver. Firstly, there was a point raised by the member for Warrandyte regarding the issue of residential care. Just to note for the Parliament: for children in residential care the government invested \$548 million in the 2023–24 Victorian budget, and this is the biggest single investment in care services in a decade to improve outcomes for children and young people in residential care, recognising the incredible importance of investing in this space.

From 1 July 2025 all residential care homes in Victoria have been funded to deliver a therapeutic model of care and provide children and young people with access to therapeutic supports. Therapeutic specialists help staff understand how past trauma is impacting on behaviours and develop plans to identify the supports needed to address the causes and respond to the behaviours. I just also reassure the member for Warrandyte that that is part of these reforms. We are not only focusing on residential care, and I was not sure if that was what the member was seeking. That is part of this whole reform that we are bringing forward here today. I just say that is a key focus as part of these reforms.

I should emphasise that the bill proposes to introduce a new model of shared responsibilities across the Victorian government to improve outcomes for at-risk children, young people and families. As has been stated, it is modelled on Scotland's successful corporate parenting approach. There has been very careful and prudent evaluation of a model which has proven to be successful in Scotland; hence this is what is backing in the reforms that we are bringing about here. It is a new model. I do want to emphasise that. It makes clear that supporting vulnerable children and young people is a whole-of-government responsibility, not just for the Minister for Children – factoring in that with children there are so many different elements that can go right or can go wrong, whether it is being able to get to school every day, getting appropriate nourishment or getting the love, care, support and medical care et cetera that they need and deserve.

I am a little bit confused by the opposition stating that they basically are not supporting parliamentary processes that have been long established. It is a little bit confusing.

Mathew Hilakari interjected.

Nina TAYLOR: Yes, they do not want a plan. It is just sounding a little bit loose. I know there was a concern about operational matters. The plans actually proceed, feed, nurture and support the operational implementation. That is a very decent and fundamental process. I would have thought, when you are talking about accountability, having a reference point as a minimum, I am saying, is absolutely fundamental. I am not sure what the alternative is that they are proposing. I do want to

explore this issue, because it has been a recurrent theme raised by those opposite in terms of accountability. Each minister will be required to table a supporting stable and strong families progress report. It is not only the plan but the progress report in Parliament and the conclusion of each supporting stable and strong families plan reporting on the progress against the actions within the portfolios. That is in this Parliament. That enables, I would have thought, based on precedent, a considerable element of scrutiny, and it allows for all in this chamber to evaluate those reports and the outcomes against the plan. Stating that this is merely a noble ambition I think is fundamentally querying the processes of our democracy and what we all agree to in terms of being part of this democratic institution that we are here in today. I know that might seem a fairly large and encompassing point to make, but I just think when they are repudiating parliamentary processes they might wish care to be taken, because it may be that in future they wish to lean on those processes that they are fundamentally devaluing in this moment.

To ensure there is adequate monitoring of progress between supporting stable and strong families plan periods, outcome measures across government will be prescribed in regulations, which responsible individuals will be required to have regard to in their plans and tracked in their reports. What are the areas that are going to be tracked? Outcome measures will be across health, education, justice and housing. I know in matters such as housing the fundamental element is obviously having safe shelter. These are the areas where outcomes will be specifically measured, and I will go further: Aboriginal self-determination, employment and other prescribed areas. It is being spelt out here, and that in itself, let alone the progress reports that will be delivered in Parliament, is actually spelling out the accountability frame. So I hope that that allays some of the concerns that are being raised in a way that I think could distort not only the intention but the trajectory of this bill's implementation – because we know that there are many very hardworking people in child protection who do an incredible job day in, day out. We know it is not from 9 to 5, it is a 24/7 role for those foster carers as well, and it is absolutely fundamental that they are supported. This is why we are making this a whole-of-government responsibility, recognising that we do need to do things differently, hence this new model.

I also want to speak to that element of consultation. During discussions with stakeholders on the bill, they spoke to the importance of partnership and working together to achieve positive change, both for individual families and the Victorian community more broadly. In discussions with members of the Aboriginal Children's Forum, members spoke about parallels in Aboriginal culture, the importance and strength of community and shared obligations to raise children and assist those doing it tough. As one member of the Aboriginal Children's Forum put it, when Aboriginal people gather around the campfire, everyone is expected to bring something. Just speaking to the central tenets of the spirit within which these reforms are being brought forward, I should say since the bill was introduced to the Parliament it has also been welcomed by stakeholders such as the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare and Anglicare Victoria. I am not sure how the opposition view those particular stakeholders, but they have certainly endorsed the reforms that are being brought forward in the chamber. The Ministerial Youth Advisory Group described the importance of making significant and lasting difference to children and young people, providing a launch pad for the next chapter and delivering both roots and wings for those in need. As one member simply put it: together we thrive.

Just on that aspect of consultation, I think that was perhaps severely sledged by the member for Warrandyte and I think it devalued the incredible input of various stakeholders who have had their role in terms of informing the fundamental tenets of this bill. I think we should take a little bit of care when we are considering how such reforms come about, noting that we are absolutely dedicated to driving the best possible outcomes for Victorian children, particularly those who are unfortunately in very vulnerable situations. I would hope that the opposition will come to see that there are legitimate parliamentary processes that back in our democracy and that continue to be valued, making sure, as is stipulated by this bill, that those progress reports are put before the Parliament and that there are direct measures in terms of outcomes that can be scrutinised by all. I have confidence in moving forward.

Roma BRITNELL (South-West Coast) (11:48): I rise to speak on the Children, Youth and Family Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. At the outset, let me say the intention behind this bill is good. No-one in this place disagrees with the concept of strong and safe families. But when the state takes responsibility for a child, responsibility for the child's wellbeing should extend beyond protection to housing, to health, to education, justice and employment. We on this side of the house believe that is obvious and moral. But aspiration without accountability is not reform. Cooperation without responsibility is not protection. And legislation that relies on goodwill rather than obligation for outcomes does not keep children safe. With this government's track record of disorganisation and drift, a plan that relies entirely on departments to voluntarily cooperate without binding duties, without consequences for non-performance and with wide-open escape clauses looks less like reform and more like another glossy binder for the shelf – more spin.

This bill is the second major child-related legislation by this government in the past six months, yet neither addresses the catastrophic failures of the Victorian child protection system – failures confirmed by my own personal involvement with children, carers, parents, frontline workers and police and also reiterated by the member for Warrandyte in her findings, as she has been talking with similar groups. It is heartbreaking – it is heart wrenching – what we hear, and it is impossible to not feel completely confronted by it, as the member for Warrandyte very capably articulated in her lead speech.

Those who actually experience the system tell us it is broken, it is overwhelmed, it is siloed and it is failing the very children the state has assumed the role of parent and protector for. This is a system in crisis and a government that is failing our most vulnerable children, and the evidence is clear. I suggest that the member for Albert Park go and talk to the families, talk to the children and talk to the workers. They are at their wits' end, and they are caring people who just want to help. This government has been responsible for child protection for more than a decade, and in that 10 years we have seen escalating numbers of children entering care – an explosion in residential care – rather than the loving arms of a family-based placement like foster care, because the system is not supporting those people and they are fleeing from the system, not because they want to but because they have to. They cannot afford to stay in it. They are unable to look after a child without the appropriate allowance, and they are not getting that.

There is a chronic workforce shortage. Children are disengaged from education. There are reports to the government that demonstrate that. One child I know who has been in the system from 12 years of age who turns 18 soon has not been to school for that whole time. Untreated mental health issues actually plague some of these children; they are going completely unaddressed. Rampant drug use and addiction are absolutely infiltrating particularly residential care facilities. Despite what the government say, that is exactly what is happening, and the workers tell me. One woman who actually runs some of these places said to me, 'You couldn't say every young girl is involved in prostitution' – I will say it for what it is – 'but almost all'. They were her words to me. Sexual exploitation and sexual assaults are occurring within these state-run facilities. It is not an unusual occurrence, it is frequent. Yet after a decade of failure what is being offered to this Parliament is not structural reform, not enforcement standards and not mandatory accountability, but a weak and loose framework encouraging departments to work together. Well, we would all like that.

On paper the bill establishes a supporting stable and strong families scheme. It designates ministers, department heads and chief commissioners of police as partners. It defines a target cohort. It requires two-year plans and then two-year progress reports to the Parliament, and it sketches big outcomes in areas of health, education, housing, employment, justice and Aboriginal self-determination to be tracked by future measures – still to be defined, I might add. But the bill explicitly does not create any enforceable rights for children, families or carers. It cannot be relied upon in civil proceedings. It does not override existing statutory duties or powers. It does not require action where scheme responsibilities conflict with existing portfolio priorities, and it does not compel ministers or departments to implement the actions in their own plans. Ministers must prepare plans, but joint planning is optional. Collaboration is encouraged but not required. That is the very definition of a silo: everyone writes a

plan, nobody has to line them up and when priorities collide the bill tells departments to follow their normal business first. There are no new powers to require coordination, reconcile conflicts, direct action or hold anybody to account. In other words, it is useless. It is procedural rather than directive – plans and reports, no teeth, no way of making sure outcomes occur and a child is cared for and protected, which is actually the purpose of child protection. I will repeat it: there is no way of making sure outcomes occur and that a child is cared for and protected.

We are talking about basics such as going to school or not being sexually assaulted. Wow, where have we come to that I am saying that here in the Parliament – that that is something I am saying? ‘Please help. Please stop.’ If you want to understand why cross-government cooperation is unlikely, just start there. This bill creates responsibilities and then makes them optional the moment they become inconvenient. That is not a lever of collaboration, it is a manual for avoidance. Experience shows us bureaucracy retreats into silos. I think we have all said it and we have all seen it. Responsibility is deflected and children fall through the cracks. That is what we see every day in the state of Victoria. Children need decisive actions, they need accountability and they need strong outcomes. Stakeholders warned that at its weakest this framework could do little more than make high-level plans and reports with no meaningful change. The bill’s own analysis concedes that the practical impact will depend on the quality of the plans, the willingness of the portfolios and the future resourcing decisions. Well, let me tell you: the police are willing. They are standing ready to act, but they do not have the legislation to be able to do that. That is why this bill is a bill without any teeth.

Let me tell you about a young person who I have been dealing with, and this is an example that demonstrates the utter failure of this system. A child who was 16 last year was placed in a secure welfare unit for her own protection, yet despite this she was picked up from that secure unit – that was her own home – by a man in his mid-30s who had an intervention order out against contact with the child. Let that sink in: a child in state care in a secure placement collected by an adult man. What do you think goes on? These young girls are fooled into believing these men care for them. They are children who are starved for attention. You can just imagine it: ‘I love you, but I need you to do this for me. If you can do this, we can get the drugs and we can have so much fun.’ You can just hear it being played out. And this is what she has told me. Of course this is pure sexual exploitation, and the police do not have the legislative tools to stop this ongoing sexual exploitation. To be completely honest, it is not anything other than state-sanctioned sexual assault. The state are failing to protect her and the state have not intervened. She will speak out. She tells me she will speak out, but she also says she is not allowed to. One of the workers who is working with her wants to speak out, but the government is strong in saying no and not allowing it. As the member for Warrandyte clearly articulated as well, they are being stopped from telling what should be told.

This is not a bill that, if it passes, will do any more than produce plans, more reports and no change where it really matters for our vulnerable children in homes who cannot be cared for in the environment the government has put in place, so we should pause the self-congratulations and strengthen the substance. We should put outcome measures in place now and put the child at the centre of care.

Mathew HILAKARI (Point Cook) (11:58): I say to the member for South-West Coast: if you are aware of laws being broken in this state, you have an obligation to report it to police. You have an obligation to do it, especially in cases of sexual assault of children and especially in cases where drugs have been dealt. I say that to all members as a standing matter.

Nicole Werner: On a point of order, Acting Speaker, the speaker need not labour the point when it has already been done.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Iwan Walters): There is no point of order. It is a matter for debate.

Mathew HILAKARI: I think my point is made. Members, if they are aware of criminality, should report it immediately.

The member for Warrandyte had 30 minutes as a lead speaker to put forward the new ideas of the opposition, and what was there? There was 30 minutes of observation of the problems. There was 30 minutes of identifying the problems. There was 30 minutes of gazing at those problems, but no solutions. Not a single one was put forward. Not a single idea was put forward on how this system can be improved in this state. And it does need improvement. It is certainly not perfect. It is far from it, this system. It has a workforce who are working hard every single day within it. But we are not blind: this system does not achieve all the goals that we seek to achieve – to keep young people safe, to see them have the life that we all hope that they can have. But the observation of the member for Warrandyte was that she has no solutions. That was her contribution to this place. She said, ‘Ambition does not mean reform.’ She does not even have ambition for reform. There are reforms right in front of her. I see that the member for Warrandyte, thankfully, is supporting the bill in front of her today, but she put forward no reform whatsoever – an observation of the problem, a gazing at the problem, an identification of the problem, but no solution whatsoever. This is part of the solution. It is not its entirety. It is not its whole – of course not. We will continue to address the challenges of keeping young people safe. We will keep bringing bills to this place. As the member for Preston mentioned, this is the ninth bill of this minister that has been brought forward to this place, and it will not be the last. But just to observe the problems is not good enough for members in this place. Just to observe them is not good enough.

I want to bring us to the bill itself. The bill identifies and has a focus initially on those children who are under the age of 18 who are or have been child protection clients. It will be focused on children under the age of 18 who are receiving or have received or require but are not receiving services from community services, those under the age of 18 whose primary family carer is receiving or has required services from community service organisations across this state, care leavers who have left the care of the Secretary of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing under the age of 25 and parents and family members of children subject to family preservation orders and family reunification orders. This is the starting point. This is the starting focus of the changes that we are making in this bill. Those opposite say that there are no accountability measures in this bill. I am very surprised by that, because there is a really clear setting out of plans that the police commissioner, departments and secretaries are required to put to this Parliament and, two years later, an assessment of how those plans have worked, whether they have worked, what achievements have been made and those areas where we have failed and we need to improve and reset our ambitions and our standards. The initial focus of the scheme is also specifically on children for whom the Secretary of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing has parental responsibility. This is an incredibly important point because this state so often is the parent for so many children – too many. I think that is one thing that we can all agree on in this Parliament: there are too many people in the care of the state. Our focus is to make sure that those people in the care of the state have the best life that they can be set up for as possible. That is why the focus of the scheme will be on this subset of children first, those who have the highest need.

Budgets set out what your ambition is and what you care about. We will have a budget later on this May, and the last six budgets in this state have put \$4.4 billion towards child protection and family service portfolios. What I did not hear from those opposite was an announcement of what dollars they will be setting forward. They talked a lot about the current payments to those people who are doing extraordinary jobs in foster care. It was not that they will pay them more. It was just an observation of the problem.

Nicole Werner interjected.

Mathew HILAKARI: No, that is right. There was an observation again from those opposite not about the dollars that they will put forward but that it is too low. I look forward to their announcement. They did not announce it today, but I do look forward to their announcement sometime soon to have more to say about their future ambition. Government is not just about observing a problem, it is about doing something about those things. In the 2025–26 budget we supported \$14 million to continue programs that support our frontline child protection services. That particular subset of funding, which

is part of that \$4.4 billion I mentioned a moment ago, is about recruitment of staff both here in Victoria but also looking internationally, because in Victoria one of the real challenges we have – and we see this across every part of our economy, whether it is the police force, whether it is nursing or whether it is teaching – is getting the staff that we need. We have such a high level of engagement with employment in Victoria – a huge number of people in employment in Victoria and a reasonably low level of unemployment. We can always do more in that space as well. But we have had such strong engagement that people across every industry are trying hard to find the adequate and appropriate workers. So that \$14 million was focused on recruitment, international recruitment, investment into kinship engagement coordinators, Aboriginal cultural support and awareness advisers and the Child Protection Litigation Office.

The closest that we actually got to an idea – a kernel of a policy – from those opposite was that young people should have a greater right and involvement in taking litigation against the state. I hope that that kernel of an idea forms into something real, because I just think that they need to have an understanding of the vulnerability of young people and the lack of resources of young people in state care, and understand that they are probably not the primary people to be going out there and seeking legal action unless they have a great deal of support to do so. But our focus of support is actually making sure that young people are as safe as they can be, rather than enabling litigation through the courts, which sounds like probably the least of the priorities of young people in care.

Since 2014 this government has put on about a hundred extra child protection practitioner roles every year, so we have had 1180 across the course of this government over the last 11-and-a-bit years. That means there are more people across our community undertaking this really important work, and I thank those workers, because this is one of the most important and one of the toughest roles that there are across our community. One of the important things, and I mentioned kinship carers and kinship engagement coordinators a moment ago, is the role of seeking to have less Aboriginal children in out-of-home care and reducing that over-representation. We know it is an over-representation, and the member for Geelong has always been a strong advocate in this place, and I thank her for her ongoing work in this area.

We were recently debating the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025, which acquits recommendation 25 of the *Yoorrook for Justice* report. That cultural understanding and that cultural engagement with Aboriginal people is of course a fundamental factor in making sure that young Aboriginal people feel part of our community, and that is probably one thing that we all want: every single person in this place wants to feel part of a community and safe in their home. This is just one piece of that effort to see that happen. I thank the minister and her team in bringing forward this bill to the house, and I commend its speedy passage.

Rachel WESTAWAY (Pahran) (12:08): I rise to speak on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. As the shadow minister has outlined, the opposition will not oppose this bill; we support its intent. But I must be direct with this house. Intent alone does not protect children. Intent alone does not keep families together. Intent alone does not support young people leaving care with nowhere to turn. This bill establishes a supporting stable and strong families scheme. It designates ministers, department heads and the Chief Commissioner of Police as partners in supporting vulnerable children. It requires them to prepare plans every two years to report to Parliament, as the member for Albert Park mentioned. The principle is sound: when the state takes responsibility for a child, that responsibility should extend beyond the child protection portfolio. Housing, health, education and justice – all of these shape outcomes for vulnerable children and families. We also welcome the formal recognition of care leavers up to the age of 25, responding to longstanding advocacy from the Home Stretch campaign.

But let us be equally clear about what this bill does not do. It creates no enforceable legal rights for children, families or carers. It cannot be relied upon in court. It does not compel ministers or departments to actually implement the actions in their plans. Most remarkably, it contains an explicit escape clause: departments can opt out of their duties to vulnerable children simply by claiming a

conflict of interest with their core business. This is a toothless tiger with a built-in excuse for inaction. The government cites Scotland's corporate parenting model as inspiration. What it fails to mention in this regard is that independent reviews found that the framework became overbureaucratic and process driven. Scotland has since moved to something different – the Promise reforms, which emphasise relationships and outcomes over compliance and documentation. Yet this bill learns none of those lessons. Unlike the Scottish model, which mandates collaboration between public bodies, this bill makes joint planning optional, and it fails to combat the very siloed decision-making it claims to address. We risk creating mountains of well-meaning documentation while nothing changes for the children who need help the most.

I want to bring this back to my electorate of Prahran. My community understands that vulnerable children and families exist everywhere, not just in disadvantaged postcodes. Prahran is home to significant public housing, to families under pressure and to young people ageing out of care with absolutely limited support. We see the consequences when systems fail: young people couch surfing because there is no transitional housing, families in crisis because they cannot access mental health services and the devastating ripple effects when early intervention just simply is not happening. A plan tabled in Parliament every two years does not help a young care leaver in Prahran who cannot find stable accommodation. A progress report does not support a family in St Kilda East struggling to access the services that could keep them together.

This bill cannot be considered in isolation from the broader state of Victoria's child protection system. According to the 2026 report on government services, Victoria spends approximately \$1.2 million per child a year on residential care. That is the highest in the nation. It is over 17 times the cost of foster and kinship care. Total residential care spending reached \$566 million for roughly 477 children. What are the outcomes from that record expenditure? Recent reporting paints an absolutely devastating picture. Residential care staff are reporting that they feel drug-affected at work from second-hand exposure to ice – ice being used by children in their care. A 13-year-old girl fell pregnant in the state's care. Infants are dying in a system described as broken. We are spending \$1.2 million per child a year, and children still are not safe.

Meanwhile the foster care system is buckling under pressure. Carers for high-needs children have had support slashed by \$100 a day. Experienced foster carers, people who have cared for hundreds of children over decades, are walking away. One carer told the media, after 18 years and over 400 children in their care, 'I have never felt so disregarded.' When we lose foster carers, where do those children go – into residential care, at 17 times the cost with worse outcomes? This is a false economy of a system in absolute crisis.

Let us be clear about where the pipeline leads. Victoria Legal Aid's data shows that two out of every five children placed in residential care face criminal charges within 12 months. Within two years every second child is being charged. The Sentencing Advisory Council found that 38 per cent of children sentenced or diverted in Victoria's Children's Court have been the subject of a child protection report. Forty-five per cent of young people in youth justice have been on a child protection order. We are not just failing these children, we are creating the next generation of offenders. A broken child protection system is feeding the youth crime crisis. This government talks tough on youth crime, but you cannot arrest your way out of a problem you created by neglecting vulnerable children. You cannot bail your way out of community safety when the system that is meant to protect children is instead criminalising them. The Commissioner for Children and Young People said residential care is acting as a pipeline into the criminal justice system for the state's most marginalised children, whose histories of trauma brought them into care. For that system to then deliver them to police and courts is a profound failure of the state. Every child we fail in care today is a headline about youth crime tomorrow. That is not a law and order problem, that is a child protection problem, and this government owns it.

Nowhere is this failure more stark than for Aboriginal children. Victoria has the highest rate of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care in the nation. Aboriginal children make up less than 2 per cent of Victoria's child population, but they represent more than a quarter of all the children in care.

The rate of Aboriginal children in care is more than 20 times the rate of non-Aboriginal children in care, and it is an indictment on this government. These figures are not improving, they are getting worse. The Yoorrook Justice Commission made 20 recommendations for urgent reform, yet here we are debating another bill that creates no enforceable rights and no real accountability. Aboriginal community controlled organisations have proven they deliver better outcomes when empowered to care for their own children, and this bill does nothing to accelerate that transfer of responsibility.

There are also serious questions about consultation on this bill. While the government claims wide engagement, stakeholders have told the opposition a different story. Many organisations were not consulted at all. Some first heard substantive details from the opposition and not the government. While we debate this bill, the government is quietly slashing funding for the very programs that actually work. Youth crime prevention funding has been cut by 46 per cent. Under the previous Liberal–National government nearly \$13 million a year was invested in youth crime prevention. Under this government that has fallen to just \$541,000 annually over the past three years. Programs like Boys to the Bush in Bendigo, like Operation Newstart – programs that engage at-risk young people before they offend – are being defunded or wound back. The government is spending billions on the consequences of failure while cutting investment in prevention. That is not a strategy, that is negligence. There is no evidence of meaningful engagement with foster carers, permanent carers, adoptive families or frontline child protection workers – the very people that are directly affected.

The opposition will assess whether there is scope to strengthen the bill in the Legislative Council. In the meantime I will be watching closely, because the measure of this bill will not be the plans it produces; it will be whether a single child is safer, whether a single family stays together or whether a single care leaver finds stable ground. I would like to say, at the request of our lead speaker and in line with her ‘not opposed’ position, that whilst the quote provided by the Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative is accurate, we acknowledge that this was an initial response and there was subsequent feedback on the matter, and that they are supportive of the legislation. I thank you for your time.

Eden FOSTER (Mulgrave) (12:18): It is a pleasure to rise in support of the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025 today, and I thank the Minister for Children for the extraordinary work she has done to bring these reforms to Parliament. I know that this is a particular area of passion for the minister, as it is for many of us here in this place, including me, and I welcome the opportunity to contribute to today’s debate.

This bill reflects our understanding that we have a responsibility and a duty of care to the children and families doing it tough across our state and, in recognising that, we are acting on that responsibility. This practical reform is the latest in a series of amendments to the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 undertaken by this government which modernise and streamline the stability provisions and protections featured throughout the standing legislation. Specifically the bill amends the Children, Youth and Families Act and the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005 to put beyond doubt that supporting vulnerable children is not the job of one minister, one department or one service alone. It establishes a clear legislative framework that requires government to work together earlier, more deliberately and more effectively to support children, young people and families who are at risk of entering or are already involved in the child protection system.

Much has been made of the stonewalling and obstacles those seeking the support of their government services face. When I was first selected as the member for Mulgrave this was a common refrain amongst constituents and one that I recognised from many years before that, whether it was as a councillor and later mayor of the City of Greater Dandenong or in my work as a school psychologist. The fault does not lie with any one government but rather with the natural consequence of overlapping bureaucracies, powers and internal obstacles to co-working and communication between them. I am proud to say that over recent years the Victorian government has made real progress in improving collaboration across portfolios. Departments have worked more closely, shared responsibility has been better recognised and existing resources have been used more strategically. One tangible example is the recognition of parents seeking family reunification as a priority cohort on the Victorian housing

register, a change that acknowledges the central role safe and stable housing plays in enabling families to stay together or reunify safely.

But what has also become clear is that goodwill and ad hoc cooperation, while serviceable, are not enough. Without a durable framework, collaboration depends too heavily on personalities, priorities and circumstances. The bill responds directly to that challenge by creating an enduring whole-of-government approach that survives changes in ministers, machinery of government and policy cycles. By legislating the supporting stable and strong families scheme the bill formally recognises that when the state assumes responsibility for a child's care that responsibility extends across government. Housing, health, education, justice and policing are not peripheral to a child's wellbeing. By contrast, they are central to it. This bill gives practical effect to that principle by embedding shared duties, integrated planning and accountability across government, drawing on the successful corporate parenting model used in Scotland. Far from inviting too many cooks to the kitchen, the intent is clear: intervene early, reduce the number of families drawn into the statutory system and shorten the time children spend in it when involvement cannot be avoided. As the minister has noted, in this way the bill complements the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025 reforms, which will extend the time available to parents to reunify with their children who are subject to a family reunification order made by the Children's Court of Victoria.

This bill is not merely aspirational; it establishes a strong accountability framework, requiring ministers and senior officials to plan, act and report on how they are meeting their responsibilities to vulnerable children and families. Regular reporting to Parliament ensures transparency, while outcome-based measures make it clear that responsibility does not rest solely with child protection or the Minister for Children but with government as a whole. This entrenches accountability, reduces operational opacity and fosters institutional memory for far longer than any minister, public servant or indeed family of interest will be in the system.

The name of the scheme, supporting stable and strong families, serves as a symbol not only of its purpose but also its values. It recognises that stability and strength do not come from crisis response alone but from sustained support, partnership and opportunity. That language was informed by extensive consultation, including powerful contributions from Aboriginal stakeholders, who spoke about longstanding cultural understanding of shared responsibility for raising children; and from young people with lived experience of the care system, who described the potential of these reforms to provide both roots and wings. I encourage each and every member in this place to read their contributions and reflect our individual obligations to our First Nations peoples in the context of this legislation and the broader call to action of Closing the Gap. It makes for powerful reading and has steeled my resolve to support this bill in its passage throughout the Parliament.

Under the scheme ministers, department heads and the Chief Commissioner of Police will be required to actively consider how their decisions affect children and families in the supporting stable and strong families group, to develop and implement clear plans within their portfolios and to report publicly on progress. Those responsibilities include improving access to services, promoting wellbeing and cultural identity and ensuring equality of opportunity and monitoring outcomes, again with particular attention paid towards Aboriginal children and young people. The framework prioritises those with the highest needs, identified as children involved in child protection and recent care leavers, while allowing the focus to expand over time to include families at risk, strengthening early intervention and prevention. This ensures that the urgent does not overshadow the important and gives me significant hope that the public service will perform better in breaking cycles of estrangement and instability in our great state.

For too long the views and needs of the youth have been overlooked or undersold. In a past life, as I said previously, I was a school psychologist and saw firsthand the pain wrought by unstable family life and that even slight delays in processing, support and direction could bring families and displaced children to their lowest and most vulnerable state. I worked with a number of children in the child

protection system. Having that stability is so important; for kids to know that there is an opportunity to be back with their families is so important.

I do not often mention it in this place, but I too was a foster parent and saw just how important family connection is for our young people. I will not talk personally about my experiences for the sake of the privacy of the foster child that I had briefly. Maybe it is in my surname; maybe I was born for it. There may be an opportunity to go back to it after this place. A big shout-out goes to all of those foster parents out there, whether it is kinship care or someone that is just doing it because they want to help young children, young people and families. They do so much for our vulnerable kids. I know from my time as a foster parent, although brief, that it is a big sacrifice that many are making. This bill supports those families, those foster parents and those young kids. Credit goes to the minister for putting together such an important bill for our community and for our most vulnerable. We all know that it takes a village to raise a child, and we are part of that village. All members of this place are part of that village, and we do every bit that we can to support those most vulnerable in our community. I commend this bill to the house.

Tim READ (Brunswick) (12:28): I am speaking today on behalf of the Greens on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. Before I begin I want to acknowledge the contributions from both sides of the chamber that have been particularly strong, especially the last one from the member for Mulgrave.

This bill creates a legislative framework where ministers, the Chief Commissioner of Police and heads of government departments are jointly responsible for supporting the needs of children who have come into contact with the child protection system, care leavers and their families. It does this through the supporting stable and strong families (SSSF) scheme. The Greens support the policy intent of the bill and want to see system-wide improvements that provide stronger support for children in out-of-home care, care leavers and their families, but the government must guarantee that a shared responsibility does not become no-one's responsibility.

I am sure all of us in this place want to see better outcomes for children and young people who have come into contact with the child protection system, especially for First Nations children and their families. In 2024 Aboriginal children were 20 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than non-Aboriginal children. Right now Victoria's child protection system has removed about one in 10 Aboriginal children from their families. This over-representation is the worst in Australia and a national disgrace. We must do more to provide early, holistic and culturally safe supports to these children and their families, delivered by the Aboriginal community. Every effort should be made to reduce the trauma of removal in its first instance, and children and young people should be supported to remain safely with their families. Then, failing that, the amount of time children and young people spend in out-of-home care should be reduced to the minimum necessary to keep them safe and ensure an enduring reunification with their family.

The Commission for Children and Young People's report *In Our Own Words* spoke to 200 children and young people in out-of-home care, and the report found too many children in state care experience instability, constantly changing placements, unsafe environments and a revolving door of workers, leaving them feeling unsupported and unheard. Children in residential care reported feeling particularly unsafe and isolated, with First Nations children experiencing cumulative harm, including disconnection from culture, kinship and community. A system meant to protect children is too often causing further harm. One 17-year-old told the inquiry:

DHHS take us out of our parents' care for whatever reason and put us in a resi which is just as bad ... If someone's being taken out of someone's care because there's been violence, you don't put them somewhere where there's more violence – it causes more trauma ...

A whole-of-government approach to support the best outcomes for children and their families is necessary to tackle the many issues we have in Victoria's child protection system – issues like growing rates of disproportionate removal of Aboriginal children and young people from their families, a

pattern which repeats the harm of the stolen generations and continues a painful colonial legacy that this state has a responsibility to confront and end.

However, the Greens acknowledge that this bill is a step in the right direction. There are potential benefits to the framework outlined in this bill. For example, where a parent has been directed by the courts to complete an alcohol or drug program as a condition of reunification but faces an eight-week waitlist to enrol, this framework could allow the relevant minister to seek additional funding to improve access to these services. The Greens are supportive of enhancing early intervention frameworks and building a system that works together at all stages to prioritise family reunification.

However, this bill lacks true accountability, has no teeth in its mechanisms and has no reporting on how the support is going to play out. If a minister fails to deliver on core actions in their supporting stable and strong families scheme plan, how will they be held accountable? In Victoria we already have many cross-government frameworks in place to improve the safety and wellbeing of children in care and to prevent their removal into care, but most remain largely unimplemented – for example, the out-of-home care education commitment, a partnering agreement between the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and the Department of Education to provide extra supports for children in care so they can remain at school and thrive there. The Commission for Children and Young People reported, in their 2023 report *Let Us Learn*, poor implementation of this partnering agreement by child protection and schools alike, resulting in kids missing out on critical supports to help them stay engaged in learning. There is a risk that the legislative framework introduced by this bill once again could fail to deliver and that the blame for child protection failures may be shifted across ministers or, worse, onto families.

The Greens have also heard from stakeholders that there was a lack of consultation and meaningful engagement, in particular with Aboriginal stakeholders. The Greens remain equally concerned that the current drafting does not mandate a duty to consult with Aboriginal people through the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria; nor are SSSF partners required to engage with the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People on the development of those plans. As I have already noted, Victoria has the highest rate of First Nations children in out-of-home care, almost twice the national average. Reducing this over-representation must be central to any child protection reform, not treated as an afterthought. The government has a duty, bound by the newly passed Statewide Treaty Act 2025, to embed Aboriginal self-determination into every aspect of child protection reform. We know the solutions to some of the issues in the child protection system already exist, and the Greens will continue to advocate for the implementation of all Yoorrook Justice Commission recommendations as well as those recommendations put forward previously in various reports by the Commission for Children and Young People. We also call on the government to work with the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service and Djirra to implement the child protection notification and referral scheme model. Community-designed solutions are already on the table, and this Labor government has made a political choice not to prioritise or properly resource them.

While this bill is a small step in the right direction, we must first address the root causes of involvement with the child protection system: poverty, housing insecurity and family violence. Without properly funding prevention and community-based supports, no ministerial and department coordination framework will be enough. The Greens hold concerns about the bill's ability to deliver effective outcomes, the risk of it becoming a tokenistic tick-box exercise and whether it will meaningfully support early intervention. The Greens will continue to call for real, enforceable outcomes for children and families. This bill must achieve what it intends: advancing children's wellbeing and safety in practice, not just in principle.

Josh BULL (Sunbury) (12:35): I am pleased to have the opportunity this afternoon to follow on and make a contribution on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025, which goes to creating a legislative framework to improve collaboration across the government to improve outcomes for children, young people and families that are at risk and those that are involved with child protection. What we saw last year, and members have touched

on these matters as well, are situations where we know our young people are exposed to significant and serious risk. We have a very important obligation to minimise those risks and to take the opportunities within all of our agencies to improve the system whereby collaboration is improved across the board. I note that the contributions that have been made thus far go to many of those references.

The objectives of the scheme, which are set out in a new section 20C of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, are: to support collective responsibility of a whole-of-government approach to child wellbeing and safety, to consider the wellbeing and best interests of vulnerable children and care leavers by supporting stable and strong families partners and responsibilities, to enable the early intervention and provide more timely and adequate services to support families caring for vulnerable children, to support preservation and family reunification for persons engaged with child protection, the coordination of a multi-agency approach to child wellbeing and safety and to promote enhanced accountability through those processes as well.

We know, and we have heard in the course of debate today, that there has been a considerable amount of work, both through extensive consultation and a number of different stakeholders that were worked through from June 2025 to October 2025 with a broad range of information sessions that were held, including with the Children's Court of Victoria, the Commission for Children and Young People, the Ministerial Youth Advisory Group, community service organisations, legal stakeholders, Aboriginal community controlled organisations, the Victorian Children's Council, the Victorian Council of Social Service and Kinship Carers Victoria, providing for those certainties in going forward. The department presented significant general information on corporate parenting and its responsibilities and its application to Victoria at the children and family sector forum in June 2025, which others have mentioned as well. This invited representatives from 85 sector organisations across the community: legal service organisations, Aboriginal-controlled organisations and peak bodies, as well as lived experience representatives, including representatives of peak bodies. They include the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, the Foster Care Association of Victoria, Kinship Carers Victoria, Permanent Care and Adoptive Families and the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance.

The key point with this work in relation to lived experience goes to the Ministerial Youth Advisory Group being engaged during the development of the bill, and members have talked about the potential of these reforms to make significant and lasting differences to children and young people. Members spoke of 'lifting up their lives', 'improving their launch pad', 'the next chapter' and making sure that they work together to address a number of those barriers that have been identified, and working and moving forward as well.

Going to further opportunities for consultation if the bill passes, and this is yet again another important point, further consultation on priorities and proposed initiatives will occur through the initial implementation of the bill. The new section, which will be 15(2) of the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005, will require a children's services coordination board, which will consult with people with lived experience, and the board may also wish to seek further work on that. There has of course been that important period of consultation that I mentioned earlier, which goes to the measures and the mechanisms that are contained in this bill that are overall important when it comes to safety improvements for standards going forward. The work that is being done is ongoing and continues. Making sure that the agencies are supported is something that the government stands committed to doing. We are making sure that the implementation and the work that is done via the consultation and the changes that are contained within the legislation before the house this afternoon go to making for an improved act. The amendments to the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 and the creation of that legislative framework, improving cross-collaboration and shared responsibilities across the government, are something that we remain committed to.

I want to take the opportunity, as a number of other members have done, to thank all of those that work in this very important sector; they do an incredible amount of work in supporting families and making

sure that our agencies are supported in their work as well. What is really critical is continuing to invest in making sure, whether that be through the budget or whether that be through other programs and mechanisms, that our system is as robust and as strong as it can be, and that is something that we remain committed to doing. There are a series of provisions that are detailed – and they have been outlined at length by a number of other speakers – within this piece of legislation. But I do want to go back to that central work, that very important work, Acting Speaker, which I am sure you know within your local community and so many members know within their communities is central to providing for the best possible structure and system, knowing and understanding that these structures and systems are important in each and every way. What we remain committed to doing are those improvements and ensuring that that work continues to be done and that those matters are addressed as we move on and move forward.

The most important thing of course that needs to occur is the continual improvement process, and to be able to make these provisions in the legislation is very important. That becomes important work across governments, across ministers and department heads and involves the chief commissioner. Making those important provisions is something that we remain, as I mentioned earlier, committed to following through on, making sure that the work of the department and the work of all of our agencies is supported as we move on and move forward through this process.

The new section of the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005 does require those amendments, those changes, to be embedded, and I think that that is a very important thing. We remain committed to ensuring that that work is sustained and continued. We remain committed to making sure that this work continues, because we know how important it is for local communities and individuals. It is something that the government, as I mentioned earlier, is committed to doing. More broadly, when it comes to supporting our young people, through the provisions that the Deputy Premier has within his portfolio of education, and also within health, we are providing for additional services and additional funding, ensuring that a range of programs and initiatives that take place go to those important provisions for young people. I am sure you know within your community, Acting Speaker, just how important those investments are. To be able to give a child the best start and give them the best life is something that is very, very important. Those provisions and that support, whether they be in the budget or through a whole range of other programs or initiatives, go to making for a better support system and a more safeguarded and better approach. We remain committed to those systems and that investment. This bill is yet another example of that.

I will just finish off where I started, and that is that making these provisions and providing for that support is something that we remain committed to. For all of those that have worked on the bill, I commend the bill to the house.

Jade BENHAM (Mildura) (12:45): I am very pleased to be able to rise to speak on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. There is no member of this house that would oppose stable and strong families. No member would oppose better outcomes for vulnerable children, as we have heard from previous speakers, and no member would dispute that when the state takes responsibility for a child, that responsibility extends beyond a single department. In principle this bill recognises that and recognises something important: that child protection does not and should not operate in isolation. A child's wellbeing is shaped by all of the factors we have heard about today: housing, health, education, justice and employment. So the intent of this legislation is sound, but as we heard from the member for Warrandyte earlier, and I cannot remember her exact words, good intentions are not the same as good legislation, and aspiration should never be mistaken for accountability.

This bill establishes the supporting stable and strong families scheme. It requires ministers and departments to prepare plans every two years, and it requires progress reports to be tabled in Parliament. It identifies outcome areas, as I mentioned – health, education, housing, justice, employment – and expands the advisory role of the Children's Services Coordination Board. On paper

that sounds comprehensive, but there is a central question: what happens if nothing changes? And that would be the worst outcome.

This bill expressly creates no enforceable rights, and it cannot be relied on in civil proceedings. It does not compel ministers or departments to act either, and it provides a broad escape clause where responsibilities conflict with existing portfolio priorities. In other words, if this scheme competes with business as usual – and we have heard from previous members, starting with the member for Warrandyte, who has done an incredible amount of work on this bill – and if business as usual prevails, then that is a terrible outcome and that is a significant legislative weakness.

There has been a lot of talk around Scotland's corporate parenting model, but again, aspirations are not the same as accountability and good legislation. What we have here is a lighter, less enforceable version. In Scotland the collaboration between agencies is mandatory. We often hear – and it is not just the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, although that is probably the primary one I hear most about – where departments tend to work in silos and there is no collaboration, or in fact sometimes there is inability within the frameworks to work collaboratively. There is that siloed work, which is an incredible barrier, especially when you have the tyranny of distance from the departments themselves. Here joint planning is still optional. It should be mandatory. The Scottish model is a good one. In Scotland public bodies have statutory duties. Here we have got planning and reporting requirements – just requirements; guidelines, if you will. That might create better documents, but is it going to create better outcomes? You would certainly hope so, because the stakeholders here have been clear in their caution. They support the intent, but they do want coordination. There needs to be that mandatory collaboration across agencies. They are concerned that this risks becoming another level of bureaucracy – and incredibly bureaucratic, more so than it is already – and risks plans becoming an end in themselves, which we see already with the amount of red tape that you have to work through. That is something Victoria does not need – we do not need more red tape. We do not need more paperwork. We need earlier intervention, stronger supports and real collaboration.

In my electorate of Mildura – and this is what I am talking about with the tyranny of distance – we often see the consequences when systems do not align, when agencies do not collaborate and communicate, or will not because the frameworks do not allow them to. We see children sometimes placed hours away from their home in their local area because housing options are severely limited. We see kinship carers stepping up – grandparents in their 60s, 70s, even 80s at times – and navigating a complex system with minimal support. Often they are pointed online, and a lot of those grandparents do not have the resources to jump online and do what the bureaucracy wants them to do. In a lot of cases also they will not jump online, but more often than not they do not have the resources to or the knowledge. We also see families trying to reunify while stuck in unstable housing because of the lack of social housing, affordable housing and very, very low – in fact historically low – rental stock.

We see young people leaving care at 18 – I will get to that shortly – or even supported to 21 or 25 but still struggling to secure employment or safe accommodation. On that note, we are very, very spoilt – and I have spoken about MASP in this place before – in the Mallee to have the Mallee Accommodation and Support Program operating with the head office in Mildura, and they have extended their scope down into Swan Hill and down through the Wimmera as well. They were started by volunteers many, many years ago. They have just built another four units for assisted living. MASP do an incredible amount of work in the youth space and in the disability housing space – that transitional housing. They are there to fill the gaps that are left by silos. That is what is needed here, and that is what this bill does not provide. But the Mallee Accommodation Support Program – MASP, as they are affectionately known – do a remarkable job in all of that and in all of those areas. In fact what they do, because they are able to be community led, is if they get a grant for accommodation – and we saw this with Doug's Place, which was named after the gentleman that set up MASP – and they receive a grant to build, they actually do it before time and well under budget to the point where they can build additional housing now because they are so proficient and manage their projects so very well. They can actually

do things under budget to the point where they can build additional housing – that is remarkable. So we need less red tape. That is what allows that to happen.

If this bill results in housing departments genuinely prioritising family preservation and working with agencies like MASP – and I have spoken about MASP before – we do not need to reinvent the wheel. There are programs out there all the time, and MASP is just one. I just know it is the beacon of light and hope in my electorate, but organisations like that exist all over the state, and they work really well – in fact remarkably well – and are where people turn, oftentimes, rather than turning to the departments, because of course the departments in Mildura are often under-resourced to the point where the office is sometimes not open and the phones do not get answered, which leads to horrific outcomes that we see for vulnerable children in the Mildura electorate.

I did tell the member for Lara that I was not going to take my full 10 minutes. Obviously once again that has not happened and I have only got through the first page of my notes. But again this is one of those bills. No-one in this place would oppose supporting stronger families and oppose supporting vulnerable children. It is our fundamental job in this place to protect those most vulnerable.

Ella GEORGE (Lara) (13:00): I too rise today to speak on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. I echo what the member for Mildura has just finished her contribution with: no-one in this place is opposing strengthening protections for vulnerable children, vulnerable Victorians. We have heard in contributions today an incredible amount of passion and care for children in Victoria, and I think this is something where, in this place, we can all put our political views and differences aside and agree to come together on an important issue in terms of supporting Victoria's most vulnerable children, who do need our support. This is an incredibly important bill that is before the house today, because this bill has been introduced to help families reunite, to keep families together and to make sure that children can grow up in safe, secure and stable homes. Today we are talking about the stability of children in care and the supports and services that some families require for reunification.

I thank the Minister for Children, her office and the department for the work that they have done on this legislation but also on other legislation that they have put through this place in recent months. The member for Preston earlier mentioned that there are nine pieces of legislation that this minister has led that all go to supporting children and to strengthening our child protection system here in Victoria. That is a huge workload for a minister, and I commend the minister for leading this incredibly important work here in Victoria. I also thank all the stakeholders who took part in the consultation for this legislation, including sector organisations across community services, Aboriginal community controlled organisations and peak bodies, as well as lived-experience representatives. I know that this includes the ministerial youth advisory group, who engaged during the development of this bill and provided some very important views and perspectives to ensure that these reforms will make a significant and lasting difference to children and young people.

As others have noted in their contributions to this bill, there is nothing more important than protecting Victoria's most vulnerable children in our roles as members of Parliament, and that is exactly what this government strives to do with this bill. The reforms in this bill are modelled on Scotland's successful corporate parenting approach. This approach changes the traditional model, whereby supporting children and families at risk is the sole responsibility of child protection, to a new approach where every portfolio has a role to play. Whether it is education, health, housing or community safety, every minister and department and the Chief Commissioner of Police will be jointly responsible for improving outcomes for at-risk children, young people and families. This whole-of-government approach will aim to deliver a more coordinated approach and complement our government's Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025, which we introduced in October last year, to create more opportunities for families to safely reconnect. Collectively these reforms are aimed at ensuring all Victorian children grow up in safe and stable homes and providing families with greater opportunities and support for safe reunification.

I am limited by time today, and I know everyone is eager to get to the lunchbreak, so I will keep my contribution brief. I would like to touch on the incredible support services that we have across the Geelong region and in the Lara electorate, where we are seeing the state government's investment in local service providers. We have Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative, who offer a range of culturally appropriate supports for families experiencing family violence or needing to engage with the child protection system. Wathaurong also operate a youth hub in Norlane, which has become an important place for young people to gather and be supported by their community. Meli are another example of community service providers offering extensive family support, including parenting programs, foster care, family violence services, housing support and financial counselling. I thank these organisations for the incredible work that they do and thank all of their staff for their passion and commitment to supporting Victoria's vulnerable children.

We have heard from many people and will hear from many more about the importance of this bill that is before the house today. It is clear there is much passion for this bill and care for Victoria's children from people on both sides of this house. This bill aims to ensure that children and young people experience greater stability and safety, while empowering families to overcome challenges and thrive. I commend the bill to the house.

Sitting suspended 1:00 pm until 2:03 pm.

Business interrupted under standing orders.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Construction industry

Jess WILSON (Kew – Leader of the Opposition) (14:03): My question is to the Premier. What action has the Premier taken since the release of the Watson report to ensure that no sexual exploitation is taking place on Victorian government worksites?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:03): As I have said on previous occasions, I have zero tolerance for these allegations of this behaviour on any worksite, and if anyone has any allegation to be made, it should be immediately referred to Victoria Police or the relevant agency for immediate investigation.

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, on relevance, the Premier is not dealing with the very, very specific question. It was a very specific question, and the Premier is being evasive in her response.

The SPEAKER: The Premier has concluded her answer.

Jess WILSON (Kew – Leader of the Opposition) (14:04): Will the Premier guarantee that sexual exploitation is no longer occurring on Victorian government worksites?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:04): Exploitation of any worker on any worksite is not only not to be tolerated; it is illegal behaviour. It is illegal behaviour that none of us should be tolerating, and if anyone has any allegation to make, they should be referring it immediately to Victoria Police. That is the action that should and must be taken.

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, on relevance, these allegations were made to the Premier, and we are asking –

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! The Premier.

Jacinta ALLAN: Further to that, to ensure that workers are protected to be able to make allegations or to be able to lodge complaints should they be experiencing or witnessing this sort of behaviour on worksites, I have established a construction complaints mechanism that gives workers the protection

to be able to make these complaints and to ensure that they are investigated, which would be my expectation – that everyone, anyone, who has allegations to make should be immediately referring them to Victoria Police.

Ministers statements: employment

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:06): What do Victoria’s hardworking nurses, midwives, Victoria Police members, TAFE teachers, paramedics and allied health workers have in common? They have all been supported with better pay and conditions under our Labor government. This is not by chance; it is because our Labor government believes that workers should have the pay and conditions, a decent wage, secure employment and, importantly, safe conditions in their workplace. We know and understand that when workers are treated with respect families feel secure, bills are easier to manage and life feels more stable. That is why we are also enshrining the right to work from home in law, because families too deserve time in their day and the flexibility to balance work, school and drop-offs and all the things that come with family life.

To use the example of the nurses, today nurses and midwives are some of the highest paid in the country because we backed them. My brother is a nurse, and a cheerio to him. It is his 50th birthday today. He works hard, like his colleagues, and they save lives and deliver world-class health care in our public hospital system. Victorian paramedics too are some of the highest paid in the nation, thanks to the support of our government. As I said, these are Victorians that save lives, and they deserve every cent of the wage that they take home. We do this because we back workers and we support families. That is the difference between us and others. There are others whose instinct is not to value workers, it is to cut – it is to cut their jobs, to cut their pay, to cut their conditions – and some, who have an \$11 billion black hole, we know would sack nurses, sack teachers and close hospitals to fill that black hole.

Construction industry

Emma KEALY (Lowan) (14:08): My question is to the Premier. Geoffrey Watson stated in his report that on the Big Build women were required to ‘offer sexual services’ to a labour hire operator in order to obtain employment. Under the Victorian law this may be sexual assault or even rape. What action has the Premier taken since the release of the Watson report to ensure that no sexual assault is taking place on Big Build sites?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:09): Consistent with my answer to the previous question, these reports are sickening, and I reiterate that every worker deserves the right to be safe in their workplace, which is why I have acted to provide workers on construction sites with a confidential pathway to be able to raise issues, knowing that there is an obligation through that pathway on the people they are reporting that to for that to be investigated. The member for Lowan refers to information that was put in the public domain last week by a particular individual. If this individual holds this information, it should be referred. It should have already been referred to Victoria Police. This is information –

Emma Kealy: On a point of order, Speaker, on relevance, the question went to what the Premier has done to keep women safe as opposed to other individuals of the community.

The SPEAKER: Member for Lowan, I ask you not to repeat the question in your point of order.

Mary-Anne Thomas: On the point of order, Speaker, the Premier was being entirely relevant to the question. I ask that you rule the point of order out of order.

The SPEAKER: I do not uphold the point of order. The Premier was being relevant.

Jacinta ALLAN: This was information given through a process in Queensland. This information that was put forward contains some of the worst, most sickening allegations of behaviour on worksites.

That should have been already referred to the relevant investigative bodies. Victoria Police right now has the powers to investigate those allegations because they are a crime.

Emma Kealy: On a further point of order, Speaker, on relevance, the Premier was the minister at the time who had oversight of this. What has she done?

The SPEAKER: I ask you to raise points of order according to the standing orders. It is not an opportunity to make a statement to the house.

Jacinta ALLAN: I reiterate the statement by the administrator, who was appointed under federal law to address this rotten culture. I reiterate his statement last week when allegations like this were being made in the public domain: anyone who holds this information should be immediately referring it to the relevant law enforcement agency, and in the case of allegations on Victorian worksites that agency is Victoria Police because these allegations contain references to things that are a crime in this state. Victoria Police, as evidenced by the work they are doing through Taskforce Hawk, is charging people, arresting people and ensuring that these allegations are being followed through. Allegations should not be withheld from law enforcement agencies if individuals hold this information.

Emma KEALY (Lowan) (14:12): Will the Premier guarantee that there is no sexual assault taking place on Big Build sites?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:12): As I have already indicated to the house, we have ensured that there is a pathway for people who want to make these complaints and allegations and who have concerns about what they are seeing on worksites – a confidential pathway to be able to make these allegations and to lodge these complaints – and there is a requirement that they are investigated. It is my commitment to workers on Victorian construction sites that you will have a confidential pathway, in recognising that workers do need to be protected, because that is what we do on this side of the house. We support workers rights. We support them to be paid properly. We support them to be safe at work. We most certainly do not want to go after them and claw back their wages and conditions, like those opposite want to do.

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker: debating the question.

The SPEAKER: The Premier has concluded her answer.

Ministers statements: health system

Mary-Anne THOMAS (Macedon – Leader of the House, Minister for Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Minister for Women) (14:13): On the day that we have opened the largest health infrastructure project that Victoria has ever seen, I rise to update the house on the Allan Labor government's delivery of thousands of good, secure jobs in our healthcare sector. As a Labor government we are focused on creating jobs in health care – jobs that Victorians can rely on. We have grown our healthcare workforce by more than 50 per cent, and what that means is we have got more than 17,000 additional nurses in our healthcare system, we have got more than 7500 additional doctors in our system and thousands more cooks, cleaners, patient services assistants and theatre techs, as well as allied health professionals.

You only get to create good, secure jobs like this if you build the hospitals for them to work in. Footscray Hospital opened at 8 am today, and by 6 pm tonight 180 patients will have been transferred from the old hospital to the new, with 4500 staff working around the clock to ensure that safe transfer. We were so proud to be there this morning – the Premier, the Minister for Health Infrastructure and the member for Footscray – to meet those hardworking healthcare workers, and now we have a world-class facility that matches the world-class care that they deliver every single day. Of course this is just one of 11 new hospitals that our government has delivered right across the state – in Frankston, in Maryborough, in Mernda, in Cranbourne and in Phillip Island. You cannot build these hospitals and fill them with healthcare workers if you have got an \$11.1 billion budget black hole. The choice for Victorians could not be clearer: a government that backs workers and employs an additional

17,000 nurses or a rabble on that side that want to sack 17,000 nurses to fill their budget black hole. Victorians know that when it comes to health care Labor will always be on their side.

Construction industry

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (14:15): My question is to the Premier. What action has the Premier taken since the release of the Watson report to ensure there are no state-sponsored strippers on Big Build sites?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:16): I can say this to the member for Eildon: if she or anyone else has evidence of these allegations, I can guarantee that Victoria Police will investigate them, and we can say that because Victoria Police have already been doing precisely that. I repeat: anyone who holds this information, if they were truly committed to supporting the women workers that they are referring to, would not be holding onto this information; they would be delivering that information to Victoria Police without hesitation.

Members interjecting.

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

Member for Lowan withdrew from chamber.

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (14:17): Will the Premier guarantee that there are no longer state-sponsored strippers on Big Build sites?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:17): The way the member has characterised that is just false, and I just reiterate my answer to the previous question. If anyone has information, whether it is information about incidents that occurred recently or in recent years, it should not be held onto for publication in different materials. It should have been immediately referred to Victoria Police. To withhold information from Victoria Police is not in the interests of the workers that the member professes to be caring about.

Ministers statements: energy policy

Lily D'AMBROSIO (Mill Park – Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (14:18): I am pleased to inform the house about how the SEC is creating thousands of jobs, backing Victorian workers and delivering energy bill relief. We know that our renewable energy vision is creating 67,000 jobs right here in Victoria by 2040. That is an increase of over 40 per cent on today. The SEC, which we will never cut, created 1200 jobs, including 70 apprentices, on the first project alone. The Victorian energy upgrades, which we will never cut, creates 2700 jobs for installers. We are backing workers and creating jobs for Victorians, building our state's renewable energy future and delivering real cost-of-living relief to Victorians.

We have come a long way since between 2010 and 2014, when renewable energy jobs fell by 25 per cent, \$4 billion of investment in renewables left Victoria for other states and retail power prices rose by a staggering 34.1 per cent. Those who have their energy policies co-written by One Nation will take us back to those dark days of job cuts and spiralling energy bills.

According to the Clean Energy Council, the new SEC is helping to build our state's renewable energy future. We all know that to drive down energy bills you build more renewables, you build more transmission and you hold the privatised energy companies to account with tough consumer protections. Just today, the Clean Energy Council released their quarterly investment report. The report tells us that Victoria leads every other state in financial investment – in investment dollars – in renewable projects. With every investment dollar that is delivered, that is more jobs, that is more wages and that is lower energy bills for Victorians. No wonder Victoria continues to lead in having consistently the lowest wholesale prices in the country.

Construction industry

Bridget VALLENCE (Evelyn) (14:20): My question is to the Premier. What action has the Premier taken since the release of the Watson report to ascertain how many women have been the subject of inappropriate behaviour or sexual assault on a Big Build site?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:20): I refer the member for Evelyn to my previous answers on this subject matter. In having zero tolerance for this behaviour, I also have zero tolerance –

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, on relevance, the question asked what action the Premier has taken since. The Premier has been evasive for the whole day in not responding to that question.

The SPEAKER: The Manager of Opposition Business will resume his seat. That is not the correct way to raise a point of order.

Ben Carroll: Speaker, there is no point of order. It is very hard for the Premier to answer when she has only been given 12 seconds.

The SPEAKER: The Premier was directly answering the question in that she referred to her previous answers.

Jacinta ALLAN: Again, and for the benefit of the member for Brighton, in referring to my previous answers today in the house on this matter, we have zero tolerance for this behaviour, which is why, when these allegations were made, when –

Bridget Vallence: On a point of order, Speaker, on relevance, women should not be suffering sexual assault at all.

The SPEAKER: Order! We do not need a commentary with your point of order.

Bridget Vallence: On relevance, I would ask you to have her come back to the question.

The SPEAKER: The Premier was being relevant.

Jacinta ALLAN: Again I go back to the actions at the time of the reporting of this alleged illegal behaviour. In the middle of 2024 I took immediate action to refer these matters to Victoria Police, to refer these matters to IBAC and to refer these matters to the Fair Work Commission as the agency that has the responsibility to both certify and prove that enterprise bargaining agreements are properly made.

Further to that, in the areas that we are responsible for here in the Victorian government, we took further action in supporting the work of the administrator and his clean-out, and he is having success. We are seeing Victoria Police – 70 charges have been laid against 17 individuals. And I say this to any member – the member for Lowan, the member for Kew, the member for Eildon, the member for Evelyn or any member who wants to use this place to make allegations based on information they hold: you want evidence of action? You should be taking it to Victoria Police. And to support that work, we have provided workers with a protected pathway. Private construction companies who are responsible for these worksites, who are responsible for the delivery of safe and secure worksites for every worker, are now required, because of the action I have taken, to ensure that any concerns and allegations on these worksites are again referred to Victoria Police. These are crimes. These are workers. They should have the respect of having any allegation referred, not weaponised as parliamentary stunts.

Bridget VALLENCE (Evelyn) (14:24): Will the Premier guarantee that no woman is currently experiencing inappropriate behaviour or sexual assault on Big Build sites, today?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:24): We take allegations of violence against women seriously, whether it is in the home, whether it is on the streets or whether it is in the workplace.

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, the Premier is required to be truthful, and two of her ministers have attacked the reports.

The SPEAKER: Member for Brighton, that is not a point of order.

Jacinta ALLAN: As evidence of that, whether it was Australia's first Royal Commission into Family Violence – we accepted every single one of those recommendations – whether it is the work –

Bridget Vallence: On a point of order, Speaker, the Premier is debating the question. It is very narrow. Can she guarantee that none of this inappropriate behaviour is happening today?

The SPEAKER: Order! Member for Evelyn, I ask you not to repeat the question in your point of order. I do not uphold the point of order.

Jacinta ALLAN: Whether it is the work we have done more recently to restrict the use of non-disclosure agreements that silence women in workplaces or whether it is the work that we are doing to support police to be able to pursue intervention orders against perpetrators of family violence or the work we are doing to implement the recommendations of the Ministerial Taskforce on Workplace Sexual Harassment, violence against women requires systematic change and systematic effort, and we are doing so in all areas.

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: The member for Brighton is warned.

Ministers statements: Victoria Police

Anthony CARBINES (Ivanhoe – Minister for Police, Minister for Community Safety, Minister for Victims, Minister for Racing) (14:26): The Allan Labor government of course invests in Victorians and frontline services: 24/7 emergency response from Victoria Police and PSO members, and we thank them for their service every day. Our Made for More campaign has seen a record number, over five years now, of applications from people seeking to join Victoria Police. Not only that, probably a 20 per cent pay rise for frontline police secured last year by our government is about valuing frontline workers and the services they provide right across our state.

Can I say further that we are backing the Chief Commissioner of Police in his work to get more former police back to the blue family, with those former members to serve as police reservists who want to come back and provide back-of-house services so we can put more police on the front line. We welcome the fact that so many have decided to put their hand up and have expressed interest in this program. I say also there may be other former police members in this place for whom perhaps other job opportunities have not quite worked out, and a police reservist opportunity may be just the career for them.

Can I also say that our violence reduction unit is a \$20 million program which is about turning lives around, finding jobs for young people and providing them with a second chance. I am very disappointed, though, that some have said, 'The truth is that the violence reduction unit is not about reducing crime.' I would say that that program is about turning lives around, and I would have thought that if you were Mrs Hermans in the other place you would be about supporting second chances, as they do in the Liberal Party. They have gone through enough leaders to support second chances. You can back the Allan Labor government to back workers.

The SPEAKER: I remind the minister to direct his statements through the Chair.

James Newbury: On a point of order, I do not think I need to raise with you, Speaker, but I will, that the minister is misusing his ministers statement by attacking the opposition.

The SPEAKER: The minister has concluded his ministers statement.

Construction industry

Annabelle CLEELAND (Euroa) (14:29): My question is to the Premier. What action has the Premier taken since the release of the Watson report to ensure that any woman sexually assaulted on Big Build sites will be eligible for compensation?

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:29): Again, anyone who has allegations of abuse, assault or harassment, all of which are crimes, should be referring those matters without hesitation to Victoria Police as the agency with the tools and the powers to investigate these very serious matters.

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, maybe the Premier misheard the question. This question was about compensation and whether those victims of crime are eligible for compensation.

The SPEAKER: The Premier has only been on her feet for a short time. The Premier to come back to the question.

Jacinta ALLAN: Further to that, notwithstanding the impatience of the member for Brighton, in addressing the question, once those allegations have been made and have been investigated by Victoria Police, if charges are laid and charges are proven through the court processes, then people are eligible for compensation through the victims-of-crime processes that are set independently. This is a serious, serious matter. Not only is ensuring that victims of crime have access to compensation something that we take seriously, but we need to support victims of crime, not choose parliamentary forums to retraumatise and impact on victims of crime.

Annabelle CLEELAND (Euroa) (14:31): Will the Premier guarantee that any woman sexually assaulted on Big Build sites will be eligible for compensation?

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: Order! I ask members to cease the running commentary after a member has asked a question. The question is to the Premier, not to members.

Mary-Anne Thomas: On a point of order, Speaker, I ask that you rule the question out of order. It was essentially the same question that was already asked, and the Premier has comprehensively answered it.

James Newbury: On the point of order, Speaker, the first question asked whether victims will be eligible and the second asked the Premier to guarantee it.

The SPEAKER: I allow the question.

Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:32): I refer the member for Euroa to my answer to her substantive question and the answers that I have also given to the members for Kew, Evelyn, Eildon and Lowan. I again reiterate that we have zero tolerance for this sort of behaviour that is being alleged, which is why we have established a pathway for workers to be supported to make these allegations to Victoria Police as the investigative body to investigate these matters and support people who are subject to this alleged behaviour.

Ministers statements: economic policy

Danny PEARSON (Essendon – Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs, Minister for Finance, Minister for Government Services) (14:33): It is great to be back, and I rise to update the house on the Allan Labor government’s plan to grow the economy and create more jobs for Victorians. We know that businesses are continuing to choose to invest in Victoria and to do business here. Through our *Economic Growth Statement* we have set up the investment front door and have an investment coordinator-general to make it easier and faster to do business here, and we have seen fantastic results. I am delighted to inform the house that since the release of the *Economic Growth Statement* we have facilitated, assessed or approved – wait for it, it is a big number, it is a glorious number – more than

\$24 billion in private sector investment, which is supporting thousands of jobs. That means more highly skilled jobs for Victorians and a more secure economic future for their families.

Today I was delighted to announce ITC Infotech's new state-of-the-art digital and AI engineering hub in Melbourne. This new facility is going to create 150 new high-skill technology jobs and cement Victoria's status as Australia's leading digital technology and innovation hub. Since we were elected we have created more than 892,000 jobs and are providing more opportunities for workers to upskill, like through our successful digital jobs program, upskilling construction and advanced manufacturing workers and apprentices with in-demand skills. While we are creating more jobs, those opposite are lining up to cut them. Their \$11.1 billion budget black hole means one thing: cuts to jobs.

James Newbury: On a point of order, Speaker, again a minister is misusing his ministers statement to attack the opposition. It is a pattern of behaviour.

Mary-Anne Thomas: Speaker, in relation to the point of order, I draw your attention to the ruling by Speaker Brooks that a minister may countenance a range of policy positions, and that is exactly what the minister on his feet was doing.

The SPEAKER: There are a couple of ways of interpreting the rulings around this. One is as a direct attack on the opposition currently sitting on the benches; the other is as a compare and contrast of previous governments and previous administrations. I ask the minister to come back to his ministers statement without attacking the current opposition.

Danny PEARSON: What I can say is that on this side of the house we are not stoking division, we are not engaging in hatred in the community and we are not playing footsies with racists. We are relentlessly focused on Victorians. We are growing the economy. We are creating good, secure and well-paid jobs. The reality is that if you have \$11.1 billion worth of cuts it has got to come from somewhere, and Victorian workers will pay the price.

Constituency questions

Caulfield electorate

David SOUTHWICK (Caulfield) (14:37): (1508) My question is to the Minister for Public and Active Transport. When you spend \$13 billion on a major project like the Metro Tunnel, you expect it to be better than what we currently have. Unfortunately, the big switch, as the government calls it, is a big switch for many of my constituents that need to change trains to get through the city loop, causing more time to be taken than what they took before and a worse customer experience. Since the government's changes to the Cranbourne and Pakenham lines, commuters are bearing the brunt of poor and inadequate planning and transition. Caulfield station is packed to the rafters. The platforms are at a point where they are just jam-packed with people trying to get through at peak times; the Myki readers are certainly working overtime. Can the minister for transport inform my constituents what service changes, if any, have been made since the network's big switch to address the interchange bottlenecks at Caulfield station?

Sunbury electorate

Josh BULL (Sunbury) (14:38): (1509) My question is to the Minister for Energy and Resources. Minister, how many constituents in my electorate have accessed the power saving bonus since the start of the fifth round? In my electorate both the team and I have been lucky enough to chat with many locals who have dropped in to talk about the power saving bonus, the application and what it will mean for them. The power saving bonus has provided real cash relief to concession card holding households, making a difference where they need it the most. As the minister knows, this is a significant and important initiative that assists with the cost of living. I take the opportunity to remind members of my community who may come into the office for assistance that applications close on 31 March and remind residents to visit the Victorian Energy Compare website to find the best price offers in the energy market. I thank the minister and her team for their hard work.

Murray Plains electorate

Peter WALSH (Murray Plains) (14:39): (1510) My question is to the minister for Public and Active Transport. V/Line staff on the Swan Hill train in my electorate have been telling passengers this service will be dropped within the next 12 months and replaced by buses to Bendigo. Minister, what is the latest information on the plans to replace the Swan Hill train service with buses? There is a huge difference in passenger comfort between the comfort of a long-haul train seat and a buffet car, particularly for those travelling for medical appointments or with young children, and being crammed onto a bus to bounce along country roads riddled with potholes this government will not fix. Is the Labor government telling the people of Swan Hill that it cannot afford to maintain and operate our regional rail network? Does this mean that the estimated cost of \$15 billion in CFMEU corruption is going to cost Swan Hill its train service? Swan Hill has fought hard over the years when its train service has been threatened, and it will fight again. The Allan government thinks otherwise. Watch this space. We will not accept second-best.

Laverton electorate

Sarah CONNOLLY (Laverton) (14:40): (1511) My question is for the Minister for Health. Recently our government announced a raft of support to help Victorians living with ADHD. As the minister knows, so many folks who have ADHD go undiagnosed because of the cost of getting an assessment. A specialist can be up to \$2000, and assuming you have the money to spend, you are likely waiting anywhere from six to 12 months. That is why we have announced that trained GPs will soon be able to diagnose, treat and prescribe medication for ADHD for anyone over six years of age. And for those who already have an ADHD diagnosis, there is even better news. If you need a top-up prescription or you have run out, you will soon be able to get that emergency refill by contacting the virtual emergency department, because we know that stopping that medication all of a sudden can carry real risks. These changes are not just saving Victorians time and money, they are saving lives. So my question is this: what will these changes for ADHD medication mean in the electorate of Laverton?

Evelyn electorate

Bridget VALLENCE (Evelyn) (14:41): (1512) There are just not enough buses in my community for school students across Lilydale and Mooroolbark, and we need more. Students in my community have been left stranded, unable to get to school or home because this Labor government's transport department has not put on enough buses to meet demand. Lilydale Heights College and Mount Lilydale Mercy College students are left stranded, refused entry on the bus at the Mooroolbark and Hull roads bus stop because of overcrowding, and the bus cannot stop at any other bus stops along the way because it is full. Students are also left competing to get on the overcrowded bus after school, forced to disembark and unable to get home. My question is to the Minister for Public and Active Transport. When will additional urgently required bus services be provided for Lilydale school students, including on route 2574? Ventura tried – they added additional services, only to be told by Labor's transport department to withdraw them. It is crazy, and it makes no sense. Free travel on public transport only works if the government also ensures there are sufficient services.

Cranbourne electorate

Pauline RICHARDS (Cranbourne) (14:42): (1513) My constituency question is to the Minister for Mental Health Ms Stitt in the other place. I would like to ask: how does the children's health and wellbeing local benefit the Cranbourne and greater south-east community? This important service offers free support for children aged zero to 11 – and their families and carers – experiencing developmental, behavioural and emotional challenges. It has been operating since 2023, and it is a key service provided by the Victorian Labor government. This service is free of charge, with no referrals needed, and it was a key recommendation of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. I am so proud of the services operating in our community. The way that we support families

and children is at the heart of everything we do. The future is bright, and I look forward to the minister's response.

Warrandyte electorate

Nicole WERNER (Warrandyte) (14:43): (1514) My question is to the Minister for Education. Donvale Preschool in my electorate has been closed for nearly a month this term, and families still have no confirmed reopening date. These children already lost two weeks at the end of last year due to construction works, and my office has been contacted by families who say they have been experiencing considerable strain, having to make last-minute care arrangements for their children without clear guidance as to when normal operations will resume. Families have also expressed how the prolonged disruption is having a significant impact on their children's learning, development and wellbeing during what is a critical early education period. The temporary site at Donvale Primary School hall is fully set up and ready to welcome students, but parents tell me they are simply waiting on paperwork and licences from the Victorian Early Childhood Regulatory Authority and the Department of Education. Can the minister inform the house when final approvals will be granted and provide a confirmed reopening date so families in Donvale can finally have the certainty they deserve?

Narre Warren South electorate

Gary MAAS (Narre Warren South) (14:44): (1515) Like the member for Laverton, my constituency question is also for the Minister for Health, and it concerns the recent announcement by the Allan Labor government regarding improvements to ADHD care. Minister, how will these changes make getting an ADHD diagnosis smoother for working families in my electorate of Narre Warren South? The complexities of getting an ADHD diagnosis come at a real time and financial cost to busy families, who do not need the added stress during already difficult times. I know this issue touches many families across my electorate because they have actually come in to see me in my office and speak to me about it. Our government recognises the need to remove barriers and increase access to ADHD help to make it easier for families every day. I look forward to sharing the minister's response with my community.

Malvern electorate

Michael O'BRIEN (Malvern) (14:45): (1516) My constituency question is to the Minister for Public and Active Transport at the table, and it concerns Malvern train station. Malvern is already a busy station. With the opening of the Metro Tunnel, Malvern is now the last opportunity for commuters from the south-east to switch lines between the Cranbourne, Pakenham and Frankston lines, but if a patron needs to use the toilets at Malvern station, they will find them closed. The minister claims a turn-up-and-go service, but it does not apply if you need to turn up and go to the toilets at Malvern, because they are locked. Toilet access is a serious issue, especially for people with medical conditions, seniors and pregnant women. It is not right for a station as busy as Malvern to be lacking basic facilities. So, Minister, when will the Labor government enable the toilets at Malvern station to be reopened to the public?

Bellarine electorate

Alison MERCHANT (Bellarine) (14:45): (1517) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. Minister, how is this government improving pedestrian safety across the Bellarine, specifically in Indented Head? I have been contacted by a number of constituents who are concerned about the safety and the access and especially the pedestrian crossings along The Esplanade in Indented Head. This is a busy stretch of road used daily by families, older residents and visitors accessing the foreshore and is particularly busy during peak holiday season, when the traffic increases significantly. People are required to be crossing at informal points without any clear markings, creating, very understandably, some safety concerns. I look forward to hearing from the minister so I can share with my constituents how this government will be supporting the Bellarine community to access their local roads safely with confidence.

*Bills***Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025***Second reading***Debate resumed.**

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn) (14:46): I am pleased to rise this afternoon to speak on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. I join this debate acknowledging that we all want to see reforms in the child protection and family services space. When you think about the portfolio areas that state governments are primarily responsible for, noting that aged care is primarily the responsibility of the Commonwealth, although the states do play a material role in that area of policy, child protection is beyond any question the most serious area for our attention, and it is in a state of crisis.

Although we will not be opposing this bill, as our lead speaker and the member for Warrandyte described earlier today, we do have grave concerns about the absence of any evidence that the government gets the crisis that exists in Victoria. Back in 2020–21 there were about 9500 children and young people in the child protection system. As of this year, on the government's own numbers, we are approaching 11,000 children and young people in the sector. So things are getting harder, and it may well be said that things are getting worse. What I am looking for from the government in the passage of this bill is some sense that they actually have a plan, not just a plan for a plan, which this bill is about. We do not oppose that, but what we are really looking for is what is going to drive better outcomes. That is important because, as I said, the system is in crisis.

You could look at any number of coronial inquests. The chief coroner herself has spoken about the state of crisis and the loss of lives – young and beautiful lives that have been lost through neglect and incompetence in the system and failure to monitor and supervise children in care. As I said, we have got about 11,000 young people and children in the sector. Most of those are in kinship care – about 8500. We have got about 1700 in foster care, although that number is falling as people leave the foster care cohort. And we have got about 550 or so children and young people in residential care. The system is in crisis. As I have said, the coroner and her colleagues on the bench have spoken about this. The Commissioner for Children and Young People has repeatedly pointed out that we are seeing avoidable deaths in child protection and family services that must be addressed, and the current and former commissioners have all pointed this out. And yet this government comes to this house with this bill with no actual plan to deliver the outcomes.

Right now, if you look at the number of child protection reports, the government's own output performance measures for child protection and family services show that this year the government expects that there will be around about 155,000 child protection reports. Compare that with what the government actually saw under its watch in 2020–21. We had about 121,000 child protection reports some five years ago, and that has blown out, on my calculations, by more than 20 per cent. We have seen a 20 per cent increase in the number of child protection reports. If that is not speaking of a crisis, then what will it take to shake this government out of its complacency and get it to come to this house with measures that will guarantee better outcomes? When you look at the number of unallocated cases in the child protection and family services sector, it only adds to the evidence that the system is in crisis. We had about 13 per cent unallocated cases some four years ago. At the moment we are approaching between 17 and 18 per cent, on my calculations, of unallocated cases. That is children and young people who are not able to access the system and who are left in the most vulnerable state we could imagine, and that is simply not good enough. Where is the government's answer on that? Where is its prescription to deal with the crisis in unallocated cases?

When you also look at the number of people leaving the sector – the dedicated staff who give their lives to the welfare, supervision and care of children and young people – the number is horrendous. The standard rule of thumb, if you like, for attrition across the public sector is often quoted at around

about 4 or 5 per cent. Generally across the public sector you can expect year to year about 4 to 5 per cent of people will leave for one reason or another. It does get a little higher in frontline services, it has to be said, but 4 to 5 per cent is standard. Do you know what the attrition rate is for child protection workers in this system? It is 21 per cent, on the most recent figures. One-fifth – 20 per cent – of the workforce is leaving year on year. So when we look at the number of child protection reports, which are approaching 160,000 this year on the government's own output performance data, which it publishes itself, and when you look at the number of unallocated cases, the cries for help from coroners and commissioners for children and young people and then the crisis that confronts our workforce, you have to ask yourself: how can the government come to this house today and say that its plan will address this crisis? We have raised this matter in this house on many occasions, and yet we see the government failing or refusing to act on the matter.

I want to conclude my remarks on the bill by just putting this in context. According to the government's own budget papers, it is expecting to spend around \$2.2 billion in the child protection and family services portfolio this year. We have, as I said, 155,000-odd child protection cases requiring investigation this year – \$2.2 billion – and this week we have been talking about the report that came out of the Queensland inquiry into CFMEU corruption. You think about the amount of money that has bled out to criminals, on the basis of that report – \$15 billion – and you say, 'What could a fraction of that money have done to address the crisis in child protection and family services?' Imagine even one-fifth of that money which bled out to criminals being used to fund our child protection system. When you look at the complete fiasco – I would argue malfeasance – around the Commonwealth Games cancellation, \$600 million, maybe more, of money was just wasted. For the privilege of wasting all of that money we actually funded a large part of the Glasgow games. On the government's own numbers that is a quarter of the child protection and family services budget.

When you look at waste on major projects, the billions on incompetence – I am not talking necessarily here about the CFMEU's criminal conduct; that is a whole separate bag – but when you look at just the incompetence across the capital portfolio alone, leaving out output programs, imagine what you could do if you managed the budget better to make the lives of children and young people in Victoria a whole lot better. That is why we are so vehement in our criticisms and the scrutiny and accountability we seek to apply to the government, because these mistakes and this incompetence cost lives, whether it is the actual loss of life or the quality and standard of lives that are lived in this state. My heart goes out to the young kids who miss out in a system that is poorly run. My heart also goes out to the frontline staff, many who are trying to bear case loads that we could never fairly expect of any frontline worker. So yes, we will not oppose this bill, because it can only help, but let us not kid ourselves that the government's plan for a plan is actually the response needed to this crisis.

Steve McGHIE (Melton) (14:56): I rise to contribute on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. I will just quickly pick up on the member for Hawthorn's last statement that this bill can only help those people and the children of Victoria that are caught up in this particular situation. I am pleased that he has acknowledged that and that the opposition are not opposing this bill.

The Allan Labor government has done a mountain of work to support Victoria's frontline workers across a range of the most vital workforces, whether it be investments in frontline health workers or support for community and social sectors and those Victorians who work in our schools, our TAFEs and our prisons. We recognise the importance of funding these sectors and continuing to fund these areas to support worker retention, growth and improvements across the space as a whole.

Working on the front lines in any workforce can be the most challenging aspect of any one of these jobs. Back in my time as a paramedic, which is a long time ago, part of that job was often being first to a traumatic situation and having to navigate not only your own emotions but the emotions of people around you. To try and calm a scene down is quite trying on individuals and in particular individual paramedics that may not have a lot of experience in those circumstances. Frontline workers are the backbone of our community, showing up every day to keep people safe, healthy and supported often

in the most challenging circumstances. We commend the efforts of our frontline workers. They work under intense pressure in unpredictable and sometimes dangerous environments while continuing to put the needs of others before their own. Whether it be in health care, emergency services, community support or public safety, frontline workers witness hardship up close, and they carry out the emotional and physical demands of that work long after they finish their day's work and long after their shift has completed.

Child protection workers are among the most critical frontline workers we have here in Victoria, and the stresses and strains on those workers are enormous. I know the member for Hawthorn raised the issue of a 21 per cent turnover rate in that industry, and that is probably because of the pressures of that job and how demanding it is; you are always dealing with crisis situations. They step out in moments of crisis to keep children safe and support families under immense pressure, and it is vital that current and future governments recognise that urgent need to properly fund new practitioner roles and evidence-based programs.

Investing in child protection is not just about protecting vulnerable children; it strengthens families, it reduces long-term harm, it eases pressures on our health, justice and education systems and it builds safer, more resilient communities for everyone. Since 2014 we have funded 1180 new child protection practitioner roles, and as a result we have seen a dramatic increase in practitioners carrying cases. Just last year the Allan Labor government invested \$14 million to continue the current programs that support these practitioners and of course to recruit more child protection practitioners. The \$14 million investment also includes continued investment into the kinship carers engagement coordinators, Aboriginal cultural support and awareness advisers and the Child Protection Litigation Office.

I want to give a big shout-out to the kinship carers in my electorate. I meet with them on a regular basis, and I was fortunate enough to have \$50,000 last year allocated out of the state budget to support our local kinship carers in the Melton and Bacchus Marsh areas. It has been fantastic to support them in what they do, in the support that they give to the children that they support and look after. I also want to extend my thanks to the many wonderful people that work out of Kinship Carers Victoria that assist us out in Melton in particular. Importantly, in the last six state budgets we have invested more than \$4.4 billion into child protection and family services. We recognise the need to continue to do more, and there is always more to be done.

Australia and, in turn, Victoria are in a highly valuable position where we can learn and adapt from other countries to develop best practice models, particularly countries that share like-minded values and similar government models. The supporting stable and strong families bill is modelled on a model out of Scotland, and it is a highly successful corporate parenting approach. At its core this new scheme will ensure that supporting at-risk children and families is no longer the responsibility of child protection alone. Every single government portfolio will now share that responsibility, and things will not be just siloed. Whether it be in education, whether it be in health, whether it be in housing or whether it be in community safety, all will be responsible and all will be held to account. It is pleasing to see that there will be a collaboration between the different portfolios and, as I said, things not being siloed.

We are not going to adopt the Scottish approach without looking at the actual data to back up this scheme, so let us look at some of the numbers. Between 2020 and 2023 the number of children on the child protection register dropped much faster than in the five years prior to the introduction of the scheme in 2020. For every 1000 children in Scotland, 2.9 were on the register, and in 2023 that number dropped to 2.3. In Scotland the term 'looked after' is a legal term for the children who are in the care of their local authority, and from 2020 to 2023 the number of looked-after children dropped by an enormous figure of 15.6 per cent. This dramatic drop in the number of looked-after children is in line with the aim set out by the Scottish government, who have set out to reduce the number of children needing care, and of course that is the objective that we are seeking here. The data also tells us that these children, since leaving school, have been in a positive place, with many taking up university courses and apprenticeships, and even many young offenders who were a part of these schemes are

now in secure and safer accommodation, and that is what we want to try and achieve – making sure that they are safe, that they are supported and that they go on to education, university and apprenticeships. As I said, we want to make sure that they are totally supported.

The benefit of having the supporting stable and strong families bill become law speaks for itself – improving the lives of many children who are engaged with the child protection process, as well as providing the necessary supports for the frontline workers. Unless we provide the supports to the frontline workers, they cannot then extend the support to the children. But importantly, it is essential that this bill and the scheme receive the support of both the government and the opposition. Again, I will go back to the member for Hawthorn and other previous contributions by those opposite saying that they are not opposing this bill, which is pleasing to see. As mentioned, one of the objectives of this bill is that it will seek to enhance early intervention and minimise the number of children and families in engagement with child protection and the duration of their involvement.

The bill is not just one that aspires to the success being had in Scotland. It will create the robust and much-needed frameworks to hold government to account, and it highlights and makes it absolutely clear that supporting vulnerable children and young people is a whole-of-government responsibility, expanding the previous responsibilities beyond just that of child protection and the Minister for Children. Again, as was said earlier, all portfolios will be involved. The accountability measures go beyond that of the scheme that operates in Scotland. We are establishing a whole-of-government coordination of the implementation of the scheme that will see ministers required to table a plan for each of their portfolios every year, so it is constantly under review, and tabling the plans every two years to make sure that we are learning all the time and trying to improve this process.

Again, this is a very important bill. I want to commend the minister and her team for bringing this bill forward and the great and tireless work that they have done on this bill. It is a really important bill. Everyone here that has spoken on this bill wants to see our children safe and supported and we want to reduce the times in child protection. Again, I commend all the carers – the foster carers, the kinship carers – and I commend the bill.

Chris CREWTER (Mornington) (15:07): I rise to speak on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. Parliament should start with the children and young people at the centre of this system, kids who have already had far too much instability in their lives. If the state takes responsibility for a child, it is not good enough to say it is child protection's problem. Outcomes for vulnerable children are shaped by housing, health, education, justice, disability supports, mental health services and, holding it all together, the coordination between them. That is one of the reasons I got involved in politics in the first place. Having grown up in Horsham, I strongly believe that kids should have an opportunity to aspire and to achieve in life, no matter their background and no matter their postcode, their socio-economic circumstances or the family that they are born into. We as a Parliament must be doing everything in our power to create equality of opportunity for kids right across our state and beyond.

Going into this bill, there are of course parts of this bill we welcome in principle. First, it recognises the need for shared responsibility across portfolios, not just the child protection portfolio. Second, it deliberately includes care leavers up to 25, which reflects what the sector has said for years. The transition out of care is a cliff, and if we do not support young people into stable adulthood, we entrench disadvantage. Finally, it proposes planning and reporting intended to lift transparency so Parliament and the community can see whether government is actually improving outcomes in areas like health, education, housing, justice and employment.

Sadly, though, good intentions are not a substitute for good design. The biggest problem with this bill is simple: it is heavy on process, light on accountability and riddled with escape hatches. The bill explicitly provides that Parliament does not intend to create legal rights, civil causes of action or even grounds for review of administrative acts or omissions. In other words, if the system fails a child again, this scheme does not give that child, that family or that care leaver any enforceable remedy. Worse

still, the bill then goes further and builds in an override mechanism: if these new responsibilities conflict or are incompatible with other functions or priorities, the other functions prevail. The practical effect is that agencies can say ‘Yes, we support the scheme’ and then when it gets hard say ‘Sorry, not today, not in our core business, not in our budget, not with our priorities.’ That is not accountability, that is a policy press release dressed up as legislation.

Second, this leads to another major issue: bureaucracy over outcomes. The government points to Scotland’s corporate parenting model as an inspiration. But Scotland’s model is not just plans and reports; it actually imposes duties on corporate parents, and it expressly expects public bodies to collaborate with one another when exercising those responsibilities. By contrast this Victorian bill makes joint planning optional, and coordination is largely left to guidance and goodwill. Third and finally, there seems to be a significant gap between this whole-of-government rhetoric the Allan Labor government is pushing and reality. Yes, the bill designates partners across government, and yes, it expands the advisory role of the Children’s Services Coordination Board. But the board remains advisory. It cannot compel coordination, it cannot compel implementation and it cannot force action when outcomes are going backwards.

It is telling that even stakeholders who broadly support the intent, like the Foster Care Association of Victoria and the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, still raised concerns about whether a framework like this will translate into real, measurable change for children on the ground. That is exactly the point. The sector wants outcomes, not paperwork. We have heard this whole-of-government language before. The reason many Victorians approach another new framework with scepticism is that this Parliament has seen inquiry after inquiry, report after report, identifying the same systemic failures, yet too often the follow-through has been inadequate. The Auditor-General has warned about the fundamentals, including whether government even has the quality of information it needs to identify risk, track children’s circumstances and ensure accountability for outcomes. The Commission for Children and Young People has also made clear that children in out-of-home care are still being failed by systems that should be wrapping around them, including education, with dozens of recommendations made to government to fix what is not working.

That is not to mention, more broadly speaking, that Victorians just simply do not trust this government to protect their children. After nearly 12 years in power this Labor government under Allan, our Premier now, wants you to believe that it has turned the corner on child protection. It should start with the truth: the system has been under strain for years. The Commission for Children and Young People reports that the number of children and young people living in care rose from about 7800 in 2018 to about 8800 in 2022, a 13 per cent increase. Over the same period, foster care placements fell from about 1600 to 1450 while residential care placements rose from 461 to 503, and the outcomes are not good. Children in care have year 12 retention of around 25 per cent compared with 82 per cent for the general cohort. Workforce pressure is real: the Victorian Auditor-General found over 3100 children were waiting to be allocated a practitioner as at May 2022 and reported workforce vacancies rising to 13.9 per cent, around 305 vacant positions. Most disturbing of all, the commission has reported hundreds of sexual exploitation cases in recent years, including grooming with drugs and money.

Behind every statistic in this system is a child – a child with a name, a life and a future that can be permanently altered by government failure. In January this year a child became pregnant at just 13 years old while living in state residential care after reporting sexual assault, with her mother describing how her children stopped going to school and spiralled into substance use and disengagement while under the state’s guardianship. We now have reporting that in some residential homes staff fear being exposed to methamphetamine, with internal instructions to wear masks if young people are actively using ice nearby. Yet even after this, this Labor government puts forth a bill that tells departments to get along with each other.

Victorians deserve more than this, and it could be much better than this if this government was not wasting, say, \$15 billion on CFMEU and other corruption under their watch. Instead of this money

being spent on strippers and others, this money could have been better put towards child protection systems, supporting families, boosting child protection workers and much more.

In my final remarks on this bill, ultimately we will not oppose the bill in the Assembly, because the aim – stronger cross-government responsibility for children in and leaving care – is sound and because there is a potential upside if it is done properly. But we will put our concerns on the record today and assess in the Council whether the government is willing to accept the changes that will make this scheme real and tangible rather than symbolic. Indeed we must (1) mandate collaboration rather than merely encouraging it; (2) tighten the escape clauses so conflict with priorities cannot become an excuse for inaction; (3) make outcome measures transparent, timely and comparable, with clear baselines, so Parliament can track whether things are improving, not just whether documents were tabled; (4) build stronger independent oversight, not just an independent review in five years, because five years is a lifetime for a child; and (5) fund implementation, not administration, because you cannot report your way to safer kids, you need workforce capability and capacity, placement stability supports, mental health services, family violence responses and housing pathways.

Finally, I want to make a broader point that the government should hear. This Parliament has seen too many framework bills that create plans, strategies and reporting architectures while frontline services remain stretched, and vulnerable children are the ones who wear the consequences. This Labor government must accept stronger accountability, require real collaboration, fund the work and prove through outcomes, not optics, that Victoria is capable of delivering stability, safety and a genuine future for children and care leavers. Children in care, as much as any child in Victoria, in Australia or anywhere around the world, deserve the best opportunities in life. They deserve the opportunity to aim towards their dreams, to aspire, to use their gifts in life and to find their purpose. We must give them the best opportunity, and I call on this government to do so.

Michaela SETTLE (Eureka) (15:17): I rise to speak on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. This is an incredibly important bill because of the things that it creates and legislates, but of course, most importantly, because of who it represents and the care and respect this government shows for vulnerable children and families in difficult circumstances. We have heard a lot in the debate about different situations people have been in, and I know that in my electorate office they are really the hardest constituent calls to deal with when people are talking about children in care or protective services.

I do want to begin by really thanking the extraordinary workforce that is out there. Ballarat is blessed with some of the most wonderful child protection workers. We have of course the frontline workers at the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, but we also have organisations like CAFS – Child and Family Services – in Ballarat. That is run by the wonderful Wendy Sturgess, and its commitment to children and families in our region is extraordinary. We also have the Orange Door in Ballarat, which work very closely with families and in particular with children. I do really want to just acknowledge all of those people and the extraordinary work they do. It is a pretty tough area to work in, and they do such an extraordinary job. I know those of us on this side respect those frontline child protection workers, and we have made sure that we have backed them all the way. Since this government was elected in 2014 there have been 1180 new child protection practitioner roles funded by the government. I think that in itself shows the absolute respect that we on this side hold for those people working in what is a very difficult field.

As I always do when I look at a bill, I think about my own electorate and the people in my electorate and how it will help the people that I am here to represent. My electorate is quite interesting in that there are very different areas within it. Part of my electorate is East Ballarat, and we have seen some pretty extraordinary historical difficulties in Ballarat that have really had a generational impact on families and children.

I was delighted just yesterday with the passing of the bill in the other place around vicarious liability, and a wonderful woman by the name of Maureen Hatcher was in to see that bill pass. Of course

Maureen began the Loud Fence campaign in Ballarat, which was about tying ribbons to churches so that people that had experienced that vile crime in fact would have a voice and so be silenced no more. I bring that up because we really do have quite a bit of generational trauma in Ballarat. There were things like the institutional sexual abuse, but we were also home to quite a few orphanages, and a lot of stolen generations people were sent to those orphanages in Ballarat. A bill like this will really have an extremely positive impact on my direct community through its ability to support all of those families and children that have gone through so much.

Of course on the other side I have Bacchus Marsh, and whilst it has a very different history, it has its own pressures. It is a very rapidly growing peri-urban community outside of Melbourne. What is interesting about Bacchus Marsh – and I find this with so many of the services that are provided there – is it sits in a funny sort of position where sometimes it is considered regional and sometimes it is considered urban, and where services are provided from, be it Ballarat or Melton, varies. So a bill like this, for me, for Bacchus Marsh is incredibly important, because that sort of fragmentation of services is what we are really looking to fix with this bill through what is a very strong piece of structural reform.

The essence of this is really a whole-of-government responsibility. I have heard a lot of contributions from those on the other side that suggest that somehow or another nobody is taking responsibility under this legislation, and of course nothing could be further from the truth. That a commissioner is in place and there are responsibilities to report on plans and pathways creates a very real line of responsibility, and that is really what we are seeking to do here. When every minister, department head and chief commissioner becomes jointly responsible, it really will address that fragmentation that we too often see – silos of different departments all working with the best of intent but in a siloed way. Bringing this all together under this commissioner means that we can get much, much stronger results.

I mentioned earlier the Orange Door and the wonderful philosophy behind the Orange Doors. I remind everyone in this house that they are a wonderful creation under this government. What the Orange Doors serve to do is exactly that on ground level, if you like, so that anyone who is in need of help can walk into an Orange Door and be referred to where there is most need. Whether family violence needs to be addressed or whether their housing needs to be addressed, there is a referral pathway through the Orange Doors. Of course the line behind the Orange Doors model is that there is no wrong door, and that will be true under this legislation. When we are looking at vulnerable children and the services that we can provide for them, it will be seen as whole of government, and we will work together to bring a system together that will really have the children's best interests at heart and have the capacity to deliver because we are all working together.

We have heard quite a bit of talk from both sides of the house today about the fact that it is modelled on Scotland's corporate parenting approach, which has been going for quite some years and very successfully. I am not sure I like the terminology 'corporate parents', but that is just because I am a mother, I think. But I do understand the idea that we all have an obligation, and of course we can all lean into the saying 'It takes a village to raise a child'. I think this bill shows that it takes the whole of government to protect and support vulnerable children that are in our systems.

The Victorian model seeks to strengthen the Scottish model, with measurable outcome domains and parliamentary reporting. When those on the other side suggest that there will be no accountability – I think certainly the member for South-West Coast suggested there was no accountability in this bill – I would have thought that reporting to Parliament really should allay those fears. Because there really is a strong requirement to come back and report to all of us in this place, each and every individual minister works towards protecting some of the most vulnerable young people in our community.

The scheme covers children under 18 that are involved in child protection, children receiving or requiring community services, care leavers under 25 and families that are subject to family preservation or reunification orders. Listing the people that this bill covers really highlights how incredibly important this bill is. We are looking at some of the most vulnerable people in our

community to ensure that the entire government is looking at the ways that they can best serve. Every minister will be wondering how they can best help these people.

David SOUTHWICK (Caulfield) (15:27): I rise to make some comments on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. That is a mouthful. What we have heard already from a number of speakers is that this is a whole-of-government approach to look at particularly our vulnerable children and how we can get government services right across the board to be supporting our young children to give them every opportunity possible.

I want to begin by just acknowledging the great work that the Mirabel Foundation does in my electorate of Caulfield and the long association I have had with Mirabel. I know when I was first elected as the member for Caulfield former Premier Ted Baillieu, who at that stage was the opposition leader, ran a program where we would all bring in Christmas gifts and then go out to Mirabel and deliver the gifts. In my first year I extended that to Parliament, where we would bring the families and carers into Parliament, and during the last week in December the kids would come in here and enjoy some gifts and we would have a bit of a Christmas party for them in Parliament. We did that for a few years. Unfortunately, we do not continue to do it. But in the last couple of years I have had the Berwick District Woodworkers Club. I was introduced to that by my colleague the member for Berwick, who, with Don Buchanan and Brian Crowe, who is the president, have been providing woodworking toys for the kids. We have been delivering those to Mirabel in the last couple of years.

I think this sums it up – a story from one of the children, now a teenager, who has been supported by Mirabel:

I'm just like you. I know how you feel. It's okay. You're part of Mirabel.

Bella has never known her father's name. Her mother died from a drug overdose when Bella was three. Her nan took her in. Bella and her two older brothers became Mirabel kids. Now 19 years old, Bella feels passionate about the debt for what her nan and Mirabel gave. At a recent big day out she was at Luna Park in a blue Mirabel T-shirt for the first time as a volunteer. She had made a pact with her younger self to never be too cool to honour Mirabel and what the foundation has done for her. She loved now being one of the kids able to say, 'I'm just like you. I know how you feel, and it's okay to be part of Mirabel.' It goes on just to say how Mirabel changed Bella's life, also her brother's life and many other children's lives as well.

The thing about Mirabel is these are volunteers that are bringing up these kids. These are grandparents that are bringing up these kids. This is an organisation that does this work on the smell of an oily rag, literally scrounging dollars to be able to do what they do, making an absolutely huge impact, and unfortunately they are not supported. They are not funded in any way they could be.

When we talk about some of the waste and mismanagement that we have seen in recent years and about the corruption allegations of \$15 billion being wasted on Big Build sites, when we then look at something like Mirabel, those are literally dollars that could change kids lives – not \$15 billion, but think about what even a few hundred thousand dollars will do for the likes of Bella and others that have been brought up by volunteers that literally every single day struggle to get the doors open. That is what makes me really passionate to do the work that I do here, as do many of my other colleagues, and I also acknowledge those from the other side as well. Many of us do this job because we want to make a difference to the likes of people like those at Mirabel and Bella. But it is not happening, and there does need to be more done. I do respect that the government has brought a bill forward, which we are not opposing. It is a plan, looking at Scotland and other areas, to look at a whole-of-government approach. It is important. We need a plan. We also need the money. We also need the rubber to hit the road and make sure we can assist these kids. We see too many kids, particularly in residential care, that fall off the rails, that do not have the support. You have kids out of uni that are literally just babysitting these teenagers that have come from the most horrendous lives and ended up in a life of crime and ended up in a youth justice facility in a revolving door because they have not had the support

right from the very beginning and they have not had the early intervention right from the very beginning.

I respect and acknowledge the fact that this bill is about trying to come up with a plan. But I think we need more than a plan; we need the strategies that actually determine this whole-of-government approach. I understand that there is not one particular government department or one minister that should be responsible across the board. But I also want to point out that sometimes when you say all are responsible then quite often nobody is responsible. We need to make sure that somebody is held accountable and responsible for these young people's future, because that is what we are talking about: a young person's future. You just cannot turn around and say, 'I'm sorry, but it's the problem of several departments and bureaucrats,' because that does not cut it. That does not cut it when a kid ends up on the streets. In the work that I did with Ardoch youth foundation we had our first young person, Eloise, who was coming out of a Brotherhood bin to school at the age of 15, 16. She was living in a Brotherhood bin and coming to school, and school was a way of changing her life and her future. We cannot have that happen by chance. We have got to have government do work. This government has had a dozen years to that work. Again, granted, we have got a plan here, but we need more than a plan.

It just does disappoint me when we see these kinds of waste: \$50 billion-plus on budget blowouts and \$600 million spent on the cancellation of the Commonwealth Games. Imagine where that money would have been spent – money that we have given to Glasgow to run a Commonwealth Games because we could not run one here. Imagine taking \$600 million and saying, 'You know what, Mirabel, you can have just a million dollars of that.' Imagine what 600 different programs, a million dollars each, would do to change kids' lives. Imagine for a minute what would happen.

I think sometimes the priorities we have in this place are the wrong priorities, because we forget about the kids that we should be focused on and the kids that, unfortunately, are choosing other pathways because they do not have role models, they do not have mentors, they do not have support mechanisms, they do not have early intervention programs and they do not have the choices that many of us have had. It is incumbent on us to do that work. Again I acknowledge the good intentions of people in terms of what this has done, but we must actually do stuff for many of these kids that are falling by the wayside. Youth crime is through the roof. Those numbers are through the roof. Kids should not be making these choices. Kids should have better choices and better options in their lives. We saw a story today in the paper about a young person that is looking to change their life and their choice, and that is what we need more of. But to do that we actually need the dollars that go with it – not just the policy but the dollars.

Let us look at some of the volunteer organisations, as I say, that have done some fantastic work around youth and that have got people that actually work on the ground with lived experience. Let us talk about them, let us fund them and let us support them, because I can absolutely guarantee that if you give the people that I have met at Mirabel, with the work that they have done, as many others have done, just a small bit of money, that money will help kids tenfold. That is where government funding should be held and supported to ensure that these organisations give these young people the opportunities that they deserve so everybody can get a start in life, rather than just throwing money up against the wall. We have seen it again with the CFMEU and that horrific \$15 billion – what a waste. Again, Glasgow was given money; the Commonwealth Games were cancelled. Our major projects have blown out by \$50 billion. Let us get some focus on this and some sense in what we are doing, and let us ensure that our kids are supported to have the best options in life.

Chris COUZENS (Geelong) (15:36): I am pleased to rise to contribute on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. As a government and as a community, we all have a responsibility to provide a safe environment for children. I think it is essential that we continue to make change, and this bill is another step towards improving our system, although I do think we still have a very long way to go. I think child protection workers, foster carers and all those involved in looking after children through the child protection system deserve our thanks

and acknowledgement for the incredible work they do, and I certainly respect the work they do. It is probably one of the most challenging jobs we have in our system, so I do acknowledge them.

I talk to many child protection workers and I talk to many people who have been impacted by child protection, and I have a pretty good understanding of what goes on, particularly in the Aboriginal community. As frontline workers, we rely on them to deliver in protecting children. I think it is interesting that the opposition are supporting this bill. However, what does their \$11 billion black hole that they have put forward if they win government mean for child protection workers? Since 2014, 1180 new child protection practitioner roles have been funded by this government. We do not want to lose those. I think it is really important that we continue to grow our child protection system in a positive way and that we address the needs of not only those children but their families. As a result of that increase, there are more case-carrying child protection practitioners than there have ever been before. The 2025–26 Victorian budget invested \$14 million to include programs that support our frontline child protection workforce. This funding continues to recruit through the international recruitment program, as well as continuing investment in kinship engagement coordinators, Aboriginal cultural support and awareness advisers and the Child Protection Litigation Office.

I want to acknowledge the kinship carers and the challenges that they face in the incredible work that they do. I know many Aboriginal services across Victoria, and I have the great privilege of working quite closely with many of those communities and listening to the challenges that they have. I know in my electorate, the region of Geelong, we have Wathaurong, which provides an incredible service. I say that because they know how to deliver those services to protect their children. The community knows how to gather around those families without the intervention of child protection. That is something that they make very clear, that when they get together, they look after their own community, and they know how to do that. That is one of the reasons why we have treaty. This government has been determined to ensure that treaty is put in place, that there is self-determination, that Aboriginal people put on the table what is best for their community, and child protection plays a big part in that. I know that Aboriginal communities across this state talk about the concerns that they have about the child protection system, but I think this bill is a step in the right direction in terms of looking at a holistic approach, which is predominantly what this bill is all about, and the importance of that. Generational trauma, institutions and stolen generations are all a big part of that, and in my electorate of Geelong the impact has been extraordinary, and that ties into the issues around child protection. So, as I said, I am really pleased that this is a whole-of-government response.

Just recently we were debating the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Stability) Bill 2025, which acquits recommendation 25 of the *Yoorrook for Justice* report. This is a really significant report, and the fact that we have now acquitted those recommendations is really, really important to the community but also to Aboriginal communities in terms of treaty, moving forward around self-determination and what best suits those communities. The landmark Children and Health Legislation Amendment (Statement of Recognition, Aboriginal Self-determination and Other Matters) Act 2023 came into effect on 1 July 2024. This nation-leading legislation puts the Aboriginal community and services at the front and centre of decision-making and the delivery of services that protects the best interests of Aboriginal children. We backed this legislation with the largest ever single investment to continue and expand the Aboriginal-led services system of \$140 million in the 2023–24 state budget. This is really significant for the Aboriginal community.

I know that other non-Aboriginal children in out-of-home care and under the care of child protection also need to have that holistic approach of government. We know that some of this is modelled on Scotland's corporate parenting approach, which is great, but I think we also have an Aboriginal community that is very clear about what it needs and there are similarities in that Scottish model which are really important to our community here in Victoria. I think when we look at the Scottish model and we look at how Aboriginal communities look after families and kin, we can learn a lot of lessons from them. I think we are now starting to say that that is a pretty good model and that holistic approach is the approach that we need to be working towards, as has the Aboriginal community for hundreds of

years. That is how they have lived, and that has been their way of looking after each other. We can learn so much from Aboriginal communities right here in Victoria to make sure that we are making a difference and that we are making change for the better.

My view on our child protection system, which I will not go into in too much detail, is that we have got a lot of change to make and this is a great step towards that and looking at those areas that we need to have more control of in terms of housing, education, justice, health, Aboriginal self-determination and employment – and then those ministers coming to the Parliament and reporting to Parliament on those plans and how they are tracking. Do we need to do more? This is something I am really interested in, making sure that we are acting on what is being presented to us. If we have failings, let us deal with them. I think it is really important that we continue that holistic approach. People losing their children because they do not have adequate housing is not a reason for child protection. People in the justice system – parents who end up in the justice system or in our prison system – need that wraparound support. Just like the Aboriginal community will tell you, that is how their community works. So it is really important that we continue to move forward and make significant change to ensure that those children are being looked after, that their families are being looked after and that we are addressing those issues around housing, health, education, justice and all of those things that are impacting on these families. We know that the Aboriginal community are so over-represented in the child protection system, so we need to be doing whatever we can. We need to ensure that those reporting mechanisms are put in place and are working, and that is what this bill is about. I commend the bill to the house.

Dylan WIGHT (Tarneit) (15:45): It gives me great pleasure to rise this afternoon to make a contribution in favour of course of the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. The bill proposes a new model of shared responsibilities across the Victorian government to improve outcomes for at-risk children, young people and families. As many who have contributed before me have said, this is a whole-of-government approach, but I think, as the member for Geelong just eloquently put, it is really a whole-of-community approach. It is not just a whole-of-government approach, it is a whole-of-community approach. The member for Geelong used the example of our Indigenous community. It is communities and services rooted in our particular geographical areas or our particular communities that really know how to do this best, whether that be Victoria's Indigenous community, indeed whether that be at times our multifaith or multicultural communities or whether that be those local services, some of which in my area I will go to during my contribution. Those local services, which have connections to these communities, connections to these young people and the adequate training and experience to help in these areas, are incredibly important. It is those communities that know best, not necessarily us sitting in here. So to have this whole-of-community approach – the Scottish model, as it has been referred to at times; it is very different to the program that they run in Scotland – I think is incredibly important and a fantastic step forward.

We have obviously made a significant amount of legislative change over the last 12 to 18 months in the space of youth offending in particular – as we should have, as was important to do. But what is equally important is making sure that young people in our communities, if possible, never, ever have to present to the justice system because there have been adequate pathways and adequate services provided locally so that they have not gone down that path or perhaps, if they have, upon their release into the community there is adequate support and there are the adequate wraparound services and infrastructure to make sure that our young people can live the fruitful lives that they deserve to live.

People in communities like mine, like the member for Melton's and like the member for Werribee's are disproportionately represented in these stats. They are unfortunately disproportionately represented within our youth justice system. So making sure that we have the whole-of-community approach that we are speaking about here this afternoon and that we have the accountability, which I will go to soon, to make sure that that whole-of-community approach is working is incredibly important. It should be incredibly important to all of us. For somebody like me and I am sure for somebody like the member for Werribee next to me, this is an incredibly important change which I think is incredibly positive.

There are several services in my community in Wyndham that deal with some of this work and deal with child protection – that may be foster services or youth services. There is Uniting, obviously, which operates at a relatively large scope but does a fantastic amount of work in my community in Wyndham, where it is not uncommon for young people to come from broken homes and to need that level of care as they are growing up. One of the earliest interventions that we often see is making sure that a young, at-risk person has stable housing and stays engaged in the education system; that is so incredibly important. Uniting do fantastic work there. We have the Wyndham Youth Services hub in Hoppers Crossing. It is run by the local council, but the Allan Labor government only a couple of years ago provided a significant grant to be able to refurbish that hub there, just near AquaPulse, and it looks brilliant. With the amount of services that they run out of that hub – the programs that they run – there is capacity for at-risk youth to go and to be supported through counselling services and through specialist programs. They run employment workshops. All of those sorts of early intervention programs and pieces and services that we see as incredibly important in this space they do at the Wyndham Youth Services hub there in Hoppers Crossing. All of the staff in there are absolutely amazing. It is one of my favourite places to visit anywhere in my electorate and such an incredibly important cornerstone in my community – absolutely integral.

As the member for Geelong said – I think in rebuttal to the member for Caulfield, because he could not quite help getting off track a little bit – we in government have invested significantly in this space since coming to government. The member for Geelong referenced the increase in the workforce that we have seen under the Andrews–Allan Labor government over the last 12 years, investing significantly, even in small things. I spoke about refurbishing the youth services hub there in Hoppers Crossing to make sure that there is an adequate space to be able to provide these early intervention services. This government has always invested heavily in early intervention and prevention services in the youth space, and we will continue to. This bill is part of that.

As I said earlier in the contribution, it is also incredibly important that there is accountability when it comes to this new way of dealing with children and youth and the whole-of-government, whole-of-community approach that we are taking. It is obviously evidence based, but there needs to be accountability, and we need to know if it is working. We need to be able to revisit it from time to time to make sure that this new approach is working, because it is too important for it not to work. Children and – not to be biased – young people in our outer suburbs, like I said, are disproportionately represented within the youth justice system, and in moving to this whole-of-community and whole-of-government approach it is incredibly important that we get this right. As part of the changes, ministers will table a supporting stable and strong families plan for each of their portfolios in Parliament every two years, with actions to ensure that services are better targeted to deliver their outcomes, which is a really big piece of accountability. There is also a statutory review, I think, after five years of this new approach being in effect to make sure that what we are doing – the whole-of-government and whole-of-community approach – is working, because it is too important not to work.

As I said, there has been a significant amount of legislation in the youth justice space over the past 12 to 18 months, but we need to get the prevention space right as well, because the kids, particularly in our outer suburbs, deserve nothing less. I commend the bill to the house.

John LISTER (Werribee) (15:55): Following on from my good friend the member for Tarneit in reflecting on the importance of the legislation that we have got around the corporate parenting model, I just want to reflect on that well-worn proverb that it takes a village to raise a child. I never thought I would say that it takes an entire bureaucracy to do so as well. However, the nation-leading reforms in this bill acknowledge just that: that every part of government around a child is responsible for the raising of that child. To echo the comments of the member for Tarneit, it is not only government but community as well.

Admittedly, when I first heard the term ‘corporate parenting’, my mind turned to *Richie Rich* and how we may be training up kids for Collins Street. But diving deep into the background of this principle from Scotland quickly shifted my thinking. Six years ago the Scottish government gave the promise

that all children and young people will grow up loved, safe and respected so they can realise their full potential.

I have worked with many young people in out-of-home care or involved with child protection. It comes with the patch where I was teaching, whether that was out in the regions or in Wyndham. It was a harsh reality that for many of these kids the most stable adults in their lives were their teachers and year-level leaders. That is saying something, because sometimes we do not feel very stable when we are at school, but we were the most stable adults that they came across. Slowly and with a lot of phone calls and emails, teachers would assemble care teams of allied health professionals, youth workers and community liaisons. It was a challenge, and we usually got most kids into half-decent arrangements, but it is the ones that we could not help that still keep me and many of my colleagues awake at night. It is a lot to bear for people who are on the front line – the teachers and the child protection workers who see these kids far too often – and for too long it has fallen to the people who work closest to children to bear the brunt of this concern. Corporate parenting, or the Victorian stylisation of the supporting strong families plan, takes the brave step of sharing this concern amongst all levers of government. Children travel on transport. They rely on safe care at hospitals, use our local government services and aspire to further training and jobs building our state. There is not a lever of this state government that should not be concerned with improving the outcomes for children.

Through reading about the Scottish scheme, which has operated for over a decade, it is not just about sharing concern for the bad that could happen for children; it is about government being focused on the good. As participants in the Scottish scheme observed, it is just as much about having joy and passion for that child as if it was your own and supporting some of the most vulnerable across our community and recognising that, when the state takes responsibility for the care of that child, every government department needs to be part of the structure that supports these children.

This bill is part of the continued work that the Labor government is doing to support vulnerable young people across Victoria and ensure that we are providing the most effective and capable care. This bill brings together every portfolio, whether it is education, health, housing or community safety, so families can get the help they need when they need it. We have already been in this space, and to say that we have not been is a bit of a furphy. We have funded 1 180 new child protection practitioner roles since 2014, all out in the communities like the ones I represent, and the government also introduced last year –

The SPEAKER: The time has come for me to interrupt business for the matter of public importance. The member will have the call when the matter is next before the Chair.

Business interrupted under sessional orders.

Matters of public importance

Education system

The SPEAKER (16:01): I have accepted a statement from the member for Albert Park proposing the following matter of public importance for discussion:

That this house commends the Allan Labor government's nation-leading investments in school infrastructure, safety, learning supports and cost-of-living relief to set Victorian students up for the future and enhance state productivity.

Nina TAYLOR (Albert Park) (16:01): I am very pleased to rise to speak on the matter of public importance commending our Allan Labor government's nation-leading investments in school infrastructure, safety, learning supports and cost-of-living relief to set Victorians up for the future and enhance state productivity. As the chamber may well know and should know, our vision for the Education State is to deliver excellence in every classroom for every student across the state. It might be synchronicity, actually, because earlier this week I was representing the Minister for Education at the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership. It was a great pleasure to address 350 teachers

from every corner of our state, from metropolitan, rural and regional locations. They have been selected to take part in the prestigious teaching excellence program, or TEP, as it is called. This comprises teachers from government, Catholic and independent schools. These schools include primary, secondary, P-12 and specialist schools.

When we come to that premise of making sure that we have excellence in every classroom for every student across Victoria, part of making that implementation a reality is nurturing the talent of our great teachers and making sure that they have the support that they need, particularly early on in their careers. I know as a former teacher myself that while I certainly was able to manage the class, I tell you what, there was very little behavioural instruction. It was like 'Get in there, and good luck.' I am pleased to say that we have come a long way, but it has taken a lot of hard work, and it is our Allan Labor government that is truly implementing the changes needed to really back in our teachers and help them with such matters as managing behaviour in classrooms.

We are committed to investing in programs that support teachers at every stage of their career, from scholarships and preservice placements to graduate programs and initiatives like Career Start that help new teachers thrive in their first year. We can see the stark contrast from where it was, dare I say, 25 years ago. We have come a long way. This is absolutely what is needed to really honour and really salute the wonderful, diverse and very capable teaching workforce that we have in this state. I can also say that our efforts to support our teaching workforce are making a difference. I am proud to say we currently have 14,000 more registered teachers in Victoria than we did in 2020, but this has taken time and hard work. It has taken deliberate, ongoing investment in employment-based teaching degrees, graduate teacher programs and targeted incentives for teachers to work in rural and regional areas. It is a testament to our ongoing focus on professional learning and leadership development for those teachers that we are keen to deepen their knowledge and practice, building a highly fulfilling and stellar career, as they deserve to do.

I should say just a further point on the academy. The academy has brought world-class experts, current research and high-quality professional learning to teachers in every corner of our state. Teachers in rural and remote parts of Victoria who have teaching and leadership ambitions are no longer disadvantaged by the tyranny of distance. With seven regional academy centres spread across our state, the academy ensures regional and rural teachers receive the same professional opportunities as their counterparts in the city. I am raising that point because often those opposite will allege somehow that we have forgotten regional and rural areas – not so, and you can absolutely see that in the way that we are backing in our teacher profession right across the state. The TEP is one of the academy's most renowned professional learning programs and – get this – is the only course of its kind in Australia. This is a testament to the investment of our Allan Labor government in our teachers, because we believe in them and we know they are the secret to the success of our children as well.

Coming to our children, I must say that according to the most recent NAPLAN data Victorian students are not only the top performing in the country but also performing better than at any other time on record.

Members interjecting.

Nina TAYLOR: Yes, Victorian students achieved the highest or second-highest mean scores in 18 of 20 NAPLAN measures. Victorian students continue to excel, with more kids in the 'strong' or 'exceeding' bands, the two highest levels of NAPLAN, than any other state. I do want to credit the incredible work of our teachers to facilitate those outcomes. It is not by chance, but obviously by deliberate investment, both in teaching and learning.

These results show the benefits of the Allan Labor government's investments in best practice teaching and learning, including mandated phonics for 25 minutes each day and support to build kids' confidence in maths. I am sure my colleagues in the chamber will have also observed this. I have been to all of the schools in my area. I regularly visit them, and I am able to see this mandated literacy

reform. It is a very vital reform when we are talking about true equity in terms of all students being able to have the best possible education, but also in terms of being able to tap into vulnerabilities early on so that they are able to be intercepted and they are able to get the support they need to really get the best educational outcomes throughout their school experiences.

What about school infrastructure? That is part of the MPI. I have to go there. The Allan Labor government has handed down a budget that invests a further \$1.5 billion in education infrastructure. I might just note while we are here that when they last had the chance, the Coalition scrapped the Victorian schools plan and failed to plan for the future of Victoria's education system. School infrastructure funding was cut to, I am sad to say, a mere \$200 million a year – shame! Not one new school was opened in 2016 following their failure to plan for the future. Thankfully, though, under our government we have had a cumulative total of \$18.5 billion in investment – billion. You can see the contrast there. That is \$18.5 billion, and we are looking back at a mere \$200 million a year. Our investment is backing Victorian families, with 121 new schools funded to open between 2017 and 2027. What about this year? Okay, this year we have opened a record 19 new schools.

Members interjecting.

Nina TAYLOR: That is right, delivering on our commitment to build 100 new schools between 2019 and 2026. When Labor came into government, the school infrastructure we inherited was a disaster, with only 14.1 per cent of school capital works programs being delivered on time – whoopsadaisy. Since the 2017–18 financial year, each financial year has seen an average of 91.8 per cent of projects delivered on time. So you see the contrast there: 14.1 per cent to 91.8 – in anyone's language, we can see there is a stark difference in terms of delivery. This means a real difference for both the teachers in their workplace but also the experience of the children as well.

I am very happy to say, as part of those 100 new schools, one of them was actually in my electorate: Narrarrang Primary School, a beautiful new primary school. I will salute the principal Tim Sawalaga. It was just such a joy to be able to go literally a couple of weeks ago to that beautiful new school. There is so much passion from those teachers. They are so excited. They are investing in the kids. The parents are excited too – everyone, a real collaborative approach. And do you know what is also really great about that school? It is also going to have a kinder in 2027.

A member interjected.

Nina TAYLOR: Yes, exactly, one drop-off. It is saving parents a lot of time and hassle and also allows for continuity in the educational experience. On top of that – and this is where we think holistically with regard to our investments in community, and education is an investment in community in reality – is also that we will have other community spaces on that site as well so that everybody can take part and make use of this precious space, because we know that, particularly in the inner urban environments, space is at a premium. Making sure that we have truly inclusive schools and ones that are actually able to be multipurpose is beneficial to everyone as well.

And there is more: we are also on track to complete six new tech schools by 2026 thanks to a \$116 million investment. These schools will deliver free hands-on STEM education for – get this – 62,000 Victorian students. Again we can say that we are making a significant impact but also investing in their future when we know how many jobs are going to be following in those STEM categories and why it is vital that we give all Victorian students the opportunity that they deserve where they live to do their best and have access to this high-quality teaching that is actually linked to and following a pathway to real careers.

This is another thing: when we are talking about delivering – and that is what a Labor government is always focused on – under Labor, schools are being built eight months faster on average. That makes a real difference in terms of delivery, particularly when you have got growth corridors. In any case, when you have got building and infrastructure you want to be able to deliver it efficiently. Roughly 50 per cent of the schools that have been built across the whole of Australia since 2018 have been built

right in Victoria by our government. I just want to contrast: Jeff Kennett's government closed more than 350 schools, including many in regional Victoria. I know my seat of Albert Park also suffered a lot there. Of course it is a Labor government that has had to rebuild. I think the inference was that probably a lot of them will go to private schools and we do not need a public education system – that we do not need accessibility to all these public schools in the area. Well, let me tell you they were wrong. You only have to go to Albert Park College. Oh my God, that is a massive school that keeps growing and growing. It has so much opportunity for the students in the creative arts, you name it. Also there is Port Melbourne Secondary – let me not leave them out of this equation. Robotics there is second to none. What those kids are doing there is absolutely phenomenal. This is about investing in the future of our kids, and we are doing it. Clearly we have form – but in a good way, of course.

Also we are implementing the biggest improvement in schools disability support that Victoria has ever seen with the nearly \$1.9 billion disability inclusion package. I should say only 14 special schools were upgraded under the former coalition government. They also cut funding for student support officers from \$33 million to just \$4 million over four years, cutting access to speech pathologists, psychologists – you get the picture; not very pretty. In 2020 we announced a further 36 special schools were receiving funding and upgrades. This means every government specialist school in Victoria has been upgraded by our government. I know this has also happened in my electorate. I know that the Port Phillip Specialist School, for instance, provides incredible support for kids. They come from far and wide to go to that school. Having been there a number of times, I know the patience and the work that those teachers provide, but actually you see the joy in the students themselves. They are really getting a holistic experience, which they richly deserve.

In addition to our investments in disability inclusion, Labor is also implementing the \$203 million fighting for students with disability and their families package. This includes more high-intensity outside-school-hours care. Oh my goodness, that announcement – I have to say I had parents reach out to me. They were so relieved, because it can be a lot to juggle for parents making sure that their kids are supported all hours of the day – except for when they are sleeping of course, if I am going to bring it down to that level of detail. In any case, rest assured it certainly had a terrific impact. I could see the relief on parents' faces, and that is also about investing in them, investing in families, and making sure that they are able to get their kids the education they need but also keep the balance that every family deserves. More support to help families navigate the NDIS is part of that reform as well.

I think we are almost at the end there, but – a good problem to have – there is so much more to talk about in terms of the Allan Labor government's investment in our schools' infrastructure, in our teachers and in our students. Luckily, there are plenty more members in the chamber who can share on this. As I said, I could not possibly get through the extent of the investments that we have made, and I am proud to say that I could not, because that means there is so much more to talk about, and I certainly wish my colleagues well on that front. As you can see, with our Allan Labor government, we deliver; the coalition cut, cut, cut. Victorians have choices here. Do they want solutions? Do they want cuts? As you can see, we have positive form in this space, and we will continue to deliver for our Victorian teachers and students.

Brad ROWSWELL (Sandringham) (16:16): I also rise to address the government's matter of public importance today submitted by the member for Albert Park, who has just addressed the matter that this house condemns the Allan Labor – sorry, I misspoke:

That this house commends the Allan Labor government's nation-leading investments in school infrastructure, safety, learning supports and cost-of-living relief to set Victorian students up for the future and enhance state productivity.

Where has the member for Albert Park gone? She has gone. I was hoping that she would stick around for this, as I was courteously here listening to her contribution. That said, if you listened to the member for Albert Park and those on the government benches who are contributing to this matter of public importance today – and by the way, I agree that education is a matter of public importance – you would

think it is just rosy, it is tickety-boo, it is hunky-dory: 'Nothing to see here – no issues whatsoever.' The member for Albert Park was on her feet talking about the great success of this government, who have been in power for 11, almost 12, years. She was talking about teacher attraction and how they have had great success in attracting teachers, yet as of today, as of now, I am sure you will be interested to learn that there are 826 teaching positions in Victorian state schools that are in need of being filled. Let us just unpack that slightly. I do not want to spend too much time on this, because there are a lot of other things to talk about as well. If those 826 are class teachers, what happens to those kids? I was speaking to a parent just the other day who is familiar with these matters. At the school that his kids are in within metropolitan Melbourne, this year they have introduced a series of composite classes, which the parents do not think is ideal but a lot have come to accept. The reason given for that was because they did not have the ability to attract sufficient teachers because of funding cuts to the school. I will use a \$2.4 billion figure – Labor's \$2.4 billion cut to education. That is not my figure, that is the Australian Education Union's figure. That is the union movement here in this state recognising that although their mates are in charge and have been for 11, almost 12, years, they are not doing the best things by kids, by families and by schools and are cutting public funding to education.

In terms of workforce, in 2023, 38 per cent of registered teachers working in Victorian schools indicated that they intended to leave the profession before retirement – 38 per cent. That is an increase of more than 16 per cent from when that question was asked just three years prior. At the same time, the proportion of teachers who plan to remain in teaching until retirement has fallen from 41.6 per cent in 2020 to 27.1 per cent. That is a 14.5 per cent collapse in workforce confidence amongst teachers. Again, if you listen to the member for Albert Park and if you listen to members of the government today, they will have you believe that it is all right, all hunky-dory, all tickety-boo. But the reality is something quite different. This is what happens to a government who has been there for almost 12 years. They lose touch with the reality of the community that they say they seek to serve, and they do not – that is the reality of it. That is the reality. This government has got a problem with attracting teachers and with retaining teachers, and they can try and spin their way out of that as much as they like, but the reality is quite different.

Members interjecting.

The SPEAKER: I ask members to cease interjecting.

Brad ROWSWELL: Thank you for your protection, Speaker. The member for Albert Park went on further in her contribution. She was crowing about the infrastructure successes and triumphs – her phraseology, not mine – of this government in relation to schools. So why then did the member for Kew, the Leader of the Opposition, go through a two-year legal battle in VCAT for the Department of Education to release the school condition report, which is a number between zero and five allocated to every Victorian government school? Why did she have to? Why did the Department of Education – why did the government – seek to hide this data from Victorians? If the government has had such great success in the infrastructure space in schools, why did they hide this information from public consumption?

For full transparency, that information has been released. The information commissioner thought that the Department of Education should have released it much earlier. The Department of Education chose not to release that information. The member for Kew exercised her right to pursue that matter at VCAT, and she won – VCAT ordered the Department of Education to release that information. As a matter of transparency, I have now submitted a further freedom-of-information request to the Department of Education. It is identical to the one that the member for Kew submitted more than two years ago, the only difference being that in my request for information I have actually referenced the case law established by VCAT in requiring the Department of Education to release that information.

As interesting as that might be, what is more interesting is what that condition report actually said: 199 schools have a poor condition rating, which is a rating of less than 3.25 on a scale of zero to five. That is approximately one in five of all schools ranked on this list in Victoria that are considered to be

in poor condition. 677 schools have a condition score below the statewide average, which is 3.48. That is, at this point in time there are about 1575 state schools in Victoria and 677 of those had a condition score below the statewide average. Sixteen of the 21 lowest ranked schools are located outside the metropolitan area, and I am sure that my colleagues the member for Euroa, the member for Eildon and the member for Mildura will be addressing the inequity in education funding in their communities.

It gets worse, though. Attendance at schools, as highlighted by the Productivity Commission just last week, is at a rate which is completely and utterly unacceptable. That Productivity Commission report found the Victorian school attendance rates have gone backwards, dropping 3.7 percentage points since 2019 – from 91.5 per cent to just 87.8 per cent. I can talk percentages all day, but numbers actually have a meaning, so let me articulate in very simple terms what that meaning is. That means that if you are a student at a Victorian government school you are not present in the classroom for, on average, four weeks a year – at a critical time, at a stage of your life, a stage of your development, when you should be in the classroom. You should have every opportunity to learn, to grow and to be amongst your friends. I say to this government, through you, Speaker: why does the data from the Productivity Commission released last week say that if you attend a Victorian government school you are absent from the classroom for, on average, four weeks of the year? That is completely and utterly unacceptable.

Again, if you listen to the government, it is all fine. They have drunk their own Kool Aid. They have sipped their own bathwater. Let us set aside the fact that that probably does not taste as nice as they would imagine it to. But the reality is this: it is not. There is more work to be done. This is what happens when you have got a government of the same colour in power for as long as this mob have been in charge. I say to the government that they have an opportunity. They have an opportunity to do better. It is not too late. They have got an opportunity to transform funding for schools from the country's lowest to something much better than that. That is the opportunity.

Victoria is currently the only state without a long-term agreement to fully fund the Gonski model, instead relying on a one-year stopgap arrangement that has left funding levels unchanged since 2023. Consider the school resource standard, otherwise referred to as the SRS. Those chalkies in the chamber I am sure will be familiar with that. Dial in now. The Western Australia state government provides 77.5 per cent of the SRS; the feds, 22.5; Tasmania, 77.5; ACT, 77.5; and Victoria – wait for it – 70.4. So in at least two states of the nation and one territory – in Western Australia, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory – students are funded to 100 per cent of the student resource standard. That means they are getting the funding that they require to give them every opportunity to learn and to grow and to contribute.

In Victoria the state government, who do not need much encouragement at all to pour a bucket of you know what over people like me on this side of the chamber – without cause, I might add – provide 70.4 per cent. That is what this Labor government contribute towards the student resource standard in Victoria, with only a 20 per cent contribution from the feds, representing funding of only 90.4 per cent of 100 per cent. Our kids are being underfunded. This is limiting their opportunity. It is limiting their chance to be the best that they can be – to grow, to develop, to learn and to contribute to our Victorian community – and this is happening on Labor's watch. And they have the cheek to put on their number plates 'The Education State'.

On just some of the points that I have raised today I would argue until the cows come home. I can see them just in the distance over there. I would argue that we are no longer the Education State – we may once have been – and I think that we should be. I think that our best years are ahead of us in this state, but not under this government. It will take a change of government for our potential to be realised. It will take a change of government to establish the conditions for people to do their very best, to contribute everything that they have, to come together as a community and not be divided.

Speaking of division, this government say they are all about bringing people together and caring for marginalised people, and yet they choose to tax education. It was this government that introduced their

schools tax just a couple of years ago, making the cost of education in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis more expensive than it had been. In response the government said, 'But we're just bringing the independent school sector and the Catholic school sector in line with the government school sector.' Of course they will not admit the truth of the matter, that effectively payroll tax in government schools is an internal accounting treatment. It does not actually have a real-life impact on the ability of schools within their budgets to provide for their schools. We will scrap that tax. We have made that commitment; it is ironclad. We will scrap that tax. It is a precipice that Labor crossed and we are not prepared to. We do not think that education should be taxed. We think that education should be supported. With 10 seconds left, I say to the Minister for Education: do better. Work with teachers, confirm the EBA, and do not put teachers, students and families in the circumstance they are currently in.

The SPEAKER: Before I call the member for Frankston, can I acknowledge in the gallery former minister and former member for Bayswater Heidi Victoria.

Paul EDBROOKE (Frankston) (16:31): We can see that the opposition is unburdened by the complications of common sense or knowledge about the education sector. I was very entertained by that performance.

Wayne Farnham interjected.

Paul EDBROOKE: I was, member for Narracan. I was entertained. But unfortunately the fundamental difference between those on this side of the house and those on that side of the house is their catastrophic failures in the education sector and what we are doing now, which is building the Education State. It is so important that this house commends the Allan Labor government's nation-leading investments in school infrastructure, safety, learning supports and cost-of-living relief to set Victorian students up for the future and enhance state productivity, because productivity does not start in the boardroom, it starts in prep. Education is the single most important investment any government can make, whether that is socially or economically – it just is – and that is across the board internationally.

What we have heard from those opposite today is a real tiptoe through the tulips of picking obscure data and trying to map out an angle with it. I think every speaker on this matter of public importance on this side of the house is a teacher or was a teacher, and I think that we will have some people who have something to say about their experiences in schools. My experience in school takes me back to 2001. I remember changing children in special developmental schools (SDS) on the floor; there were no lifts. I have taught in classrooms where the roof leaked. I have taught in classrooms with asbestos everywhere. I have taught kids who were bright as anything, the brightest kids, who would be the future of Victoria, but they struggled because things at home were hard. They went to school without breakfast; they went to school without lunch. I have seen the difference between a supported child and a child who feels forgotten.

When we hear those opposite talk about supporting education, it makes me shiver to the core, because in 2001 we were still dealing with the cuts of the Kennett era. Jeffrey Gibb Kennett – I know a few people on that side of the house are fanboys of Jeff, and that is okay; we can deal with that. 1992 to 1999 I think was when Jeff was around. I was in the Latrobe Valley and, unbelievably, my community died overnight, the community that I lived in. But then I became a teacher, and I realised that Jeff Kennett and the Liberals –

Members interjecting.

Paul EDBROOKE: We can hear the interjections from opposite, but past performance is the best predictor. We know that saying, and it is true here. 350 schools were closed. We just heard the member for Sandringham talk about a lack of teachers and also some facts and figures. What happens to these children when you take 350 schools away? How many teaching jobs is that? Well, we know it was 7000 to 8000 Department of Education jobs down the drain. What happens to the collective intellect

of a state when you do something like that? What happens to the collective childhoods when you do that? A lot of these children rely on school as, sometimes, fundamentally the only sure thing in their life, the only supported thing in their life.

On this side of the house we do not suffer from, let us call it, the Dunning–Kruger complex, where people get up on the other side of the house and talk about their record in education, what they think should be done, without realising that historically the Liberal Party is utterly incompetent in this space. The Dunning–Kruger complex, where incompetence cannot recognise its own incompetence – we teach kids that today in school, in psychology. But when they destroyed 350 schools and sacked 7000 teachers, how gutsy must they be to stand up in this house and say that this government is not good enough in the education sector and that we should not have numberplates with ‘The Education State’ on them. Thank you for helping me. It is just like working it out myself, only harder. We heard a little bit about the egalitarian nature of the theories across the line, but their history tells us everything we need to know. The self-confidence is very, very, very high, but the self-awareness is very low, the knowledge of history is very, very low, and our education system suffered because of it. Make no mistake, if the Liberals get back in, if the coalition get back in, if One Nation – the coalition of cuts – get into government, we will have that again: schools being closed down, teachers sacked. We will hear none of this, that they care for children, they care about education.

Since coming to government the Labor government has delivered \$38.6 billion to the Victorian education sector, and that is delivery, that is not just slogans. The results show it as well. According to the most recent NAPLAN data, not only are Victorian students top performers in the country, they are performing better than any other time on record. Yet across the aisle what we are hearing today is talking our students down, talking our teachers down. On that can I just pivot to thank the teachers in this chamber, to thank the teachers out in the community. Whether it is in SDS, private schools, state schools, secondary or primary, they do an amazing job. We know that it is not just what some people might imagine – the whiteboard or the chalkboard. There is a hell of a lot of care that goes into teaching these days and making sure we steer children and youth into the right areas where they can make a better future for themselves. We on this side will not steer clear of the hard questions, and that is why those NAPLAN results are so good, essentially.

This government committed an extra \$1.5 billion in infrastructure this budget. That is \$18.5 billion into infrastructure since we came to office. That is 100 schools – we reached 100 schools built this year. That is absolutely amazing. When has that ever been done in history – 100 schools built in Victoria. So when I hear someone across the aisle talk about there being a shortage of teachers – we have just built 100 schools; of course there is going to be pressure on the system. But the pressure on the system is because in some ways we are still catching up from those Kennett years. We have also invested \$1.9 billion in disability inclusion. I was a teacher for a period in the SDS system. As I said, the ramifications of the Kennett era were that we did not have lifts. We saw teachers changing kids, teachers going above and beyond, because they did not have what they needed to teach children, to give them that pastoral care. And some of the things we have done are not just nice extras; I would actually consider them the foundations of learning, like mental health supports in schools, banning mobile phones – leading the nation in banning mobile phones – in schools. I do not think you can disagree with that and stand on a foundation of evidence.

As far as the debate from the other side goes, I do not think it is that complicated. When they had their chance, did they invest? No, they did not invest. They had the four years between 2010 and 2014, and the Kennett years, and they cut the whole time. Every time they have been in power, they have cut. They cut more than \$1 billion from education. They cut Free Fruit Friday. They cut the young readers program. Bloody hell, who cuts literacy? Excuse my language. Excuse my literacy. Who cuts literacy in a school? They cut the school staff bonus. They cut the education maintenance allowance. 350 schools were closed. We cannot afford to go through that again.

We know that those opposite are, as we have seen today in question time, the Harvey Norman of politics – three years with no interest. And that is what is happening now. No-one is interested in what

they are bringing to the table, because their history is clear for everyone to see. To say they are egalitarian and they support everyone in the education system is one thing, but to actually do it is a totally different animal. You need to step up to do that. That is what this government has done.

Brad Rowswell: On a point of order, Speaker: relevance.

The SPEAKER: There is no point of order.

Paul EDBROOKE: Relevance? We are talking about the education system, for God's sake.

The SPEAKER: I remind the member for Frankston about disorderly behaviour and the use of unparliamentary language in the house. I call the member for Mildura, who is very lucky to be still in the house.

Jade BENHAM (Mildura) (16:42): I all of a sudden have been transported back to the mid-1990s and feel like I have just been reprimanded by my teachers.

The SPEAKER: Order! I do hope that you are not reflecting on the Chair.

Jade BENHAM: Absolutely not, Speaker. I would never. The MPI before the house today is:

That this house commends the Allan Labor government's nation-leading investments in school infrastructure, safety, learning supports and cost-of-living relief to set Victorian students up for the future and enhance state productivity.

I beg your finest pardon. If this house is being asked to commend the Allan Labor government's so-called nation-leading investment in school infrastructure, safety and learning supports, then we need to ask a very simple question: nation leading compared to which nation? We heard the member for Sandringham point out some very alarming facts and figures earlier, some of which we will get to. But in the interests of representing my community, I have a few home truths to tell. The member for Frankston was very quick to illustrate that a hundred new schools in the city have been built. Well, the member for Narracan tells me that he has not had a new school built in 50 years. The electorate of Mildura would be around the same. In fact the report about the condition of government schools in Victoria illustrated that Chaffey College was one of the worst, with a mark below three.

There is a very real distinction between education in the city and education in the regions, and it bears absolutely zero resemblance to the MPI that has been put before the house today. Across regional Victoria, government schools are operating in facilities that are decades – sometimes five decades – past their prime, and I want to tell you a few stories about some of these schools. I have spoken many times in this place about Mildura West Primary School. This is a government school. It is a baccalaureate school, in fact, a very good little primary school in the middle of Mildura which has had two master plans over the past 12 years – two. How much progress do we think that has had in building and completing either of those master plans? Zero. In fact one of their learning buildings is still being held together by chipboard because termites have eaten it out, so that fails the facilities test. Meanwhile, the government did build them a new \$400,000 toilet block they did not need – so again, priorities.

We have Koorlong Primary School, a beautiful little school just outside of Irymple, which borders a bushfire zone. They were instructed by the department to pull out all of their trees. In particular there was a beautiful big old cottonwood tree in the middle courtyard, which offered shade not only to the kids playing but also to the surrounding buildings – 'No, no, you have to take that out.' Okay, then the school applied for grants for shade structures. Four times they have been knocked back for shade. I went to that school on a day when it was, guess how hot, being in the north-west of Victoria.

Danny O'Brien interjected.

Jade BENHAM: Forty-nine degrees. You were close, Leader of the Nationals. No shade. The Lake Primary School, which is again another lovely small school in Mildura – this is an interesting story – has what is called the Lakers court – a basketball court, a multipurpose court. At the moment

it has been deemed unsafe because of cracks, uneven surfaces, all that kind of thing. The school council themselves went and got a quote to resurface the Lakers court; it is affectionately known as the Lakers court. The school went and got the quote. It was \$70,000 to repair it or, if you wanted to fully renovate it and resurface it, \$100,000. The government came back and said, ‘No, no, you can’t do that, because it will cost us \$400,000’ – four times what an independent quote sourced from the school said it would cost.

Danny O’Brien interjected.

Jade BENHAM: It must be a union job, honestly, because that is unbelievable. We have Swan Hill College. I was discussing Swan Hill College, which is where I went to school, and the toilet block there. I am shocked to learn that that toilet block – which holds a few memories of my misled adolescence, perhaps – is still standing and needs urgent, urgent replacement. It was set up in a way that wayward teenagers could tell if teachers were walking in, but we are not going to go there. I have not got the time; I have more important stories to tell. But that toilet block, I swear, was there when my mum went to that school. In those days it was Swan Hill High School.

I will touch as well on some points that the member for Frankston made about the Kennett era being so terrible. You know what, I was at school during the Kennett era. I was at Swan Hill High School. My sister was at Woorinen Primary School.

A member interjected.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, Kennett shut it down, and I would still rather be on this side of the house than be with a socialist government that has no idea about budgets or spending or an adequate education system in the regions. So yes, that did affect my values and, you know what, I respected it because my parents explained to me that the state had been run into the ground completely. Our Premier at the time, Mr Kennett, had to then consolidate, so we did consolidate the secondary college. It was a consolidation of the tech school and the high school. Now we have the flexible learning options campus on the site of the old tech school, and it took years for that to occur. That is a great school, led by Gabe Mudge I think, who is still doing that.

So I am a product of the public school system, and the more stories I hear about the state of things, it just continues to alarm me. That brings me to enrolments. I know that it is tough to get into good schools, both private and government schools, in Mildura. Irymple Secondary College is one that is quite sought after, but if you are not in the zone, you have got little hope. Chaffey Secondary College is another one. Mildura Senior College is extraordinary; St Joe’s as well. I was on the phone today to a mother, who was talking about her son Connor, and this actually brought me to tears when Connor sent me a text message. They have moved from Horsham up to Mildura. They have bought a business.

A member interjected.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, the member for Lowan would know exactly who I mean. Connor just completed grade 6 last year at Gol Gol. This is another example of cross-border communities, which usually work well, but because people are voting with their feet and filling up all of those independent schools now, Connor, who has autism spectrum disorder and ADHD, level 3 – he has a diagnosis – cannot get a place in a government school. He cannot be supported at all in any school they have approached to start year 7. Connor is now four weeks into the school year and ready to start year 7, and he cannot get a place. Let me read you –

A member interjected.

Jade BENHAM: You would think there would be a moral obligation to take him. He is a beautiful kid. Let me read you the text message that Connor sent me earlier. Connor said:

This is absolutely unbelievable that I haven’t been able to start high school with everyone else. I’m new here and because of my diagnosis I already have trouble making friends. Now everyone has been together for 4 weeks they will have formed their friend groups I am so worried I will be behind in work and have no

friends. As each day goes on and I haven't started high school I feel more and more defeated. It's getting me down, every school that says no makes me more and more down. Mum is trying so hard and not getting anywhere. It's so unfair, I should be able to start high school but I can't, this is crazy.

In fact there is a school bus for the Mildura schools that stops right outside of their front door, and Connor's mother called me in despair today, explaining that if she cannot get him enrolled in school, then they are going to have to leave Mildura – they are going to have to leave the region. So when this MPI came up today and I read it, I honestly did say, 'I beg your finest pardon.' What a crock.

Paul Edbrooke: On a point of order, Speaker, I find that a very emotional story, and I think people in this house would like to help.

The SPEAKER: What is your point of order?

Paul Edbrooke: My question would be: is that child in your zone, and can we help?

The SPEAKER: What is your point of order, member for Frankston?

Paul Edbrooke: Can we help?

The SPEAKER: That is not a point of order.

Daniela DE MARTINO (Monbulk) (16:52): I am very pleased to speak on the MPI today, which commends the Allan Labor government's nation-leading investments – and the member for Mildura did ask before which nation; this nation – in school infrastructure, safety, learning supports and cost-of-living relief. Teaching is the noblest of professions. That was said to me once, and I have read it also by a former teacher who I admired greatly, Peter Anderson. He wrote a book about his experience as he was actually battling motor neurone disease. He did state that teaching is the noblest of professions, and I have to wholeheartedly agree. I would like to commence my contribution by thanking teachers, past, present and those still to come – the ones who are training, who have decided to seek to enrich and educate our future. It is a fine thing to do. Teachers do not do it for the glory. They do not do it to posture. They do not do it for any reason other than that they feel a deep vocational calling to help, to enrich others and to foster a love of learning in our young people – and hear, hear to them.

There are many reasons why teachers sometimes do leave the profession – I mention that because the member for Sandringham touched on that before – and there are lots of personal reasons. I was a teacher, as many people already know, and then it got a little bit hard with my work–life balance at one stage, because back 20-odd years ago – and that is giving my age away somewhat – it was not as family-friendly as it is now. We are so much better at making sure that teachers can job-share and that part-time work is respected and encouraged, but it certainly was very, very difficult to achieve that a few decades ago, before our government came in. We acknowledged that and we have worked on it, and the department has worked on it too, to ensure that teachers get a bit more work–life balance and can have the flexibility they need if they are raising families as well. For me, that was my situation. It was never a conscious decision to leave a profession I absolutely adored; it was that life happened that way. I have to say we have done so much in this space.

I recall teaching. I did my dip ed in 2001, so I ended up having my first official class on my own in 2002. The spectre of the Kennett years was still looming very large back then. I know that those opposite sometimes mock the fact that we refer to the Kennett years, even though they were several years ago now. But there is a reason why we refer to them. It is because the damage that was inflicted on this state means the scars are still here, and we as a government have had to work so hard and with such determination to undo the damage and then build upon it and heal and improve things going forward. Then there was that record from 2010 to 2014, the *Twilight Zone* years, where nothing happened. It was like Victoria then existed in some kind of parallel universe where barely any investment was made. We actually saw cuts to education during that time. Things went backwards through stagnancy. Things just did not happen. Ask anyone out there on the street what they recall of

the Baillieu–Napthine years, and most people go ‘Not much’ because there was not much that actually occurred. And so once again, we had a period of stagnation. We then had to come in and lift things again. We had to invest. To be able to say that we have now opened a hundred schools since we came into government at the end of 2014 is an extraordinary achievement when absolutely nothing happened in the four preceding years to that point in time.

I remember as a teacher – and maybe some of my former teacher colleagues in the chamber may also recall this – we used to feed students who came to school hungry. I had a student once and the only food – it was not even food – this young man had was a bottle of Coke that he brought to school with him. That was his breakfast and that was his lunch. We would go out – this is not for me to talk about myself – and the teachers as a cohort would buy a sandwich from the tuckshop for him. And he was not the only one; there were several others. We would bring in fruit. We would do things. We would make sure that he had some food in his belly because we knew then, as educators, you cannot learn on an empty stomach. Well, we know that as a government too. That is why the school breakfast program is one of the greatest things we have introduced. I have spoken about it before. I will speak about it till the cows come home with their udders full of milk to fill these kids up as well – if they are not vegan. But my point is that we understood that there are some basics you have to get right for kids to be able to learn and thrive.

How about glasses? If they cannot see the whiteboard, free glasses for kids are a start. How about addressing dental concerns? Tooth pain is incredibly distracting. It is not good for your health either. Oral health issues lead to systemic health problems, so we have addressed that with free dental vans as well. And we have filled hungry bellies. It is not just kids who would go hungry who are enjoying the program; so many others do. It is social awareness. I have visited our breakfast club programs, and can I tell you the conversations that happen around them are just so good to hear. I am going to use the word ‘wholesome’. It is wholesome to see these kids sitting there having their brekkie and chatting about things, and then the ones who need that extra support often get packs of food to bring home, because the people at home also need food in their bellies. We understand that you have got to get the basics right.

We have also made sure that the buildings are thriving. We have invested incredible sums of money to ensure that we have built those new schools, but we have also upgraded and modernised so many. I have got three purely secondary schools in my area. Two of them have been upgraded and another one is on its way. Upwey High and Monbulk secondary college have been absolutely revolutionised and transformed in our time, and Emerald Secondary College is next on the list. It has already had some upgrades. It has got a bit more to go, and that will be happening this year, I am very pleased to say. We have actually invested \$18.5 billion in building, upgrading and modernising schools in our last 11 years alone. That is amazing. Not one school opened in 2016 following their – not 2016; sorry, I have got the year wrong. Do you know what, I was talking about glasses –

A member interjected.

Daniela DE MARTINO: Thank you – 2014. That is why glasses are important for children. They did not plan anything for the future when they last held government. As I said before, we talk about Kennett because of the scars inflicted on this state that have lingered long. We have had to work so hard. Do you know how many schools Jeff Kennett’s government closed? Here is a figure to stagger everyone: more than 350. And tech schools disappeared. We lost tech schools out our way and, I tell you what, again, that was something that lingered long. Students who needed to go to a tech school, for whom learning Shakespeare in English was not going to be relevant or pertinent to their future careers and productivity – where did they go? They were lost.

We have actually addressed that with our vocational major. Our One VCE program is revolutionary – the fact that students can go to any secondary school and do VCE, whether it be a more academic pathway or actually address more technical areas and vocational roles. We have allowed the flexibility in our education system, because we understand that strengths lie differently and the aims of students

are different as well. Not everyone wants to go to university anymore – actually I do not know if everyone wanted to in the first place. They certainly did not. We acknowledge that. That is why our system now has the dexterity to be able to address that and to really allow young people to enrich themselves and see a great future for themselves through education, because we all know that education is the key; it is the doorway. People who migrate over know that their children get a great opportunity in this country because of our education system.

When it comes to the state of Victoria – I know it has been mentioned before; it bears repeating – our students have achieved the highest or second-highest mean scores in 18 out of 20 NAPLAN measures. It is our best ever result. Why? Because we have invested, because we have supported our teachers, because we have invested in the classrooms and facilities where kids can get a world-class education and because we have filled their tummies full of food. And boy, let us all remember what happened to Free Fruit Friday. How tight can you get if that is what you are going to cut when you come in and take over as a government? How utterly mean and awful.

I do commend our government on our nation-leading investments in school infrastructure, safety, learning supports and cost-of-living relief. I have only just scratched the surface. Do you know what I was going to commence my contribution with? ‘Where do I begin?’ The list was so long it was actually overwhelming to think, ‘How am I going to frame my contribution? I don’t even know where to start. There is so much to speak about.’ What a great problem to have in this MPI contribution. I commend the matter to the house.

John PESUTTO (Hawthorn) (17:02): The last thing we are going to do in this house today is congratulate the Allan Labor government for its management of our education system. At this time when we have a budget that is out of control and debt spiralling out, which has an impact directly on services like those that we rely on in the education sector, it is an insult to the Victorian people that this government wants an elephant stamp. When I run through the things I am about to address, you will see what a catalogue of failure characterises the last 12 years of the Allan Labor government. When you look across the capital program and recurrent expenditure you will see that more and more Victorian students in government schools in particular are having to learn in environments that are not conducive to their education and that their own families are having to dip into their own pockets for an education system that should be free.

Let us start with the capital program – the buildings and the facilities that we see in schools. This government at the last election promised that it would renovate and refurbish 89 schools. It was an \$850 million commitment – a shiny, big commitment. We have been prosecuting the case for the last four years about the litany of broken promises around that commitment. We have pointed out, and the media, thankfully, has also echoed, the work that we have done – the member at the table and before him the member for Kew and now Leader of the Opposition. There are dozens of Victorian government schools that will not have their renovations and refurbishments completed by 2026. That was the commitment: \$850 million, 89 schools delivered – not promised – by November 2026.

What is worse is that not only do we see that there are dozens of schools that will not actually see any of the funding at all, but when you go through budget paper 4 and you compare the two columns – total estimated investment and the amount remaining to be spent – you will find on nearly all occasions that the government has put a little bit of money in and then bumped off into the never-never between two-thirds and three-quarters of the funding that is required to deliver the projects that the government promised in the lead-up to the 2022 election. What a lie. What a farce. The government comes in here wanting an elephant stamp, and there are thousands of Victorian families and, more to the point, students who are going to miss out because this government lied – yes, it lied – to the people of Victoria.

Let me turn to the condition assessment reports, which I acknowledge are work that has been done by the shadow minister. We see nearly 200 schools, probably more – 200 schools that we know of – that are in a poor state, not fit for purpose, yet this government says the system is going along swimmingly.

And that is just the schools in the worst condition. There are hundreds of other schools that are not fit for purpose in terms of their construction and deserve capital spending to improve the learning environments of our young students. It is the government's own condition assessment report, and it is thanks to the work of the shadow minister and his predecessor, who had to fight to elicit that information from this government.

On top of that, Infrastructure Victoria pointed out a number of things in its recent reports. One is that Victoria will need, because of population growth and in particular the growth in those corridors around metropolitan Melbourne, which are growing at much faster rates than the rest of the state, 60 more government schools. You have to ask, given the magnitude of the financial mismanagement of this government, how it is going to deliver the schools we need to accommodate a growing population. But as Infrastructure Victoria also pointed out in its report, the current state of government schools is affecting learning outcomes and will continue to have an effect on learning outcomes. They are just some of the problems besetting the capital program when it comes to schools. What does the government get on the capital side – school buildings and facilities? It gets a big F.

When you go to the recurrent side of the school budget, the story is no better. If you look at the report on government services, this state is being so badly run that we spend the least per FTE student in a government school of any jurisdiction in the country. That is not a prize I think Victorians want to see this state claim. We actually spend the second-lowest per FTE student in non-government schools. On either measure we are at the bottom or at the second-lowest level of the rung. That is not a happy story to report.

Then you look at the Gonski debacle, and I say 'debacle' because this government is trying to get away with shirking its responsibilities under that agreement. We have been pointing out for many months now that the government has been punting off its so-called commitment to reaching 75 per cent of the SRS, the schooling resource standard, by 2028 to as early as 2031 but possibly even later. I suspect this government, if it were ever to be re-elected – and heaven knows we are going to try to stop that – would push it off to 2034. Not only that, it is already nickel-and-diming its commitment. It is claiming around 5 per cent of its Gonski commitment to date on compliance and depreciation. It is not actually a funding commitment that reaches students and teachers. On the Gonski side of things the government deserves no credit and no lollies for its failure to deliver on what is a very serious commitment, because it affects the welfare and future potential of our students.

Another aspect I want to touch on – and it is really galling to listen to some of the self-congratulatory addresses from the opposite side, with all due respect – is when we see in government school after government school that parents who are already doing it tough have to find hundreds of dollars every year to fund things like nurses, casual relief teachers, facilities maintenance, other urgent school upgrades and repairs to toilets and sanitation in their own schools. That is a disgrace. And that is happening all over the state; it is not just in metropolitan Melbourne. All over the state of Victoria our schools are being so starved that the government is trying to pretend that the system of voluntary payments is just that and that there is no need for school communities to raise important funds for basic things.

We live in a state that I thought, and still maintain, is proud of its history of a commitment to free public education. But it ain't free anymore under this government, and it is what you do not get if you cannot afford to make the contributions, which we call voluntary but we know that every parent feels, for all good reasons, the urge to want to contribute because they want their kid, after all, to be learning in a positive environment. So what else are they going to do? Of course they are going to fund whatever they can afford to contribute to these school funds. Kids will continue to miss out, and that is just not fair. These are basic things. I do not mind if schools in our government school sector want to raise funds for voluntary things, but these are the necessities of a good education system.

Is it any wonder – and this brings me to my final point – it is so hard to recruit and retain teachers in this state? We see a drop-off among graduates of between 30 and 40 per cent after two years of study.

That means in the future we are looking at, I would estimate, on what I have read, over 2000 teachers in our government school sector that we will be short of by around 2028 if we are not careful as a state. We have to make it more attractive for our teachers, and we have to reward them for the good work they do. We should not congratulate a government that is letting our government school system be run down to the point where it jeopardises learning outcomes, and we should not congratulate a government that is so starving our government schools that hardworking Victorian parents have to dip into their own pockets, after all of the cost-of-living increases under this government, to fund a public education system that they deserve without having to do that.

John LISTER (Werribee) (17:12): It is my honour to rise on this matter of public importance to speak about our nation-leading investments in school infrastructure, safety, and learning supports and how those are setting Victorian students up for the future and enhancing state productivity. There are a few things I want to touch on here, particularly as I know a lot of my colleagues have touched a lot on the concrete and steel that goes into building our schools – that school infrastructure. I note the member just previously went into great depth about our school infrastructure build, and I know there was reference to our growing outer suburbs. I have 16 pages that I have been flicking through of both maintenance and investment in infrastructure and brand new schools that we have in the Werribee electorate alone. I think probably we have doubled the amount of public schools in my electorate, and that is something that we are not necessarily going to hear a lot about from those opposite.

As a teacher, I did just want to pick up on a few of the metaphors used by the previous member, the member for Hawthorn, of the government giving itself elephant stamps or the grade of F. This leads me into what I want to talk about, which are the learning supports that we have put in as this government in our schools. He uses those well-worn metaphors of handing out a stamp to a student, but anyone who is in a modern classroom would understand that we do not necessarily use the old elephant stamp anymore, although they do make a little bit of a feature. Modern schools are encouraged to use positive schoolwide behaviour principles, including looking at other tools such as points for a whole classroom and encouraging a more collective role in improvement, but also feedback. Feedback is one of the most important mechanisms. So they are again showing how old-fashioned they are. They have not set foot in a classroom for a while, but as someone who still has someone working in a classroom at the moment –

Brad Rowswell interjected.

John LISTER: And the member for Sandringham always has that faux outrage whenever I talk. But let us talk about the idea of the F grade. Modern schools, particularly our public schools, avoid using F grades. We now use developmental rubrics focused on learning progression, which is particularly important in helping students to understand their zone of proximal development in order to move them through that skills continuum that we have in our curriculum.

I think it is particularly important when we look at the learning supports that have been implemented by this government. It is more than just concrete and steel that we have invested in our schools. It is things like the Victorian teaching and learning model 2.0 revised, which is based on evidence around cognitive acquisition and memory. It is also based around social learning and how to implement that consistently across the classroom. This is also based on our multitiered system of supports. I am going to demonstrate one of the positive classroom management strategies now: as I talk, I am going to use a quieter tone of voice in order to maintain the room at a quieter volume – and you have seen the difference. However, if I start to raise my voice, you start to hear a lot more talk. Consistent, positive classroom management strategies are things that we have implemented throughout our schools – again, something that you are not necessarily going to hear from those opposite because they have some very strange views about curriculum and what should be taught in our schools, based not on evidence but on ideology.

I mentioned our schoolwide positive behaviour program, but recently, as of November, we worked with parents and with students and with our teaching staff around an expectations framework – shared

expectations to support student behaviour. That is all about working in this trio that we have in any student's life – the student, the parent and the teacher – around the expected behaviours we have in a school. Those are being respectful and engaged. For parents, they need to be respectful, safe and engaged, and also schools and staff need to be respectful, safe and engaged. If only those opposite followed these same principles that we are teaching in our public schools when it came to their former colleague, the member for Nepean. It is unfortunate that they do not follow what we are teaching even amongst our youngest of students at public schools, these positive, shared expectations in our schools. I note that my colleague mentioned the vocational major, which is another one of those great reforms that this government has done with an eye towards productivity and getting more people engaged in the workforce. As someone who has taught vocational major – and I have spoken about this in this place at length – it is one of the best programs. It means kids get engaged not only in literacy and numeracy but also in skills and learning for life. It is really important.

We talk a lot about concrete and steel and we talk a lot about cost and money and things like that, but it is these changes that this government has led because we have not been afraid to listen to the experts and to use that research to be able to implement these programs in our schools, and we know that these work. Quite often I used to joke in professional development about how much we spoke about Professor John Hattie and the work that he has done around the effect size of different things in our schools. One of the biggest effect sizes that he found in his view of all the research was an effect size of 1.57 when it came to collective teacher efficacy. Our Victorian teaching and learning model, which we have implemented over these last couple of years, is all about having that consistent teacher practice. It is the best practice, and John Hattie's research tells us so. Classroom management, yes, has a small effect size – very significant, it is still in the positives. We also see things like teacher clarity and feedback as some of those biggest effect sizes; they are really important things. Again this is all based on the science of learning.

The Victorian teaching and learning model comes out of a report that was done by the Australian Education Research Organisation, and they looked at some of those different ideas around cognition and memory acquisition and incorporated that into the four elements of learning. All state schools are going through the process of rolling out the VTLM and the shared lesson plans now. But those four elements of learning that will feature in every lesson are attention, focus and regulation, which are sometimes a bit difficult for some of us in here; knowledge and memory – unfortunately those opposite have a bit of a short memory; retention and recall – we have a very long memory here, especially around the 350 schools that were closed by Jeff Kennett, and that is the second time I have name-dropped him today; and mastery and application, which is something that we want to ultimately lead to as we bring in these reforms. The VTLM also goes towards having those lesson plans, helping reduce the workload on teachers by having a consistent model that every program will run throughout the Victorian curriculum, from foundation to year 10, and then reflecting it into VCE and vocational major. This is really important, because we know teacher workload is one of the biggest factors in burnout. As the member for Hawthorn was referencing, and as someone who has been burnt out teaching, I know full well what that is like.

We have supported our teacher workforce not only through recruitment of more teachers and graduate support programs that we have brought in but also through the previous enterprise agreement. I do not want to float into the current one because that would be inappropriate and we wish everyone to continue to negotiate in good faith, but in the previous enterprise agreement there was a strong call for a reduction in contact hours. We are now down to 18.5 hours per week for teachers' contact face to face with their classes. This has meant some changes to the model and the way that we deliver our different timetables, but it means ultimately that there is more time for lesson planning, for meeting with parents and for doing all the other things that teachers need to do to be able to provide that instruction in the classroom. Time is particularly important. We are one of the few states that actually clarify in our enterprise agreement that we will have 18.5 hours of face-to-face contact time. There is a lot of reference to New South Wales by those outside of this chamber, including comrades in the Australian Education Union, but in New South Wales only 2 hours are protected, and there are lot of

issues with the amount of contact hours that they are required to do. Is there more that needs to be done? Absolutely. I think this side of the house has been pretty clear when it comes to our teacher workforce that we do support good pay and conditions for our teachers. I look forward to seeing everyone work in good faith as we get along with this.

As I conclude I do want to say that it is important, while we discuss these issues, that we not only look at that concrete and steel but that we also look at those changes happening in the classroom that have been pioneered by this government working with the department and experts in their fields to be able to roll out some of the best teaching and learning practice. I did not even talk about the academy, which is one of my favourite programs. As a graduate of the academy, I find it one of the best programs we have rolled out as a government. Just in conclusion, I want everyone to remember that this is about more than just concrete and steel, it is about students, learning and teaching.

Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (17:22): I rise to speak on the MPI around education. Whilst the Labor Party talk up a big game here, they fail in a lot of areas, and there are a number of those failures that I certainly want to highlight. I listened with interest when they talked about them opening schools and us closing schools. I can give you a list of all of the schools, which I obtained through questions on notice, which have been closed under the Labor Party. I think that they like to not know that truth. They like to have some untruths here. Schools in my electorate have continued to close. I understand that they are doing an investigation into perhaps doing a whole bunch of closures in my area by consolidation. That research is underway in the department as we speak. I think that the government need to open their eyes a little bit and also to understand that when you have population growth in certain areas of course you have to build new schools. Everyone would be building schools in those areas.

I want to concentrate, firstly, on a couple of things in my electorate where we seem to have failure after failure from the government. I am going to start with Wesburn Primary School, which is a gorgeous little primary school on the Warburton Highway. The school is located on the bend of a road just at the base of Mount Donna Buang, and the weather gets pretty dicey. There is a lot of traffic, and it zooms past too often. We have been wanting to have installed in that area 40-kilometre flashing electronic signs to slow the traffic down, and time after time the government ignores these requests, really putting the safety of the school crossing supervisor and the students at risk. It bothers me greatly, because the government say to me that there is a problem with the traffic, the volumes and things like that. I do note that the former Minister for Education, the retired member for Monbulk, managed to pluck something out of the air for schools that were located in back areas in his electorate, which had hardly any of the traffic and issues that I have with Wesburn Primary School. He managed to get these electronic 40-k signs installed very easily. I was particularly concerned about that.

Another school in my electorate that I have had quite a bit to do with over the years is in Panton Hill. Panton Hill Primary School has had trouble for years with their outdated fire sprinkler system, and it kept springing leaks. It is almost like one of those cartoons where you put tape around and block one hole and it pops up in another. In the end so many have popped up, and it has taken years and years for it to finally be addressed. That is happening as we speak, but it has taken so long. Panton Hill is an area on the fringe of Melbourne. It is fairly bushy and is in a high fire-risk area, and I would have thought that the fire sprinkler system was something that was of particular importance for that school and that community. Not only that, but Panton Hill have been very keen to have an outdoor shaded area for the kids. I go to many other schools that do have these shaded courts where the kids can sit. This is where they have their school assemblies. They have to sit on the asphalt outside – this is the best that they have got – and hope to goodness that it does not rain or that it is not too hot and they all get sunstroke first thing in the day or at the end of the day. It would allow them to have an area to play in sunshine where they have got some shade, or in winter, if it is raining, it would give them a covered area. There are many, many schools in my electorate that have this, and I would like to see that happen at Panton Hill. With that, of course, comes the extension of the court, because they do not have a full-

size netball or basketball court. So there is a bit of work to be done. But now that the fire system is finally being addressed, I would like to see something happen there.

We have also had a bit of an issue with failures in bushfire areas from government departments. I was disappointed that when the member for Monbulk spoke she mentioned Emerald Secondary College but did not talk about the issues that they are having at the moment. I was quite disappointed to see the selective processes going on there. We have had a change in our fire rating system. In the last few years it has gone from six particular points down to four, and it is now moderate, high, extreme and catastrophic. It does not take much to get into high. And for kids at Chum Creek, this has caused particular problems, because every time there is a high fire danger rating they are required to relocate the entire school to Healesville Primary School. This has happened on seven out of 11 days at the start of the term. The 'Shelter in place' direction was fine, but the department determined it needed some work. In October they were advised about this. They had a number of meetings, and they were expecting that this work would be done over the summer. But for whatever reason, the government dropped the ball on it, and this was not done over summer. So when the temperature is 24 degrees – and the other day in the Yarra Valley it was a beautiful day; you could not describe it any other way but as a beautiful day – the entire school has to pack up their bags and relocate to Healesville. What this means is the school could not do playgroup and out-of-school-hours care, with parents having to drop kids off and take them somewhere else. It was a real problem. But it seems to me that there are other schools – and I mentioned Emerald secondary school, which is a little bit different. Those kids work from home – or school from home. For three days in the first week the kids were working from home. In Diamond Creek there were similar problems. So the government can talk all they like, but we have got kids in bushfire-impacted areas whose safety is being put at risk.

We have had to, with great difficulty, obtain the condition report under FOI, and we challenged the FOI, because the government just did not want to let us know about the conditions of a number of schools. On that list of 199 with a condition score of less than 3.25, there are many, many schools in coalition- and Labor-held seats. I look at Killara Primary School in Sunbury, which was number 4 on the list. I do not recall the member for Sunbury at any point coming into this place asking for investment. I could not find any media release or anything on his Facebook page to say that he had actually been fighting to get things at that school improved. He did have some messages there saying he had been out to the school and what a great school it was – 'a terrific school' I think were his words from March last year. But he did not say whether or not the principal got in his ear to say, 'Listen, mate, we need some upgrades here fairly quickly.'

The same goes for Macarthur Street Primary School at Soldiers Hill in Ballarat. I have not seen the member for Wendouree raise this as an issue. These schools are being neglected. And the poor member for Ripon – goodness me. In the top 15 there are four schools, and I had a look to see what the member for Ripon has been advocating in the last few years in this area and could find very little. On 6 November 2024 she did make some announcements. They were not the same schools – there was Ararat Primary School – but they got just a fraction of what is needed. We had the Great Western Primary School, Amphitheatre Primary School –

Martha Haylett interjected.

Cindy McLEISH: I have clearly hit a nerve with the member for Ripon, who is absolutely embarrassed by her performance in this area and the fact there are so many of her schools on this list.

Maroona Primary School and Ararat Primary School are in the top 15, and I felt kind of sorry for the member for Ripon because I thought the government might try and prop her up a little bit more and support her, but I could not find much evidence of these schools in the Labor-held seats being mentioned in budget replies, whether they had got budget for it or whether they had been advocating on their Facebook or Instagram posts. I had a good look and I could not see that they had been advocating strongly, so that was particularly disappointing.

I want to mention also the gap in the outcomes for rural and regional students, and this was an issue a number of years ago – an issue to the point that the minister at the time had an expert panel convened to come up with some recommendations about how to close this gap for kids going to school in those rural and regional areas, and there has been nothing reported since 2019. So it is very difficult to know whether or not the kids in our country areas are still being neglected by this government. We can see their schools are in poor condition. (*Time expired*)

Alison MARCHANT (Bellarine) (17:32): It is a pleasure to rise to speak on this matter of public importance submitted by the member for Albert Park:

That this house commends the Allan Labor government's nation-leading investments in school infrastructure, safety, learning supports and cost-of-living relief to set Victorian students up for the future and enhance state productivity.

At the heart of all of this is kids, and when this MPI came up I was really pleased, as a former teacher, to speak on this, and there is a lot to try and get through in the short amount of time that we have. In putting some notes together for this my first instinct was to think about the kids that I have taught. I think about Max, who always had a ball in his hand, had a wicked sense of humour and now is the coach at our Barwon Heads Football Netball Club. I think about Eliza, who had a real spark about her and is now a teacher and influencing in a positive way, being a great teacher for her students. Andy, who was sharp as a tack, who secretly loved maths but did not let anyone know, is now a doctor. Megan was creative and artistic and hated maths but found out she could do fractions when I gave her an art project to put together to design a dog park, and she showed me that she could do fractions.

These are the things that really matter to teachers – the kids in the room that they think about. They go home, they think about them and they write reports, and they hope that in the year that they have them they can have a positive change and give them the skills and the tools they need at the time to keep advancing, keep learning and have a love of learning. I just want to mention one other, though: Jack Henry, who plays for Geelong Cats. I also taught him, and I hope that I taught him everything he knows about football. He is a great player for the Geelong footy club. But every kid is different and every kid needs something a little bit different, and I just want to acknowledge the incredible work our teachers do every day to make sure every child in their classroom is getting the support and the learning that they need. I think that teachers have that in mind. They want the best for their students. That is what parents have in mind: they want the best for their children as well. So do we as a government. The investment and the absolute commitment we have to education on this side of the house is our commitment to proudly stand with our families, proudly stand with our schools and proudly stand with our teachers that will deliver the Education State that we talk about and that we have talked about today. It is not just about curriculum. It is about that connection and making sure that families have trust in the system as well.

Across the Bellarine we have incredible schools that are embracing the things that we are reforming in this state, and I would like to talk a little bit more about the really important work that we have done in the space of phonics. It was a few years ago that I was teaching, but I was actually a Reading Recovery trained teacher. Reading Recovery has had its iterations, and I really believed in that program. I had kids who progressed well and had that extra support in the early years, and they were able to get back with their peers and where they should be for their age. But I had some students who did not progress the way they should have. It left me with this niggling feeling that I had failed them. It leaves you with a niggling feeling of: what could we have done better?

When I had my own children and I had a son who loved books, was good at speaking and had good language skills from a very early age, it was not until we really got to grade 4 or 5 that we realised he was struggling a little bit and not keeping up with his peers. I was doing Reading Recovery at home, so I thought I knew what was best in terms of education and reading. I later found out, after my own research and the school's support, that my son actually has dyslexia. He has given permission for me to share this, and I have shared this before. But he has dyslexia, and I found out, after doing research

and finding a wonderful community of parents who have children with dyslexia, that Reading Recovery is not the answer. We have moved on from that. The science of reading tells us that systematic and explicit phonics instruction is of benefit not just for kids with dyslexia but for all kids. All kids get the foundation of how reading, letters, sounds and words work, and it sets them up for success. My son still struggles. He missed out on that. He had a whole-language-type education when he started primary school. We have done the best we can to try and catch him up, and he is doing a great job.

But I am so proud that we had a government and a minister who bravely then said, 'We've got the evidence, we're going to do something a bit different in our schools and it's going to actually change the way that we'll see the next little bit of our students coming through.' We already know our NAPLAN results are leading the nation, but I cannot wait to see what happens when we can see the difference from when we introduced structured phonics and what that will do to our results as well. It supports our teachers to actually have testing and assessment for our students in the younger years so they can see the students who need extra help; they can identify those early and then they can give them the right support.

I also want to talk a little bit about the pathways now that we have introduced in the VCE, in those later years. We know that not every student's pathway is going to look the same. We have strengthened our VCE. We have now our VCE vocational major – VM, as it is known – and parents are telling me that it is an incredible opportunity for students to see a pathway after school. They have been able to experience real-life careers, maybe at a TAFE taster. Bellarine Secondary College in my electorate has a great partnership with the local TAFE, the Gordon, and students in year 9 get to go and have a taster. They try plumbing, they try hairdressing and they try carpentry. I am not sure if they let them on to real hair in year 9, but they have an experience, and it actually opens the world. They can then choose subjects that they think they may give them a bit of purpose and direction. It has been an incredible program and one that has been really successful.

The other one that is really successful is at Bellarine Secondary College. They have a program called Farm My School. They have turned an old soccer pitch into a working farm. They have animals – they have chooks and ducks – and grow vegetables. They create vegetable boxes to provide to families but also to restaurants and to the canteen to create meals. This is an incredible program, where students have another opportunity to learn horticulture and agriculture with real-life experience. It also addresses some food security issues in our communities. These are the things that really make a difference.

We know too that having a school at the heart of your community actually means that you get to go to a great school but you also feel part of your community. We have supported families through cost-of-living kinds of measures within our schools because they are part of our community. Having a dental van come to your school so you can access that and not have to worry about appointments and traipsing kids around – it is there at your school – is absolutely incredible. To have someone come and test kids for glasses and vision and sight and to identify those who may need glasses that may never have been picked up actually changes the dynamics of our school communities. They are hubs where families can get that support.

I am really pleased to be able to speak to this matter today. I have seen the opposition do nothing but talk down our schools and our Education State. I think that we have had some incredible initiatives and reforms more recently, and I am really proud to be part of this government. Saying that we are the Education State is not just a slogan; it is not just a logo. This is a promise. This is a promise to families and a promise to students that every child, no matter where they have come from or their background, is going to have a chance to learn, to thrive and to have a great career after school as well. I commend this matter to the house.

Annabelle CLEELAND (Euroa) (17:42): I had to read this matter of public importance a few times just to get it right. I can understand that –

Members interjecting.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Deputy Speaker, can I just confirm whether that member is in their seat before they start to disrespect people on this side?

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The member to continue, in silence, please.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Let me just check:

... the Allan Labor government's nation-leading investments in school infrastructure, safety, learning supports and cost-of-living relief to set Victorian students up for the future and enhance state productivity.

I can see why the member for Albert Park scurried out as soon as that little misleading bombshell was dropped, because we might just set some things straight on this side of the house around some facts behind it. I want to localise it because it actually does have enormous consequences on students' futures across the state but in particular in regional Victoria. For such a small investment and how far that can go for our communities, one thing that a lot of Nationals MPs are grappling with right now is cuts to complexity funding. \$100,000 is being cut from most of our P-12 schools in regional Victoria, which is having consequences for our students that will change their future trajectories. One of my school principals – I have spoken to all of them – who also said he cannot be named because of potential consequences to his school, said, 'We're limiting VCE subjects. We're limiting mentoring. We are limiting those supports for students that need some extra help.' One hundred thousand dollars is being cut from our P-12s in regional Victoria because this government cannot manage money. We hear all these reports about the \$15 billion blown on Big Build sites in corruption, yet we are losing \$100,000. I hope everyone is silent because we are furious about what we are missing out on in regional Victoria because of the mismanagement of these projects in Melbourne.

I wanted to close with the \$15 billion and where it was going to go. Let me take you along. We have got the complexity funding cuts of \$100,000 and the school condition report and – again, you have heard it before – the two-year VCAT battle to silence this because the Deputy Premier did not want this to get out. Three of my schools made the hot list. This is not something we are bragging about. This is shameful. This is saying the conditions that our children are learning in are inadequate.

A member interjected.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Substandard. Three of my schools – nearly 20 per cent of Victorian schools – are below standard and in poor condition. These are facts. Thank you to the Labor members who have gone silent because you cannot argue with the truth.

On a local level, furthermore, what does that condition report look like? I have recently met with Seymour College P-12. More than 700 students are at this school.

Jade Benham interjected.

Annabelle CLEELAND: A super-school. We do not have air conditioners, member for Mildura. We do not have air conditioners at a brand new school with more than 700. Those that left the ivory towers of Melbourne would know that we have just gone through a heatwave where our students were working in conditions of mid-30s. This is not acceptable in this day and age. Do not build a new school without air conditioners. What is just a little cherry on top of the under-resourcing in our regional communities is also that the power is required to be upgraded to get them air conditioners. \$2.5 million to have sufficient working conditions for our school is a very small drop in the ocean when this government is happy to turn a blind eye to \$15 billion wasted on criminal gangs and bikies on these Big Build sites. Imagine what \$15 billion could do for your community.

Members interjecting.

Annabelle CLEELAND: You will be relieved that I have lost my notes now. You have really done your work. What I am going to say is we have spoken about the condition report, and we

understand it from the lack of air conditioning on the ground. Listen, everyone go silent now, because at Kilmore, a town of nearly 13,000 people, there is no public secondary school. What do we call Victoria? The Education State – except for regional Victoria. Just FYI, regional Victoria is about an hour, 60 kilometres or so, down the Hume. Take a look. Come, drive, understand the conditions that we are putting our kids in, because they are unacceptable.

Danny O'Brien interjected.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Yes, exactly. Heathcote is another town – a growing town. We do not have a public secondary school. Again, it is unacceptable. We do not even have the investment for a business plan to look at whether they deserve a secondary school. Labor wants to talk about cuts: they closed Tooborac Primary School, split the education zoning in the middle of the town and told half the kids to go to Bendigo and half the kids to go to Broadford, when there are no public buses to take them there. And the leftover students are going to Seymour, and they do not have eligibility for a bus to get them to school. This is not a *Utopia* episode. This is the reality in my electorate.

Danny O'Brien interjected.

Annabelle CLEELAND: It is dystopian. A year ago I put up a really quick fix: you close my school – how about you redirect one of the buses 6 kilometres and we get those students to school? It was ignored for more than 12 months until a fortnight ago; we had students left, and their parents were calling schools and making sure that they could get there. And they still cannot – 78 kids prescribed and a 58-seater bus. How do we get those 20 kids to school? Their parents change their working environment to get them there, or they are absent. So let us talk about absenteeism. Why is it that regional Victoria has such high rates of absenteeism? We cannot get our kids to school, we do not have a school or we do not have conditions that are safe and comfortable for them to be there. Question any of this. We have the reports. This is coming directly from our community, verified by so many reports that say we are getting the short straw in this state.

We could talk about the government priorities. I am going to read my notes now because I want the language to be correct. Honestly, it is hard when we have people in our electorates saying, ‘Why can the government turn a blind eye on wasting \$15 billion of money stolen on Big Build sites to fund outlaw bikie gangs, drug dealers and state-sponsored strippers to entice people to get to work, and yet we can’t even get an air conditioner in our schools?’ It is unprecedented to hear that right now in the upper house every single member other than Labor has supported a royal commission into this. That says something. Why do you want to hide the condition report of our schools, and why do you want to hide a royal commission into the Big Build? Because there is something that Labor wants to hide.

Let us talk about, in my last 90 seconds, what \$15 billion could do for regional Victorians in my electorate. \$15 billion of Victorians’ money stolen by Labor’s mates on Labor’s watch could get us a new school in Kilmore, could get us a school in Heathcote, could transform the future educational outcomes of every single Victorian student. This has the potential to change Victorians’ lives, and we cannot even have it properly investigated. How many air conditioners could we get with \$15 billion? Quite a few. Victorians have 15 billion reasons to question this government, 15 billion reasons to doubt what they are being told.

The member for Albert Park put forward a matter that says we are nation leading in investment in school infrastructure. Imagine what that \$15 billion could do to our school infrastructure. Nearly one in five schools are in poor condition while money disappears elsewhere. The priorities are clear: under Labor corruption is covered up – it is in their DNA – but under the Liberals and Nationals it will be cleaned up, because that is in our DNA.

Gary MAAS (Narre Warren South) (17:52): I rise with an enormous sense of gratitude in fact to speak to this matter that has been put forward by the member for Albert Park. When I note the speakers on our side of the chamber, there actually seems to be this incredible sense of hope and aspiration for the students of Victoria. There is an innate sense of positivity, but of course that is what comes when

you have members in this place whose contributions to this debate have all been from a sense of lived experience, because each and every one of the contributors today has been a former schoolteacher – the member for Albert Park, the member for Frankston, the member for Monbulk, the member for Werribee, the member for Bellarine and me. I know that there are several other of my parliamentary colleagues who were fighting for spots today to speak to this because they too had experience in our education system, including the member for Greenvale and the member for Ballarat, and I understand the member for Preston has dabbled in some tutoring at university level as well. But if you come from that lived experience, you come to the Labor Party and you make sure you come to government, where you can enact change, where you can make a difference for kids, because as a schoolteacher you want to be able to instil hope into the next generation. You want to be able to pass skill sets down in whatever discipline it is that you are teaching.

I heard the member for Bellarine speak with a great sense of pride of students that she has taught that have gone on to great things. As one who has taught in the discipline of music, it thrills me no end when I see professional musicians on stage doing their things. The drummer of the Bamboos Graeme Pogson – I am so proud to see him touring the world and doing the great work that he does. These are the sorts of things that inspire teachers and keep inspiring them, even when they come to this place, because you want to make sure that every kid has opportunity. As everyone in Labor knows, education absolutely transforms lives.

I was fortunate as a kid growing up to have a great local member. A fellow by the name of Edward Micallef, the member for Springvale at that time, was a passionate advocate for education, and he made sure that the school I went to in the outer south-east, Springvale High, got its fair share of means-tested funding. Back then it was known as the disadvantaged schools program – a horrible name, but it was that program that helped set kids up for their future lives and, I dare say, helped me to latch on to something such as music to be able to navigate my way through life and through the education system.

Just this afternoon, I saw something similar when I was sitting with the member for Narre Warren North and the member for Cranbourne and speaking about a sporting program, again with kids from the outer south-east who were looking for that peg to hang their futures on. They are great at football and there is a big football club in the outer south-east that is integrating with our communities and ensuring that it is attached to the government's education programs.

Together with funding, together with infrastructure, together with social cohesion and community effort, great things can be attained. It is so good to see that what was happening back in the 1970s and 80s in Victoria with our education programs is exactly the same thing that is happening now. Lives are being improved every single day. And can I say that over that distance it has largely been Victorian Labor governments that have delivered that. I am very proud to be a part of the Allan Labor government, which leads this nation in investments, as I said, in school infrastructure, in safety, in those learning supports and in cost-of-living relief.

But of course, we hear the politics of grievance all the time, don't we? We hear it on this side. When you have got nothing positive to say, you are always going to be on the negative. And, you know what, these guys cannot even stop fighting with themselves, let alone put a positive agenda forward. I mean, where is the education policy? Where is it? You are comparing us to perfect; you have not even got anything yourselves. They have not even got anything themselves; there is nothing. Do not come into this place and start talking about something else – we are here to talk about education. You have not got policy to talk to. They have not got policy to talk to. Nothing exemplifies this more than when you see them fighting in their party rooms. You had deputy leader Sam Groth, who stepped down early this year because his own party was undermining him. In the same month we finished delivering a hundred new schools that we said were going to deliver. We deliver; they fight. It is clear they are focused on themselves and they are not focused on Victorians.

Since coming to government, Labor has delivered an additional \$38.6 billion for our schools. You compare this to the Libs and the Nats, who are obsessed with cuts. When they were last in power, they cut health, they cut education – and families in the outer south-east, I can tell you, really paid a very high price for this. It is only on this side of the house that investment in education will be prioritised. It is only on this side of the house that it will continue to grow. We understand our teachers because, as I have already pointed out, we have many of them on this side of the house. Only Labor governments know the importance of a great public education and what access to opportunity does for communities. That is why we will keep delivering, why we will keep expanding and upgrading our schools, why we will help students be the very best that they can and why we will support their families as well, be it in the realm of cost of living, while also backing our teachers.

I think my speech has been truncated a little bit, so let me spell it out as I conclude my comments today. It is clear that, under the Liberals and Nationals, students, teachers and families will be left on their own in a Wild West kind of zone of privilege where only those with the biggest wallets will have access to education. Labor governments will always stand by our teachers, always stand by our students and always stand by our school communities because they are the backbones of our society, a civil society of social cohesion, one that is important for our kids to have the best start in life. It is why we are the Education State, because Labor believes education is the single most important investment that any government can make in our collective future. I was a teacher; I will always be a teacher. Teachers never give up on their kids, and this government will not give up on them either. I commend the matter.

Bills

Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025

Second reading

Debate resumed.

John LISTER (Werribee) (18:01): Returning to this bill, we have just had some really good reflections on the power of education. Earlier in my contribution I spoke about my own experience of dealing with children who were either in out-of-home care or involved in child protection. I spoke about how they never leave you, the names and faces of those kids that you worked with, knowing full well that when the bell went at 3:05 they were not entirely sure of what their situation would look like as they left the school gates – some of the most certainty that they had for the day was at school. I commend my colleagues for their contribution so far on this bill, but I would just like to give a shout-out particularly to those school staff who work in wellbeing that see this every day. I think the model that we are seeking to implement with this legislation says that they are not alone with this – it is not just those child protection workers, those teachers and those youth workers at amazing places like Uniting or through a youth resource centre – the member for Tarneit outlined the great work that they do. I have been along to many of their programs as well and seen the work that they do in engaging young people. It is not just for those groups to look after and look out for the interests of those young people; it is for everyone.

A bureaucracy is a very tricky thing; it can sometimes feel quite impersonal. But as someone who has worked with and in the bureaucracy, I know full well that it is filled with people who want to do the best for our state and want to do the best for our country. We want to make sure that that feeling of wanting to do the best is at the heart of this legislation, and that is something that this legislation outlines. We are taking inspiration from the experience in Scotland. Again, I have done a fair bit of reading into how their model has rolled out, and I have found that having that coordinated support between and across different departments, all the way from their local authorities – it is a little bit strange how they organise themselves – which are also responsible for housing and things like that, up to the police service and other government departments, a lot of what is being done is being led by young people themselves. They talk about these groups of champions that they have got that come together and discuss what they want to see being done for them in that local area through those

different agencies. Having that voice is so important for young people. It helps train them. It helps make them realise that we are here to develop them as human beings.

As I said at the start, that promise that Scotland makes to its children I think is something that we will reflect not only through the legislation but also through the application of this as we roll it out. That promise that Scotland makes, that they will make sure that children grow up loved, safe and respected so they can realise their full potential, is something that everybody can get around. We know this model works. From reading the review of corporate parenting, a 14-year-old from Scotland commented:

We have relationships with the staff that support us. It feels like being part of a family.

I think that is particularly important when we think of some of those different departments and agencies that will be a part of this corporate parenting model.

Those opposite are supporting this in this house, which I actually respect, although it is another one of those cases where they support it here but they are going to meddle around with it elsewhere, in the upper house. I feel like they just need to be clear with the Victorian public about how they are going to change this, just like they need to be clear about what sorts of services are at risk if they get in due to their ideological bent around cutting services. It is in their DNA, but we do not do that. We support our services. We make sure that we have got these child protection workers, and we also make sure that all those different services that will be part of the corporate parenting model are funded and resourced.

Building a system which engages with communities and brings stakeholders all together is what helps ensure that when we support and care for children outside of the home they are given the best. Supporting communities through changes like this helps ensure that the future we are building for our most vulnerable children is not just one of protection, which is obviously the most important thing, but also one of opportunity and making sure that they have something to come. It is a move that I commend Scotland and this government for taking, because I think it is important that as we move to a more modern bureaucracy, one that comes out of the stuffiness of Collins Street and spaces that look a lot like this and into the real world, we realise that it is not just about the paperwork and the documents and all those kinds of procedures. It is about the people we are working with, and when I say 'working with', it is about listening to them and using it as well. I commend this bill to the house.

Kim O'KEEFFE (Shepparton) (18:07): I rise to speak on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. This is a bill that seeks to make a number of amendments to the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 to create a supporting stable and strong families (SSSF) scheme to provide for collective responsibility and a whole-of-government approach to supporting child wellbeing and safety. I am sure that everyone in this place shares a fundamental goal that stable families and safe children have to be a priority and that we must be making the changes necessary to ensure that the most vulnerable people in our communities have the support and safeguards that they need. There are many families and children who are in need of support in our communities. It is critical that we provide the resources that ensure that the right frameworks are in place. There have been incidents of children and families who have not had the support that they need. When there is family breakdown, the impact can be devastating and in some cases even tragic. We know that there are issues within the child protection system itself today. Like others, my office has had many people contact us, and some of the incidents are alarming and distressing. We must do everything we can to ensure that children within the system get the utmost care and protections afforded to them. We cannot expect families to reunify and children to be safe and stable without the services that actually make that possible, such as accessible housing, culturally appropriate treatment programs, early intervention supports and full support for carers.

The government has framed this bill as nation leading and as a means to create a whole-of-government response to support vulnerable children and their families. I absolutely agree that child protection must be a shared responsibility. However, the concern is that these reforms do not go far enough to make the changes needed for families and for the already overburdened child protection system.

Stakeholders generally supported the intent of this bill and saw it as a step in the right direction. However, many raised their concerns that plans and reports alone would not lead to real change, especially without clear accountability, stronger collaboration and proper funding, and most stakeholders raised concerns about inadequate consultation. Stakeholders also warned that trying to cover too many groups may reduce the focus on those with the highest needs.

Despite its broad goals, the bill mainly sets up a system for planning and reporting. It does not require departments to take action, create legal rights or step in when outcomes are not improving. The scheme lacks enforceability obligations. Its practical impact will depend heavily on the quality of the SSSF plans, the willingness of portfolios to collaborate and future resourcing decisions. Collaboration is encouraged but not required, and coordination is mostly left to high-level guidance in planned preparation from the Children's Services Coordination Board.

It is often the unsung heroes in our communities who are doing incredible work in this space. Just today I had Melanie from the Shepparton community house here on the steps of Parliament advocating for continued funding. What I did not know about Melanie until we chatted over lunch is that she cares for a young Indigenous teenage boy along with her own seven children. She said the plan was that he only stayed for about a month, and a year and a half later he is still there. He has stability and a family who care for him. Another very special woman in my community – her name is Wendy Dow – has been a foster carer with Berry Street for more than 35 years, opening up her home and heart to more than 300 children during that time. She is a remarkable woman, caring for children in their time of need on top of her own four children and three permanent care children. In a recent article published by the *Shepparton News* Wendy said:

Being a foster carer doesn't come without its challenges – children missing their families, struggling with dysregulated behaviour and not knowing how to cope with their own emotions.

Also in the article Wendy shared a story of a little girl she looked after for 3½ years who went home to her family after lots of hard work from the child's biological mother. Wendy mentions her ongoing support to that child and the mother to this day. She is such an incredible, caring and giving woman, and how fortunate are we to have someone like Wendy as a foster carer. It is foster carers like Wendy and her family that provide stability, a safe space and time for children and for their families to get the assistance that they need. We know that the need is growing for foster carers, and as a government we need to provide the support and assistance needed.

I would also like to acknowledge the team at Shepparton Berry Street, who do such great work, offering a range of services and support, including family violence support, trauma services, out-of-home care, and parenting and family services, and of course there are many others. I have also mentioned my friend Aunty Faye Lynam in this place before, a remarkable Indigenous woman who during her life fostered many children, and not just Indigenous children. She advocated for respect and dignity in child protection and the youth justice system. Sadly, she passed away two years ago, but I remember her stories of the children she fostered and her genuine love and care and hope for their future and the future of their families.

It is really sad when families are separated and pulled apart – the impact of my own experience of family breakdown as a child – and there is that sadness when your siblings leave the home and that separation and confusion. I did not see one of my older sisters for four years when she left at the age of 14 and went to live with a family in Melbourne. I was 10 years old, and she was my big sister who looked after me, and I do always remember that night when she was picked up. I left the family home as a teenager, leaving behind my younger siblings and moving in with friends and family initially, then in and out of a range of accommodation. I look back and think how extraordinary it was that that was just allowed to happen. There were seven of us, and most of us left the family home as young teenagers. My parents needed help. My dad had mental health issues, and both parents had alcohol addiction. Back then we did not get the family assistance we needed, and my parents did not look for it. I look back on those times and how hard it was for all of my siblings.

We need accessible family support services and early intervention. If we can have the support mechanisms in place that help families through the challenges that they are facing, having those systems in place will lead to the prevention of family breakdown and positive outcomes. Also, the safety of the child must be the highest priority. Every child deserves a safe and stable home and a family that can care for them, not to be lost in a system that leaves them and their families behind. We also need to ensure children get counselling and mental health support, as it can have a lifelong impact and ongoing trauma and be a traumatic time in their life, not only during that time but in the future.

Foster carers and anyone who takes on the care of a child take on an enormous responsibility. We must support them in every way possible. They are the safety net that catches many children. I will also note the response from the Foster Care Association of Victoria to this bill. The FCAV welcome the introduction of this bill, but they are concerned that the objectives of the bill cannot be meaningfully realised unless there is substantial investment from the government to ensure that timely access to critical support services is available to families. The FCAV also in their response went on to say:

Without dedicated new funding to expand service capacity, reduce waiting times, and ensure equitable access across the state, the reforms proposed in this Bill risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

A well-resourced system that supports families, carers and practitioners should also be front of mind when it comes to decision-making. They also raised concerns that:

The SSSF Bill does not mandate consultation with foster carers during the development of departmental plans and leaves open the possibility that critical aspects of child protection service delivery may be overlooked or inconsistently addressed.

They also said:

Children in care do not experience services in silos, and so neither do carers. Education, health, mental health, disability, justice, and child protection often intersect in the everyday experiences of children and their carers. When coordination and resources are deficient, carers absorb the impact, and the children experience further disruption. Coordination is central to this Bill, yet carers are not named as SSSF partners, calling into question how success will be tested in reality at the placement level. If the SSSF plans do not translate into meaningful, timely and coordinated action, carers bear the burden, supporting children through delays and unclear escalation pathways and potentially resulting in crisis-driven responses. Consultation with carers can ground outcome measures in lived reality, identify where accountability becomes diffuse, and test whether coordination is operational rather than aspirational. Without this lens, progress may be reported on paper, while instability persists in homes, until carers can no longer buffer the system's gaps for the children in their care.

They also raised concerns regarding carer recruitment and retention:

Carer recruitment and retention, for example, is critical to system capacity and placement stability. Without direct consultation with carers on factors influencing recruitment and retention, plans may fail to include meaningful objectives or outcome measures to address these systemic challenges.

It is critical that we do work through this bill, that we do aim for better outcomes, that we do make sure that the actions are accountable and that we see the impacts on children's lives is a positive outcome. We must make sure that we keep forcing and really trying hard to support the carers, the children and everyone that is impacted. I will finish my contribution there, but there is still so much more that needs to be done.

Sarah CONNOLLY (Laverton) (18:17): I too rise to speak on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. This is a really important bill. We talk about some really important topics here in this place. This bill is about improving outcomes for young Victorians, especially children at risk and their families, so this could not be a more important topic for us to speak about this afternoon. But it is no surprise to me that those opposite – and it is lovely to follow the member for Shepparton – have pretty much run out of speakers, and they ran out of speakers some time ago. Despite coming to this place and putting on a big show and dance about how they really care about child protection and how they have a lot to say about it, the room is empty

on the other side of this chamber, and I do wonder if they will have any other speakers this afternoon to stand to speak on this really important bill.

The main goal of this bill is to introduce a new whole-of-government approach to supporting child wellbeing and safety through the establishment of the supporting stable and strong families scheme. We know that our child protection workers do an incredible job. It is an incredibly difficult job, but they do the job of supporting young people who end up in this system, and they do it for a number of different reasons. These are truly incredible people, and it is so important this evening to give a big shout-out and a big thankyou to those child protection workers for everything that they do. Working with vulnerable kids day in, day out is an incredibly difficult task, which is why this side of the house and our government have consistently backed these workers.

Since 2014 we have invested in more than 1180 new child protection practitioner roles, which means there are more case-carrying workers than ever before. In the past six state budgets we have invested more than \$4.4 billion into child protection and family services, with \$14 million in last year's budget to continue programs to support this workforce. As we know, it is an incredible job, and incredible people make up our child protection workers, but they cannot and should not be expected to do it alone. The challenges facing vulnerable young people are not just for child protection to deal with. It is on all of us across government to consider their needs in different portfolios, because they all play a role: education, health, housing, community safety. This cannot just be the responsibility of the Minister for Children.

We know that this approach already works, and I am going to give you an example. The Victorian housing register recognises parents who are pursuing family reunification as a priority cohort on the waitlist, because we know that having a secure roof over your head helps make for a stable family. We have also got the education supports for children in care program, which provides one-on-one tutoring for kids or young people in the care system who are not engaging with or are at risk of falling out of school, because education for these kids is just as important, if not more important, than other children's.

I have a bit of a smile talking about this, because when I was first elected in 2018 Westjustice and the minister – I think the minister at the time was the member for Niddrie – got together and had a bit of a pilot for children at risk. They had a special card where they did not have to pay for public transport. They had free public transport, which has evolved this year into us announcing and rolling out free public transport for kids under the age of 18. It was such a great pilot – and thanks to and a big shout-out to Westjustice, who do tremendous work in the western suburbs. Thanks to them advocating for these kids at risk of dropping out of school, of getting fines that they did not intend to get in the first place and ending up before the justice system, we have been able to roll out free public transport for kids under the age of 18, at a saving for parents of almost 800 bucks a year per child. I mean, how incredible. What a great story that is, from this small pilot that took place, I think, in Wyndham. It came through a particular school, and I think it was The Grange –

John Lister interjected.

Sarah CONNOLLY: Wyndham Central. I was going to say The Grange P-12, but I cannot have favourites, member for Werribee. But that is just how remarkable it is.

Back to the couple of things that I have just mentioned: they align with the goals of the child protection system. They are not just funded or they do not just run directly through child protection services. It cannot be done alone; we need a bit more. We know it because we have also seen it in the action through Scotland's corporate parenting approach, which we have been talking a lot about over the past couple of months. That scheme ensures that it is the legal duty of public bodies to uphold, safeguard and promote the rights and wellbeing of children and young people who are or have been in the care system.

We are going to be doing that, but we are going to go one step further and create a framework that is actually going to hold government to account for this task, which I think is a really important thing. That is what this bill is all about. The bill is able to do this through the establishment of the supporting stable and strong families scheme. It is going to bring all ministers, department heads and the Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police together as partners, importantly, under the one scheme. All of these positions will have the capacity to create real, positive change for those vulnerable kids, throughout the entire state government spectrum. This list is not exhaustive, but the bill will allow for other positions and office-holders to be prescribed in the future.

How does this scheme work in practice? The bill is going to require that every two years each and every single minister must table a supporting strong and stable families plan for their portfolio. These plans will have to include a clear vision and objectives, along with concrete actions to meet the demand of vulnerable children, with resource allocations and timelines to do so. At the end of each cycle ministers will go ahead and table a progress report; it will detail outcomes and it will detail actions achieved through this plan. This is going to ensure, importantly for these kids, transparency and accountability for each portfolio in this respect. These outcomes will be tracked across key areas like health, education, justice, housing and employment. And because we know that this is an area of policy and that child protection is a system that disproportionately affects Aboriginal Victorians, there is also going to be an outcome for Aboriginal self-determination, which is really important in this case.

The Minister for Children, Minister Blandthorn in the other place, will still be responsible for overseeing and monitoring the performance of the system and coordinating the scheme with other government departments. To support the minister the Children's Services Coordination Board will advise the minister on cross-government policies, track system performance and include the voices of children, and really importantly, also include the voices of their carers. This board is the most appropriate mechanism, I think, for oversight, as it is already comprised of the secretaries of the main government departments with existing responsibilities for services delivered to children and families. That is a lot of people involved in this scheme, and with the involvement of those there is transparency and accountability.

I think at the end of the day it is really important to report on those things that I have just mentioned, because the outcomes for these really vulnerable children really are driven and determined by not only what we do in here but what is happening on the ground with people within the scheme. It is so incredibly important. What I am hoping is that we will see a reduction of at-risk children. We have a lot of kids in the western suburbs that struggle with engagement or are disengaging with school. We have a lot of services in operation that are there to support and keep those children at school, including the school principals, who, in the last couple of seconds that I have got left in making a contribution on this bill, I will give a big shout-out to. Some of the prins I have met over the past eight years that I have been in this place are absolutely amazing, and they transform children who are totally at risk and so vulnerable because of the circumstances that they are born into, through no fault of their own. These principals take these kids and they lift them up and they transform their lives, giving them an education, which gives them the opportunity to succeed in life. I wholeheartedly commend this bill to the house.

Lauren KATHAGE (Yan Yean) (18:27): I too rise in support of the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. From the outset can I say that I want to dedicate some of this time to saying how important foster carers are in our community and what an incredibly important role they play in caring for some of Victoria's most vulnerable children. They give so much because they care about children and ensuring that children have the best possible outcome that they can. I had the privilege of meeting a lot of foster carers when I provided respite care for their charges, and the people that I met were busy, salt of the earth, absolutely child-focused people that would give you the shirt off their back. So I really want to thank every single foster carer in Victoria for their dedication to Victorian children.

We know that parents want to be with their children, and sometimes the difficulties faced by a parent get in the way of that. I think about my time and I think about a particular woman who we supported

at the women's homelessness service that I worked at, and in her room each night in bed as she lay her head on her pillow her pillowslip had printed on it photos of her children that she was separated from and that she was finding it difficult to get back to due to her lack of housing. So it is obviously very pleasing as a part of this government to note that priority housing for families seeking reunification is something that this government cares about.

When I think about what life is like for families who might be at risk of being engaged with child protection, I think of Julie Hagan, a fantastic social worker that I used to work with who worked on early intervention with families while the children were still at home. She was amazing. She was absolutely amazing, Julie. But what was really interesting about what I saw in her role was how much of it was acting as a go-between on behalf of families, going between departments, going between agencies and being that connector. So I am really pleased to speak to this bill, which basically seeks to replicate that fantastic social worker Julie Hagan insofar as it is about making government people centred and wrapping departments and services around people, rather than having silos that are focused on their own individual objectives only.

It strikes me that this is not the first time that this government has undertaken such changes to the system. This is a government that disrupts the system and that will always change the system if it is for the benefit of Victorians. We have seen that with this government's work with the Orange Door, where people needing help are clustered around by the different services that can offer support for all their different needs. We see that with the mental health hubs, which have that same people-centred approach, and we see it with the Navigator program. Those are some really good examples of how the government is wrapping around people at their time of need and providing the least friction, the fewest barriers, to getting the help and support and services that they need, and I am really proud to be part of a government that does that. You just have to think about the Premier creating the children's portfolio when she became Premier and bringing things together for the benefit of children – wrapping around children. I am proud to have human-focused and people-centred leadership in our government.

Some of the talk earlier today from those opposite was around a fear of a lack of accountability in regard to the legislation and a concern that the legislation was not focused on what they saw as the most pressing needs. Let us be really clear that this government has brought waves of reform to child protection. I believe the minister has had nine separate pieces before this house, which have ranged from the detail to the macro. What this bill is about is changing the structure and the system so that children do not as easily fall through the gaps or need intensive residential support. It does not mean we are not also doing that work. Along with providing record funding, record staffing and innovative new ways of supporting children and families, we are also changing the system through this bill, and that is the focus of this bill. It is not a case of either-or, it is a case of both, always, every day for every child, and that is what this government is about.

Those opposite also raised concerns around accountability and fears that there would be a lack of accountability set in stone through this legislation. It concerns me that they do not recognise their role in the accountability structure in Victoria. We have plans and reports through this legislation to be tabled in Parliament. We are all members of Parliament, and it is our job to scrutinise, to raise questions and, if need be, to raise hell. That is our job. If they do not feel that they have the ability or the skill to carefully analyse reports or recognise how different things might impact their electorates or their portfolios, well, the shame is on them. They have a role, and we are all accountable. This government has demonstrated how seriously it takes that accountability by taking so much action in the space of child protection. We even see it at PAEC, the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, such an important aspect of accountability of the government. When it came time to discuss child protection in the most recent outcomes hearings, which are around the indicators and outcomes that departments are seeking to achieve, which is what those opposite said they want to have oversight of, it would have been better if those opposite, their members of PAEC, were there for those hearings. I regret that they were unable to attend, and hopefully they will attend future child protection sessions of PAEC.

I said earlier that as well as this structural reform, which creates a connectedness between governments, we have also supported the child protection system more broadly. Backing in our child protection workers, 1180 new child protection practitioner roles have been funded by this government over the last 10 years, or since 2014, and we have invested more than \$4.4 billion in the child protection and family services portfolio over the past six state budgets. Numbers can seem meaningless, I agree, but what each of those dollars represents is an investment. It is an investment in a child, an investment in a carer and an investment in the workers who keep families together and keep children safe when they cannot be together. Looking at the broad reforms that this government has brought before this house, continual improvements and the minister's drive to see all children reaching their best possible outcome, I am absolutely proud to stand here for this bill, and I will be equally proud of the next bill and the next one, because I know we have only just gotten going.

Kat THEOPHANOUS (Northcote) (18:37): I am also really proud to be standing up in support of this bill which recognises a pretty simple truth – that is, that when a child is at risk responsibility does not neatly fit into one department or one portfolio. Decisions made in housing, health, education, justice and transport shape the lives of vulnerable children every day, and when those systems are not aligned, families feel the gaps and children pay the price. This bill looks to close those gaps by making supporting vulnerable children and families a shared responsibility across the Victorian government.

Families who come into contact with child protection are not short on scrutiny. What they are often short on is time and coordinated support. Parents on reunification orders can be expected to have secure, stable housing, address health needs, engage with services and support a child's schooling, all while navigating systems that may not be speaking to one another. Young people leaving care are asked to build independence while juggling insecure housing, casual work and inconsistent access to help. Non-government organisations, carers and people with lived experience have been really clear about what they need and what their challenges are. The problem rarely sits with a single service; it sits in the spaces between them – a stalled handover, a missed connection, weeks lost while families retell their stories and wait for the next step.

This bill establishes the supporting stable and strong families model, which gives shared responsibility across the Victorian government to improve outcomes for vulnerable children, young people, care leavers up to the age of 25 and families engaged in family preservation or reunification. As others have noted already in this debate, it draws on the successful corporate parenting model used in Scotland but adapts it to a Victorian context and strengthens it. Under our model, every minister, every department secretary and the Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police are jointly responsible for improving outcomes for at-risk children, young people and families. That is a deliberate and important choice. It recognises that decisions made in education, health, housing, justice and transport all shape the lives of vulnerable children, whether or not those portfolios traditionally sit with child protection. Every minister will be required to set out what their portfolio will do through a supporting stable and strong families plan tabled in Parliament every two years. Those commitments will be public and capable of being tested. Ministers will be required to report back to Parliament on what has been delivered, with progress measured across health, education, housing, justice, employment and Aboriginal self-determination. The strength of this framework is its focus on that delivery. This model is centred on children and families engaged with or at risk of entering child protection and family services. The initial focus is on children subject to family reunification and preservation orders, children in care and young people who have recently left care, but over time that focus can broaden to strengthen prevention and early intervention, helping to keep families together.

Consultation has been a really important part of the reform, including the voices of carers and of people with lived experience, and that work will continue through implementation. Kinship, foster and permanent carers will help guide what works on the ground, and I thank, as others have, those people who do this vital work in what can be very confronting and challenging circumstances. These are people who open their homes and their hearts to children in their time of need. That is a deeply special thing to do, and we need to recognise that contribution.

I also want to acknowledge and thank the Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency, VACCA, who are based out of Preston, in the inner north – a proud Aboriginal community controlled organisation with really deep ties locally. I thank CEO Muriel Bamblett for her leadership and advocacy in this space on behalf of her community. VACCA's voice has consistently reinforced what Aboriginal families have long known: when services are culturally safe, timely and properly coordinated and fundamentally based on keeping children connected with kin and culture, we see better outcomes.

These reforms build on Labor's really strong legacy of supporting children, and one of the things that I am most proud of as a member of our Labor government is our focus on getting that best start in life for kids and giving kids opportunities. Over the past six budgets this government has invested more than \$4.4 billion in child protection and family services. Since 2014 more than 1180 additional child protection practitioner roles have been funded, meaning there are more case-carrying practitioners than ever before. In the most recent budget alone \$14 million was invested to continue programs that support the frontline workforce, including kinship engagement coordinators, Aboriginal cultural support and awareness advisers and specialist litigation support.

For children in residential care our Labor government has delivered the largest single investment in care services in a decade, with \$548 million to improve outcomes and ensure that from July this year every residential care home in Victoria is funded to deliver a therapeutic model of care. That means trauma-informed support, specialist expertise and care that responds to behaviour with understanding rather than punishment.

Whole-of-government action is already removing barriers for families. Parents pursuing reunification are now recognised as a priority cohort for public housing, because without stable housing reunification becomes very, very hard. Programs like pathway to good health ensure children entering care receive coordinated health assessments, and referral education support for children in care provides one-on-one tutoring for those at risk of disengaging in school. These are practical examples of what happens when governments rally around families in the moments that matter most.

That same focus runs through our key Labor reforms to ease pressure on families and strengthen the foundations that children rely on. Free public transport removes a simple but very real barrier, helping young people get to where they need to go, whether that is training, school, appointments or community. Free kinder takes the pressure off household budgets but also gives children those crucial early years of learning that are fundamental to their development, and it helps parents stay connected to services and their communities. School breakfast clubs mean children do not start their days on an empty stomach. Locally in the Northcote electorate we are building an early parenting centre – another key feature and Labor reform to help parents in those early years. We have opened an urgent care clinic in Northcote too, giving direct access to our healthcare system. We also recently opened a mental health and wellbeing hub in Northcote – another critical feature of a system that supports people when they are in need. Together, these and many other everyday supports reinforce routines and stability and give children the chance for that best start.

Importantly, this bill also responds directly to the findings of the Yoorrook Justice Commission. Yoorrook was clear that one of the greatest barriers to better outcomes for Aboriginal children and families is the failure of government systems to act together, early and with accountability. It emphasised the need for shared responsibility across government, stronger early intervention, culturally safe practice and transparent monitoring of outcomes. The bill does not do everything in that space, but it does respond to the core principles that Yoorrook identified. By embedding shared responsibility across government and requiring public plans and progress reports, we are placing outcomes for Aboriginal children and families squarely within the accountability of every single minister. This bill advances the systemic change that Yoorrook sought and that Victoria urgently needs. It stands alongside other landmark reforms already delivered, including legislation placing Aboriginal self-determination at the centre of decision-making and the largest single investment ever made in Aboriginal-led child and family services. The over-representation of Aboriginal children in

care continues to be unacceptable to me and my community, and it is driven by system failure. That responsibility for change must be collective, and this bill goes some way towards addressing that collective responsibility.

In Northcote we see why these reforms matter. I hear from young people leaving care who are trying to stay connected to work and study while navigating insecure housing in particular. I speak with carers who want systems to work better together so children experience stability rather than constant disruption. This bill responds to those realities. For women, particularly single mothers, it means earlier and better coordinated access to housing and health support. It is a reform shaped by evidence, strengthened by lived experience and focused on the outcomes that matter. I commend it to the house.

Bronwyn HALFPENNY (Thomastown) (18:47): I am also speaking in support of the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. This is a bill, as has been said by others, that seeks to amend the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 to facilitate better coordination and collaboration between and across government departments to support vulnerable children and their families. We often hear criticism of the bureaucracy, that different departments operate in silos, resulting in inefficiencies and acting as barriers to good outcomes. This has been said of the child protection system and family services more generally. This legislation seeks to change this so that the state works to support vulnerable children and families in a more holistic way. There have been numerous inquiries over the years into child protection and children and young people in out-of-home care. We all know that we have to do much better and we have to find new and better ways to support children and their families. Of course the most important thing is that in order to keep children safe, we need to keep children safely in their homes.

This legislative reform is one step on that journey. It provides a legal framework to improve collaboration and delivery of services while also building into the system stronger lines of accountability and producing the data to measure outcomes through parliamentary reporting. It is also therefore available to the public. The opposition got up here today and talked about all the problems and complained about the system and how bad the government is, but we do not really see them doing any of the hard work to come up with solutions; they have got no ideas. But today and every day the Allan Labor government is coming up with ideas to try to find answers and make things better for Victorians. The opposition claims this bill does not do anything to address the problems, but I think the opposition does not really know how government works, nor how important a bill such as this is. It builds in accountability, with ministers required to report to Parliament and develop plans. It includes measuring outcomes to clearly show what is working and what is not. It also includes establishing mechanisms to listen to and involve those with lived experience.

The main purpose of this bill is to ensure that services and supports are provided early to families and children so children can safely stay in their homes and not be removed into out-of-home care. Enabling early intervention is a point that has been raised over and over by many who know that we need to do this in order to make the outcomes for vulnerable children the best they can be. Timely intervention to support and preserve and reunify the family is critical in this process, because children want to be with their families, they should be with their families and we need to make sure that those families get the support to fulfil their obligations and responsibilities to their children.

This legislative reform is based in part on a model developed in Scotland that is deemed to have been quite successful. Whilst the Victorian legislation, the legislation we are talking about here, does not adopt all of that program, it has taken the aspects that have been shown to work and added additional safeguards and reporting channels. This legislation has been advocated for by a number of organisations that are involved in the rights and care of children, such as Anglicare and also the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. The lived-experience voice will also be heard and has been heard within the development of this legislation through the ministerial youth advisory group. They have been consulted, and they will also be involved in the implementation of this legislation all the way through. There is a legislative aspect that also brings in the role of the Children's Services Coordination Board, and that board will support the administration of this scheme – the holistic, all-

of-government approach – and will be prescribing the outcome measures to ensure clear data and to establish if progress has been made.

This legislation and other reforms are about keeping children safely with their families. Previous opposition speakers, as I have already spoken about, have repeatedly given the most terrible accounts of what has happened to children in out-of-home care, and nobody is disputing there have been terrible experiences, but, while serious, they are not the point of this debate or this bill. This bill is about stopping and preventing children going into out-of-home care – and therefore not being in situations to have those terrible experiences – and ensuring that the families are supported and the children can stay at home, where they normally want to be, no matter the circumstances. It is the government's responsibility to ensure that a child is safe, to support the family in order to preserve the family being together and also – in cases where there have been children removed from the home – to ensure they have a process and the necessary supports in order to bring that family back together.

There are a couple of other parts of this bill that I would just like to touch on briefly in the short time I have left. I think other speakers might be happy if I sit down a little bit early so they can also make a contribution. At new section 20Q there is a requirement for the minister to cause an independent statutory review of the supporting stable and strong families scheme to be undertaken within a five-year period. Again, we are not just sitting here saying this is the be-all and end-all. It is also building into the program and scheme a way of reviewing how the scheme is working and what is going well and what is not. That is required, under the legislation, to be undertaken within a five-year period. So there is accountability built into this scheme, with a review by an independent body to ensure that the scheme is working. We certainly want to make sure that we are improving the child protection system. There are also measures that have not been there before in terms of looking at the outcomes, looking at what is working and what is not and making sure that we are reforming this system and ensuring that it is good for families and for their children.

Paul MERCURIO (Hastings) (18:54): I rise to speak on the Children, Youth and Families Amendment (Supporting Stable and Strong Families) Bill 2025. I want to begin with the simple principle at the heart of this reform: when a child is vulnerable, when a family is in crisis or when a young person is navigating trauma and uncertainty, the response they receive should not depend on which government department they happen to approach first. It should not depend on whether they knock on the door of housing or health or education or justice. The response should be coordinated, consistent and focused on helping early, not waiting until things deteriorate further. That is what this bill is about. It is about that response being coordinated, consistent and focused.

There have been a lot of debate and a lot of things said in the chamber, and I am lucky last. I am not sure if there is anything new I can say, but I will repeat the statement by the member for Werribee that it takes a village to raise a child. I completely agree with that. Somebody on the other side actually used the quote that everybody's job is nobody's job, and that is a bit of a negative view. I think that the more people that are thinking, caring and working together, the more chances we have of stopping people from slipping through the cracks and being lost. That is why I support this bill. I do note that everyone supports the bill, and the discussion is how it is going to be implemented to some extent.

But what I love about this bill is that under this change every minister, every department head and the Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police become partners in improving outcomes for at-risk children and families. To me that is 'It takes a village to raise a child.' I might just say it again: under this change every minister, every department head and the Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police become partners in improving outcomes for at-risk children and families. This is a meaningful shift. It recognises that the resources, powers and influence that sit across portfolios can and should be aligned in the interests of vulnerable children. It moves us away from a model where one part of government carries the burden and towards one where responsibility is shared and visible.

We have already seen the benefits of cross-government collaboration. A practical example is recognising parents who are pursuing family reunification as a priority cohort under the Victorian

housing register. That might sound administrative, but it makes a real difference. Stable and appropriate housing is often the critical factor that enables parents to address protective concerns and safely resume caring responsibilities. Without a stable home, reunification is significantly more difficult. With one, families have a far stronger chance of rebuilding. There are other examples. The pathway to good health program ensures that children and young people entering or re-entering statutory care receive health screening, assessment and referral support. In education, the education supports for children in care program provides one-on-one tutoring to help young people who are disengaged or at risk of disengaging from school. Even policies such as free public transport for those under 18 can play an important role in enabling access to school, training, appointments and work. These initiatives demonstrate what is possible when portfolios work together.

I just recently had an experience with my daughter, who was trying to purchase a new phone. She is unwell, she cannot work and she went to the phone company to talk about getting a phone. They basically said, 'You can't get one; you don't earn the money. We won't give you the loan.' It made me realise that our society tends to make poor people poorer consistently, and it is the poor people and the people that are having difficulties that we as a community should be picking up. We as a community should be supporting the people that are disenfranchised and disabled with technology and what is going on in this community.

Business interrupted under sessional orders.

Adjournment

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The question is:

That the house now adjourns.

Warrnambool rail line

Roma BRITNELL (South-West Coast) (19:00): (1529) My adjournment matter is to the Minister for Public and Active Transport, and the action I seek is delivery of a six-carriage VLocity train set to the Warrnambool line and to immediately undertake the works required to restore full capacity and dignity to train travel for the people of South-West Coast. Right now the Wodonga train line operates with six carriages, including buffet cars, and has the ability to navigate short platforms without any difficulty. They have USB charging points and tray tables and ample room for luggage. It shows what is entirely possible when the will is there to deliver a suitable service. But on the Warrnambool line our story is very different. In recent years our service has been reduced to just three carriages, with no buffet car at all. This is a significant cut in capacity and comfort for a region that relies heavily on rail travel for work, for medical appointments, for education and to stay connected.

The explanation we have been given is that government cannot put more carriages on our line because our platforms are too short, but we know that is simply not the full story. Other stations, including in places like Avenel, just north of Seymour, manage short platforms with ease. Doors can be controlled, and operational solutions already exist and are used elsewhere in Victoria. The technology is available. The method is proven. The excuse does not stand. 'Train now arriving at Avenel. Please check there is a platform available. Please mind the gap. Passengers in the rear cars may need to move forward to ensure a platform is available before exiting the train,' unfortunately, is something we do not hear on the Warrnambool train line, but we need to.

This issue with train capacity is just one example, one symptom, of a much deeper pattern of neglect across South-West Coast. This government seems comfortable with giving \$15 billion to outlaw motorcycle gangs but not with providing a suitable and efficient train service to South-West Coast. Despite their promises, we are not fooled. People in South-West Coast deserve better than a government that looks the other way while mismanagement festers at the very top. We are still using paper tickets on our train, a system that belongs to another century. Long after other regions have moved on to modern integrated ticketing, our passengers line up for paper tickets when they should be tapping on and tapping off. It is outdated, it is inconvenient and it is another reminder that

investment and innovation simply are not reaching regional Victoria. When even basic upgrades bypass our region, it becomes impossible to ignore the message: this tired and arrogant state Labor government does not value the regions.

Anakie Primary School

Ella GEORGE (Lara) (19:03): (1530) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. The action that I seek is for the minister to visit Anakie Primary School with me and hear from the community about the road safety concerns they have primarily in front of the school and along the section of Ballan Road extending to the intersections at Staughton Vale Road and Darlington Drive. Local residents and the school community frequently express concerns to me about the safety of children, staff and families near Anakie Primary School, and I completely agree with their concerns. This road is a major, high-volume commuter and freight route, with high volumes of vehicles, including residential commuters, heavy vehicles and public transport, passing through daily. Given that Anakie Primary School is located on this road, the school community is eager to work with the minister and the Department of Transport and Planning to address the troubling incidents and the near misses that have occurred. Implementing safety measures would greatly improve safety for all road users, particularly the children, staff and families of Anakie Primary School, and I look forward to working with the community and the minister to address this matter.

Electricity infrastructure

Emma KEALY (Lowan) (19:04): (1531) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Energy and Resources, and the action I seek is for the minister to immediately halt the VNI West transmission project, to undertake a full review of Victoria's transmission plan to ensure it is reflective of modern and emerging energy technologies and to assess the value proposition and business case to understand the true cost of this project. It is well and truly clear, if you spend any time along the VNI West line, that this project has been horrendously managed. The people in those communities and the landholders have not been treated with any respect at all. This is a project that is going on to land which has certain agricultural practices that simply cannot operate under transmission lines, and yet there has been no information provided by VicGrid or the Victorian government or any insight into what the impacts are on communities. Communities are divided and farmers are angry, and they want to be heard. It is also impacting on really important environmental assets through that region. This is because it does not go through an existing easement, it is bulldozing its way through the west of Victoria. Local people have not been able to have their say. In fact Labor have taken away their say by legislating that if they say you cannot enter property, there will end up being a massive fine for farmers. That simply is not fair.

We also know this is a massively expensive project. It has gone from about \$7 billion now up to \$11 billion. It is expected to end up at about \$20 billion, and this is before anybody has even signed up to this project. This will end up as a massive cost for everyday Victorians, because every single dollar ends up on an energy bill at the end of the day. It is not the government that pays; it is people who are struggling to keep on top of their everyday bills that will pay the price. And of course we know that there are existing grid issues that urgently need maintenance. The lines in the west of the state are aged and brittle and send energy in the wrong direction. This government should focus on upgrading those existing lines – use the existing easements as a first priority – to keep the cost down. But most important, this process of upgrading existing lines would unlock more renewables than VNI West. I urge the government to immediately halt VNI West, to listen to the communities and the people of western Victoria and to ensure that they upgrade the existing lines and deliver real value for everyday Victorians.

Bushfire recovery

Martha HAYLETT (Ripon) (19:06): (1532) My adjournment matter is for the attention of the Minister for Environment. The action I seek is for the minister to expedite the bushfire clean-up at the Carranballac Recreation Reserve in my electorate following last month's devastating Streatham fire. The Carranballac Recreation Reserve is public land managed by a dedicated local committee of

management with oversight from the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action. It is the heart and soul of the Carranballac community, home to the cricket club, the progress society, the Eel Skinners & Duck Pluckers BNS Ball, and the much loved HarvFest Ball. Last month's fire destroyed the reserve, the clubrooms and everything inside them. The loss has been deeply felt. A local recovery network and working group has now been established, and the community is rallying together. But locals are concerned that recovery efforts on this DEECA-managed site may fall behind, particularly when it comes to tree removal around the reserve and the clean-up of damaged buildings. This community deserve certainty and momentum as they begin rebuilding what they have lost. I welcome the minister's support to ensure the clean-up is prioritised so the people of Carranballac can start the road to recovery.

Rental reform

Chris CREWTER (Mornington) (19:08): (1533) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Consumer Affairs. The action I seek is for the minister to update Victorians on what the government is doing to enforce the proper carrying out of smoke alarm, gas and electrical safety checks at the standard prescribed by the Victorian Residential Tenancies Act 1997. While Victoria has legislated strict rental safety standards, the laws are being rorted by unscrupulous operators. Noncompliance has unfortunately led to fatal consequences. Over the last decade Victorians have tragically lost their lives from preventable incidents, including a father killed in a fire caused by non-operational smoke alarms, and a woman and children in separate incidents who died from carbon monoxide poisoning. Today Victorian renters remain at risk of preventable injury and death because critical safety checks are failing or simply not being properly done at all.

The McKell Institute brought together key stakeholders from Victoria's rental ecosystem and produced an evidence-based analysis that confirmed this systemic breakdown in oversight, auditing and accountability for safety checks by Consumer Affairs Victoria. Mystery shopping data reviewed by the McKell Institute shows inspections that should take at least an hour are completed in as little as 15 minutes. Safety checks have been reduced to a box-ticking exercise, such as providers simply taking a photo of the electrical box. A third of providers did not check the proper functioning of a single smoke alarm at the property. For electrical safety, 60 per cent of required checks were incomplete and almost a quarter lacked the required licence. Gas safety is even more alarming. Eighty per cent of the required steps defined in the Residential Tenancies Act were missed. With hundreds of thousands of Victorian rental properties requiring safety checks every year, costing property investors millions, the absence of an effective enforcement process wastes resources and leaves renters vulnerable. Stronger oversight, accreditation and enforcement with respect to providers could stop unsafe shortcuts and guarantee that reforms genuinely protect Victorian renters. It would also protect landlords whose properties and tenants may be at risk and ensure they are getting the proper safety checks they are paying for. Lastly, it would ensure a fair market for providers, stopping providers doing the wrong thing and undercutting those obeying the law on price and the amount of jobs done per day.

The McKell Institute report recommends the introduction of an accreditation scheme for safety check providers that would include an online registry and auditing function. According to a proposal put forward by an industry provider to the minister's office, the scheme would be self-funded by industry participants, requiring no new costs for renters, landlords or the government. You can read this report on the McKell Institute's website under the research tab under the heading 'Unchecked: strengthening safety measures for Victorian rental properties'. Unfortunately this government is failing to ensure our renter protection systems are properly enforced despite existing laws being in place to enable oversight of providers. I call on the minister to take action.

Bass electorate ministerial visit

Jordan CRUGNALE (Bass) (19:11): (1534) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Environment and Minister for Outdoor Recreation, and the action I seek is for the minister to visit my electorate of Bass for a grand day out, touring our many Labor government initiatives and signature

projects – upcoming, underway and completed – and meeting with many community members across my electorate. Given the confirmation just recently of the MotoGP contract not being extended beyond this year’s event, I take this opportunity to also ask that the minister in his tourism and major events portfolios joins me to meet with the Bass Coast council and stakeholders to discuss what future opportunities we can all work towards for alternate major events that will benefit my community and wider region.

The state’s largest dune reconstruction project has begun in Inverloch, with haul contractors mobilising equipment to pump 100,000 cubic metres of sand from Andersons Inlet to the surf beach area starting in April. It is the first major action of our cape-to-cape resilience plan. A \$2 million contribution brings the project to \$5.3 million, alongside the \$1.7 million in ongoing coastal protection works and a further \$700,000 to extend and repair the geotextile wall. And perhaps we can time the visit with the Equinox Festival – all things sonorous and stellar astronomical.

A visit must include an underground tour of the State Coal Mine and of course meeting with our remarkable former miners Daniel Carr, Luciano Storti, Ugo Andrighetto, Frank Cimino, Aldo Sartori, Reg Wilson and Rod McLean. Huge appreciation to the Parks Victoria team, friends and volunteers who care for and champion this treasured site. Our \$1.5 million investment brings the tunnels up to scratch. We just need a tad more, please, to get the drift car, which we committed to, back up and running again.

Across our coast, boat ramp upgrades are transforming access. Lang Lang is almost complete, and Tooradin begins construction in early March. Planning continues at Cannons Creek, Newhaven and Corinella. Recently upgraded and open are Inverloch, Mahers Landing, Rhyll and Cowes. Our fishing clubs are thriving, including the now 115-member Warneet Fishing Club, led by the amazing president Carly Edwards. It is welcoming, inclusive and family focused. Yes, they need a clubroom, and the rec reserve is a perfect location.

On the landcare front, Bass Coast Landcare Network just received \$200,000 for a new seed bank. Devon Meadows is tackling rabbits. Phillip Island with the Bunurong Land Council is planting 3000 plants in endangered swamp scrubs. The South Gippsland Conservation Society is restoring 5.8 hectares. The Western Port, which is a UNESCO biosphere, with surrounds including the woodlands – great walks – offers extraordinary environmental values, including a Ramsar wetland. It is where people, environment, industry and agriculture all come together. We need a strategic whole-of-bay framework. Moonlit Sanctuary in Pearcedale is celebrating its 25th anniversary. There is so much to see and so many to meet. Come on down.

Construction industry

Wayne FARNHAM (Narracan) (19:14): (1535) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Housing and Building, and the action I seek is that the minister withdraw the grossly unfair minimum financial requirement that the government are passing through regulation at the moment. Such is the concern about these MFR regulations that once again the Housing Industry Association and Master Builders Victoria have issued a joint statement demanding that these regulations be withdrawn. They see these regulations as the death knell for many in the home building industry. Master Builders Victoria CEO Michaela Lihou has stated:

Industry feedback indicates this nightmare legislation will dramatically reduce the volume of work builders are permitted to undertake, even where demand exists at a time when Victoria urgently needs more housing. Where is the logic in that?

HIA Executive Director for Victoria Keith Ryan is quoted in the joint media release as saying:

... Victoria’s home builders have lost confidence in a government that they no longer believe will give them a fair go.

He also pointed out that the industry is:

... not looking for any favours here, just a government which might stop kicking builders in the guts and treat them with respect instead.

Those words cannot be any truer than what they are. The fact of the matter is that, particularly last year, the government has passed through so much legislation, and it is beating up builders from pillar to post. Every bit of legislation that has gone through this Parliament has stifled this industry. The government's own figures say the government wants to build 80,000 homes a year. You failed on that figure. That failure will be exaggerated by the fact that this regulation will hamper more builders. I can tell you now that builders in the industry have had a gutful of this government. The government is either too arrogant or too stupid to listen to the industry. It is as simple as that. You cannot keep putting these demands on the industry. You will not have builders left to build homes in the middle of a housing crisis. It is that simple. The government has to stop being so arrogant and listen to the industry. They are warning the government time and time again, but the government turns a blind eye. This state will end up in a very, very poor situation when it comes to housing if the government keeps beating up the housing industry.

In closing, the MFR regulations must be withdrawn immediately, and the government must start a proper consultation process with the industry to develop workable regulations that protect consumers but also give builders a fair go. Honestly, stop beating them up. You will have no-one left.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: I remind members that the use of the word 'you' means the Chair.

Kala Primary School kindergarten

Gary MAAS (Narre Warren South) (19:17): (1536) The adjournment matter I wish to raise is for the Minister for Children and concerns kindergartens on school sites. The action that I seek is that the minister provide an update on how the opening of the new Kala kindergarten is supporting busy families in my electorate of Narre Warren South. I was so pleased to hear that Kala Primary School, which has just opened in Cranbourne North in my electorate, would also have an onsite kinder. Kala kindergarten is part of the Allan Labor government's commitment to building more kindergartens on or near local schools. It is just such a simple idea, but it has a tangible impact for local families day to day. Not only does it give parents more time back in their day as they avoid that double drop-off, but it can also make transition for kids to primary school much smoother, not only for them but for the whole family as well. It is one of the many simple ways that we are making kinder more affordable for Victorian parents while providing easier access to high-quality early education. Alongside our nation-leading free kinder program and those kinder kits, we are putting money back into families' pockets. I look forward to sharing the minister's response with my community.

Carlisle River road maintenance

Richard RIORDAN (Polwarth) (19:18): (1537) My adjournment this evening is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and the action I seek is for the immediate funding of the urgent road bridge repairs on the Carlisle River road, the C161. This Parliament will be well aware of the fact that the Carlisle River community has been devastated by fires on and off now for weeks. In June 2025 two key watercourse crossings on the Carlisle C161 road were replaced with temporary bridges. Unfortunately, in the last week one of these temporary bridges has been knocked by one of the many pieces of heavy equipment going down to secure that community and the rest of the Otways and has lodged the bridge free. The community has been reliably informed by the government's own contractors that there is just simply no money to replace this bridge. That damaged bridge saw the good nature and the good spirit of the local farmer Matt Reid provide an alternative route through his farm, past his dairy, through his back store paddock, across over his own bridge and back onto the road again. In the last week this saw students going to school at the local Carlisle River Primary School, milk tankers and other important forms of transport down that road having to use a farmer's paddock because this state is so broke.

This state, as we have heard this week, has had \$15 billion to give away to all sorts of nefarious causes within its own groupings around the state, yet a hardworking local Otway community like the Carlisle River community has been left with two broken bridges and one-way traffic in an area that has literally seen thousands of emergency services vehicles in the last few weeks having to use this inadequate source of bridging across a main road. It is simply not good enough. The very least that this government could do is, perhaps when it finds some of the missing \$15 billion from the CFMEU and other strange causes, direct some of that funding back to this urgent bridge request. This community will be for the next month, if not years, recovering from the fire damage to pastures, fences and other things, and the last thing those that live in the community and are rebuilding their lives need is to have their lives put at risk because this government has simply been unable to afford to maintain basic road infrastructure on what is an important and accessible piece of road network and the only road network in and out of the community. So, Minister, the action I seek is for the immediate funding and repair of the Carlisle River bridges on road route C161.

Pascoe Vale electorate road safety

Anthony CIANFLONE (Pascoe Vale) (19:21): (1538) My adjournment matter is also for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and the action I seek is for the minister to please provide an update on the investments and the initiatives that the Victorian Labor government has been undertaking to make our roads, streets and neighbourhoods safer across Pascoe Vale, Coburg and parts of Brunswick West. As highlighted by the Economy and Infrastructure Committee inquiry into road safety, which I was proudly part of, we must continue doing more to make our roads safer. I draw the minister's attention to recommendation 5:

The Department of Transport and Planning revise its Speed Zoning Policy to streamline changes to speed limits on a case-by-case basis.

Essentially, the recommendation talks about the need to reform speed limits on arterial roads that go through school areas and catchments, shopping precincts and other activity centres and for the department to take a more flexible approach to adopting safer speed limits in our communities. In this respect I am very pleased to report the Department of Transport and Planning (DTP), as a result of this inquiry, has reviewed and updated speed zoning guidelines to better consider and respond to the needs of inner suburban communities like mine. On 12 December I received a letter from the minister regarding Sydney Road, North Coburg, that informed me that the department of transport supports our community's calls for safer speeds of 40-kilometre speed limits from 7 am to 7 pm between O'Hea Street and Bakers Road, down from the current 60-kilometre limit, creating a more vibrant and safer Sydney Road, North Coburg, to better balance the needs of all road users. These steps respond directly to the Liveable Sydney Road campaign and calls from many locals I have spoken to, including Mercy College and O'Gorman's blinds store at the corner of Bakers Road and leading resident Drew Roberts. Just yesterday I was very proud to table a petition for the campaign of 514 signatures that called for this and other changes that we continue to support.

On 18 December the minister for roads also wrote to me concerning road safety on Moreland Road and informed me, thankfully, that DTP have also provided their support for reducing the speed limit to 50 kilometres an hour along Moreland Road through Coburg, down from the current 60 kilometres, and support a new pedestrian crossing on Moreland Road near Queen Street to improve safety for families, children and vulnerable road users. This is very welcome news to many locals, over 2000 of whom previously signed two local petitions that I also supported on this issue. Local families from Coburg West Primary School, St Fidelis primary and Brunswick North Primary are very happy about this news, as is leading local parent Tahlia Azaria.

On 15 January the minister for roads also wrote to me about Murray Road and said that DTP continues to support and hear our community's calls for better road safety along Murray Road – the implementation of the first-ever 40-kilometre school speed zone along Murray Road, North Coburg, between Stockade Avenue and Outlook Road is an initial step to improving safety in that regard – and

that on 25 October 2025 DTP made adjustments to traffic signals programming at the intersections of Murray Road and Stockade Avenue and Murray Road and Newlands Road to allow pedestrians to begin crossing before vehicles receive the green light, making them more visible to turning drivers, and of course that they support and are investigating continued ongoing improvements. I note that there is a road counting mechanism along Murray Road at the moment, but I support these measures.

Responses

Nick STAIKOS (Bentleigh – Minister for Consumer Affairs, Minister for Local Government) (19:24): I genuinely thank the member for Mornington for raising his matter, because it is a serious matter; it is a matter that is above politics. We have 14 minimum rental standards in Victoria because noncompliance with the rental standards can sometimes have tragic consequences. Last year with the member for Wendouree I met the family of Simon Scarff, who very sadly died trying to escape a fire at his rental property in Ballarat, which was not fitted with a smoke alarm. That is why this government changed the laws in Victoria to ensure that all rental properties not only have to be fitted with a smoke alarm but also have to be tested at least once per year. I take the point that the member for Mornington is making, that we need to ensure that rental providers are complying with those minimum standards, and we need to do what we can to ensure that there is full compliance with those minimum standards. I will ensure that I refer the member's concerns to the director of Consumer Affairs Victoria and to our rental taskforce responsible for weeding out noncompliance with our minimum standards, including when it comes to smoke alarms. The member also referred to a report by the McKell Institute. I am aware of the report, and I will undertake to the member that I will meet with the McKell Institute on that matter. Thank you to the member for Mornington for raising that with me.

A number of other members did raise issues for various ministers. The member for South-West Coast raised a matter for the Minister for Public and Active Transport concerning the Warrnambool train line. The member for Lara raised a matter for the attention of the Minister for Roads and Road Safety with regard to the roads around Anakie Primary School. The member for Lowan raised a matter with the Minister for Energy and Resources with regard to the Victorian transmission plan. The member for Ripon raised a matter for the attention of the Minister for Environment requesting that he expedite bushfire clean-up of Carranballac reserve. The member for Bass raised a matter for the attention of the Minister for Environment asking that he visits the electorate of Bass. The member for Narracan raised a matter for the Minister for Housing and Building with regard to minimum financial requirement regulations. The member for Narre Warren South raised a matter for the attention of the Minister for Children with regard to kindergartens on school sites, specifically one in the member's electorate. The member for Polwarth raised a matter for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety regarding repairs to Carlisle Road. The member for Pascoe Vale raised a matter for the attention of the Minister for Roads and Road Safety requesting an update on investment in local roads in his electorate. I will ensure that all relevant ministers receive those requests.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The house stands adjourned until tomorrow morning.

House adjourned 7:28 pm.