

**PROOF**

**Hansard**

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**

**60th Parliament**

**Wednesday 14 May 2025**



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**Wednesday 14 May 2025**

**The SPEAKER (Maree Edwards) took the chair at 9:32 am, read the prayer and made an acknowledgement of country.**

*Business of the house***Notices of motion****Notice given.**

**The SPEAKER (09:34):** General business, notices of motion 53 to 58, will be removed from the notice paper unless members wishing their matter to remain advise the Clerk in writing before 2 pm today.

*Documents***Documents****Incorporated list as follows:****DOCUMENTS TABLED UNDER ACTS OF PARLIAMENT – The Clerk tabled:**

Auditor-General:

Domestic Building Insurance – Ordered to be published

Quality of Victoria’s Critical Data Assets – Ordered to be published

Bendigo Kangan Institute – Report 2024

Box Hill Institute – Report 2024

Chisholm Institute – Report 2024

Gordon Institute of TAFE – Report 2024

Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE (GOTAFE) – Report 2024

Holmesglen Institute – Report 2024

Melbourne Polytechnic – Report 2024

South West Institute of TAFE – Report 2024

Sunraysia Institute of TAFE (SuniTAFE) – Report 2024

TAFE Gippsland – Report 2024

William Angliss Institute of TAFE – Report 2024

Wodonga Institute of TAFE – Report 2024.

*Bills***Energy and Land Legislation Amendment (Energy Safety) Bill 2025***Council’s amendments*

**The SPEAKER (09:35):** I have received a message from the Legislative Council agreeing to the Energy and Land Legislation Amendment (Energy Safety) Bill 2025 with amendments.

**Ordered that amendments be taken into consideration later this day.**

**Victorian Energy Efficiency Target Amendment (Energy Upgrades for the Future) Bill 2025***Council’s agreement*

**The SPEAKER (09:36):** I have received a message from the Legislative Council agreeing to the Victorian Energy Efficiency Target Amendment (Energy Upgrades for the Future) Bill 2025 without amendment.

*Members statements***Hume Men's Shed**

**Ros SPENCE** (Kalkallo – Minister for Agriculture, Minister for Community Sport, Minister for Carers and Volunteers) (09:37): Last Friday I had the privilege of again visiting the Hume Men's Shed in Craigieburn. Thank you to Bruce Trippree for hosting the visit and for sharing insights into the work of the shedders. This vital community hub provides invaluable services for residents in both the Kalkallo and Greenvale electorates, so it was great to visit with the member for Greenvale. With the shed currently running an impactful program mentoring students from Hume Valley School, it was also great that the member for Broadmeadows could come along. The shed offers a welcoming space for men to connect, share skills and support one another, and the mentoring initiative sees members of the shed generously sharing their time, wisdom and practical skills whilst building confidence and positive relationships with the students.

**Anzac Day**

**Ros SPENCE** (Kalkallo – Minister for Agriculture, Minister for Community Sport, Minister for Carers and Volunteers) (09:37): On another matter, I acknowledged the solemn and important occasion of Anzac Day in Craigieburn. Thousands of residents from across the Kalkallo and Greenvale electorates gathered at the dawn service and the 10 am service to reflect and honour the Anzac spirit and to pay their respects to the brave service men and women who have served our nation. I extend my sincere thanks to Kevin O'Callaghan, members of the Craigieburn War Memorial and Remembrance Committee, the Craigieburn SES and all involved in organising the local commemorations. Their dedication and commitment help ensure that the sacrifices made are never forgotten. I also want to thank Dennis Krake for allowing us to share his story as a Vietnam War veteran in our Anzac Day flyer. His powerful story reminds us of the personal cost of conflict and the enduring courage of those who have served, and we thank him for his service.

**Middle Kinglake Primary School**

**Cindy McLEISH** (Eildon) (09:38): Middle Kinglake Primary School have set the benchmark when it comes to student-led Anzac Day services. It was again a pleasure to attend this year's service at the school. I want to commend MCs Alannah Strubing and Cullen Gardiner and the grade 5 and 6 students who spoke with confidence and knowledge at the service: Willow Sarkkinen, Alexis Rowson, Bonnie Richardson, Curtis Reid, Ruby Puzin, Airlie Kiss, Christian Ingle, Arthur McCormack, Rose Evans, William Barlow, Saphira Borg, Olivia Dinatale, Ripley Jenkins, Carmen Barwick, Ben Bailey and Will Alford. Alannah also laid a wreath on my behalf at the Kinglake dawn service. Bonnie Richardson is an exceptional talent. She read the poem she wrote for the occasion, *Whispers from the Bloodied Shore*. Bonnie's poem was so good that the Whittlesea RSL read it at their Anzac Day service the following day and Marymeade Catholic College used it at their school service. Congratulations to principal Meagan Callander and Di Wilkinson-Hill for another successful service and, more importantly, for instilling the importance of respecting and remembering our Anzacs into our younger generation.

**National Domestic Violence Remembrance Day**

**Cindy McLEISH** (Eildon) (09:39): 7 May was National Domestic Violence Remembrance Day, and my colleagues and I paid our respects to the victims of family and domestic violence at the Safe Steps Candlelight Vigil 2025. It was a moving ceremony led by survivors and advocates of family and domestic violence. The vigil remembered the lives that have been lost, shone a light on issues faced and offered an opportunity for survivors to share their stories.

**Our Lady of the Sacred Heart College Bentleigh**

**Nick STAIKOS** (Bentleigh – Minister for Consumer Affairs, Minister for Local Government) (09:40): I recently attended opening night of *Peter Pan*, a production by OLSH College Bentleigh in

partnership with De La Salle College. Congratulations to everyone involved: to the cast, Archie Cannington, Niki Georgas, Tilda Meadows, Sophia McElherron, Michael Conron, Max Jones, Charli Arvanitakis, Noah Ockwell, Adi Smit, Angelina Gomez, Maddy O'Donnell, Stanley Trilsbach, Tianna Kamal-Eddine, Ruby Werth, Campbell Anderson, Alex Roach, Nicholas Crabtree, Zara Charters Wood, Chloe Abdulbaki, Sarina Azad, Charli Blundell, Phoebe Bull, Madeleine Di Conza, Dollwia Dsouza, Oliver Eagle, Asha Heredia, Valentina Intemerato, Adrian Jackson, Lani Jeffs, Charlotte Johnstone, Emerson Chrisp, Sophia McClellan, Taylor Giles, Ross Cochraine, Jake Huang, Anthi Georgas, Maxwell King, Noah Bonnici, Lily Kelk, Sophie Littlefair, Ruby McKeown, Amelie Przychodzen, Vivienne Ronchi, Mia Sax, Annaliese Tilstra, Annabell Wall, Sophia Yaum; to the orchestra, Max Schroder, Thomas Fish, Kristian Ristevski, Jerry Dong, Christopher Wilson, Ryan Treacy, EJ Sumarno, Dylan Ip, Abigail Ronald, Lincoln Patten, William Soderlund, Harry Trbanc, Domenic Puopolo, Jasper Tudor, Esther Tannen; and of course to the crew, who worked hard behind the scenes and to everyone involved. It was a fantastic production at OLSH College. I look forward every year to being at their blockbuster productions, and this was absolutely stellar. Congratulations.

**The SPEAKER:** I remind the minister not to use props in the chamber.

#### **Shepparton Pacing for Pink**

**Kim O'KEEFFE** (Shepparton) (09:41): On Sunday 4 May I attended the Shepparton Harness Racing Pacing for Pink fundraiser in support of the McGrath Foundation, with over 200 attending the luncheon and hundreds more outside supporting the events at the track. Funds raised through the event go towards funding breast care nurses, who do such an incredible job supporting their patients, and so far have supported over 155,000 patients. At the event, cancer patients Michelle Honey and her mother Pauline Baldi shared their personal journey and the challenge of being diagnosed with breast cancer and going through breast cancer treatment at the same time. The sharing of their experience at this event was a testament to why these amazing breast care nurses need to be funded and why we must keep supporting cancer research. Michelle and Pauline's very strong message was to remind people to have their regular health checks, a message that resonated with so many in the room and a message that can save lives. As Michelle mentioned, often in our busy lives things can get in the way of our self-care. I first heard of Michelle's diagnosis on social media, and she has been so passionate in wanting to share her story in the hope that it will encourage others to have their health checks but also to seek advice when they feel something about their body is not right. Pauline is now cancer-free and Michelle is still fighting her cancer battle. These incredibly strong, brave and determined women left a lasting impact on everyone in attendance that day. The Shepparton Harness Racing Pacing for Pink event raised over \$38,000. It was a fantastic day. Well done to everyone involved. Today we have the Cancer Council here at Parliament house for Australia's Biggest Morning Tea. Thank you for your vital work in research, prevention and support.

#### **Victoria State Emergency Service**

**Pauline RICHARDS** (Cranbourne) (09:43): 21 May is the national day of recognition for and to say thank you to our SES volunteers, and I can tell you SES volunteers in Cranbourne are the best of the bunch. I am going to take the opportunity to thank our unit controller Scott Bernhard and our deputy controllers Scott, Bec and Stephen, and I would like to acknowledge our amazing volunteers. To Mandar, Ian and Phillip, thank you. To Craig, Tim, Morgan, Ian, Dave, Nick, Paul, Andrew, Julie and Mitch, you are all amazing. To Ashley, John, Robyn, Anita, Michael, Amiru, VJ, Mikayala, Jordan, Josh and Ben, you are the best in the business. To Victor, Michael, Andrew, Praneel, Isaac, Raj, Francesca, Jake, Ray, Rene, Rhys, Sean, John, Taylor and Yohanes, Cranbourne is very grateful. This year is so exciting because it is also the opportunity to celebrate 50 years of the Victorian SES. The Victorian SES is an amazing service, but in Cranbourne we have a beautiful new centre. It has been so well loved by our volunteers, and I have to say how grateful I am to Brian McMannis for steering us through all that.

### **Anzac Day**

**Pauline RICHARDS** (Cranbourne) (09:44): On another matter I am very grateful to have celebrated Anzac Day in Cranbourne, and I want to thank Stuart Couch in particular for leading us in a sombre and wonderful service. I am always grateful.

### **Narracan electorate funding**

**Wayne FARNHAM** (Narracan) (09:44): I want to give a shout-out to Drouin Secondary College, in particular the student leadership team who met with me recently. They were ready with a significant number of questions about their role and mine, questions like what it is like to be in Parliament and how I became an MP. We even spoke about the challenges they face within the school community in demonstrating leadership on key issues. When it came to the community, there were a number of questions I thought would be good to get on record for the government. This is from the students. Why hasn't the Victorian government funded more sporting grounds in Baw Baw shire? Why hasn't the Victorian government funded more road upgrades in Warragul and Drouin? Why hasn't the Victorian government delivered the new West Gippsland Hospital as promised?

What they really want to know is when the \$11.7 million upgrade to their school will be delivered. It was promised in 2022, and nothing has happened to date. The students are spot on. They can see the lack of investment by the Allan Labor government. They are not angry; they just want to see their community and school receive the funding that was promised. I do not think that it is too much to ask, and my hope is that next week's state budget answers these questions for both the students and our local community.

Just a quick side note on the tennis match between the member for Mildura and me, I am one up, and I will keep the chamber informed.

### **Frankston Hospital**

**Paul EDBROOKE** (Frankston) (09:46): There is no way the member for Narracan beat that member. I want to put on record what a great day I had with the Frankston council councillors and executive team, who came and toured the new Frankston Hospital redevelopment. Although walking up and down 12 flights of stairs was a bit of a workout – I did not need to go to the gym that day – looking at what has been thoroughly thought out and provided for the Frankston community and that whole catchment of the south-east and the peninsula is quite amazing. To see the looks on some of our councillors' faces about how big this project is and what it means to their community was simply amazing, and I think they are very much on board. The helipad has now been finished, and we will have helicopter operations, with the Helicopter Emergency Medical Service or Helimed I think coming in and doing some training very soon. That is another milestone that has been completed in this project.

### **Anzac Day**

**Paul EDBROOKE** (Frankston) (09:47): As well as that, could I just go on the record as saying a huge thankyou to the team at Frankston RSL. The Anzac Day ceremony was amazing. The respect from that huge crowd, which seems to get larger every year, is something to behold. Speaking to that crowd and seeing just a field of heads, you could hear a pin drop, such is the respect for our servicemen and women. It is well done every year. Thank you to Frankston RSL and Frankston council for their commitment to people who serve.

### **Knox road and transport infrastructure**

**Kim WELLS** (Rowville) (09:47): This statement condemns the Allan Labor government for its continued failure to support critically needed road and transport infrastructure projects for the people of Knox. The Allan government needs to now step up and provide funding in next week's state budget for vital Knox projects such as the Dorset Road extension and duplications of Wellington and Napoleon roads and commence works on a railway line to Rowville.

State government support has never been more important since the recent federal election and the federal Labor government's failure to commit to or provide funding for these important road and public transport infrastructure projects for Knox. In fact it was the federal Labor government, when it came to office in 2022, that axed funding of \$110 million for the Wellington Road duplication, \$50 million for the Napoleon Road duplication and \$475 million that had been previously committed to the Rowville railway line. Despite a major \$73.5 million coalition campaign commitment announced by Aston Liberal candidate Manny Cicchiello to extend Dorset Road from Burwood Highway, Ferntree Gully, through to Lysterfield Road, Lysterfield, disappointingly there was no matching project funding committed by federal Labor. Knox residents and commuters deserve so much better.

### **Essendon Fields Hart Precinct**

**Anthony CIANFLONE** (Pascoe Vale) (09:49): On 27 February I had the honour to officially help open the Essendon Fields new Hart Precinct. Established as Melbourne's first aerodrome in 1921, over the years Essendon Fields has gone on to welcome generations of migrants and is now becoming the jobs hub for Melbourne's north-western region. Today home to 330 businesses and 6000 jobs, the new Hart Precinct's anchor tenants are supporting a further 350 jobs, including via Modscape, a prefab builder; Dutton Wholesale; Prestige Cars; Autex acoustic panels; Elenium, a global leader in self-check-in kiosks for airports; Leonardo, an Italian global aerospace engineering company maintaining our state's emergency services; the air wing; and Green by Nature, a national landscaping business. I commend Essendon Fields CEO Brendan Pihan and the entire Essendon Fields team for the delivery of the new Hart Precinct and the fantastic community event and open day that we celebrated.

I have directly been involved in the evolution of Essendon Fields over many years, including having been long-time Wills federal MP Kelvin Thomson's community representative on the airport's community consultative committee, which worked to introduce one of the earliest bi-neighbourly agreements in the country, solidified the existing curfew arrangements and helped support the airport's ongoing engagement and consultation with surrounding residents.

### **Smile Squad**

**Anthony CIANFLONE** (Pascoe Vale) (09:55): On 24 February I also had the pleasure to visit our free dental health service for students, the Smile Squad, at Coburg West Primary School. Delivered locally by Merri Community Health, Smile Squad has so far provided free dental treatment across Merri-bek through 15 schools – 10 primary schools, three secondary schools and two specialist schools – and 7000 overall chair visits. I want to commend Melanie van Altena, the director of the program, Emily Blazeovski, Jonathan Teoh and Mark Collagrande and the school captains.

### **Emergency services levy**

**Peter WALSH** (Murray Plains) (09:50): I would like to thank all those who made the effort to travel to Melbourne yesterday for the Stop the Tax rally. This is a new tax to fund the faceless bureaucrats of the Victorian Labor government. Despite what those on the other side of the house may say, this is not about the volunteers; it is about filling a huge black hole in the Victorian budget. The volunteers were on the front steps of Parliament yesterday. They are incensed when they hear those on the other side say that this is a tax for them. It is not. Department secretaries are rubbing their hands together with the nearly \$2 billion they will have to spend out of this tax. I would go further to say that this is effectively a land tax on farming land in Victoria – something that has always been exempt from land tax. The Allan government has effectively now introduced land tax on farming land and increased land tax for all those who have been brought into the land tax payment scheme over the last two years. This is about every property in Victoria now having an increased land tax. I would urge the members in the upper house to vote against this new land tax. Listen to the voices of everyday Victorians and vote against this new tax. Labor have wasted tens of billions of dollars on cost blowouts on major projects in Melbourne, and now they want to have a land tax to make up that huge black hole. This is socialism gone mad in Victoria.

### Anzac Day

**Vicki WARD** (Eltham – Minister for Emergency Services, Minister for Natural Disaster Recovery, Minister for Equality) (09:52): To commemorate Anzac Day this year, so many locals supported thoughtful and moving services across our community. I thank Montmorency Eltham RSL president Ash Graham for his heartfelt speech at the Eltham dawn service. He reminded us that to commemorate Gallipoli is not to celebrate war; it is to remember the cost. It is to recognise the enduring human impact of decisions made from the beaches of Anzac Cove, and it is to remind ourselves, 110 years later, of the responsibility we bear to seek peace, to honour all who served and to learn from history.

Thank you to Makayla Henry from Catholic Ladies' College for reciting the oath on behalf of the Australian people, the Eltham High School choir for their beautiful *Amazing Grace*, Eltham East Primary School for participating in the Eltham cenotaph roll call and the Eltham College Suara choir for their moving *Honour the Dead*. Thank you also to Nathan Bradshaw, Joey Buchan and Maegan Blair from Eltham College for their moving Anzac requiem; St Margaret's Reverend Yvette Daniel for reading the Lord's Prayer; and piper David Cretney. Thank you also to the Montmorency Eltham RSL family service, Jemima Coyne and Josh Schilling from Montmorency Primary for their acknowledgement of country, Lydia Natoli and Amelie Sharp from Montmorency Primary for their acknowledgement of service, Molly Brennan from Eltham College for reciting *Why We Remember*, the City of Melbourne Highland Pipe Band, Father Michael Sierakowski for the Lord's Prayer, Oliver Plunkett-Zbaracki and Charli Ribaric from Eltham High for the Anzac requiem, and for *Travelling Soldier* thank you to the Eltham College choir's Nate Clarke, Josie Gelperowicz, Tanay Joshi, Ethan Lee, Freya Leung-Harris, Hayley O'Donnell, Oscar Wijnen and Archer Wilson.

### Mental health support services

**Rachel WESTAWAY** (Pahran) (09:53): I am perplexed. Where are the new bed-based rehabilitation services, the local mental health and wellbeing hubs, the regional mental health boards and the services for older Victorians that the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System recommended and the government promised to deliver? The crisis in mental health is impacting the people of Pahran. We see people in dire need of assistance on our streets. They need care and treatment that is simply not available to them. Left to wander the streets untreated, these people create a dangerous and unpleasant environment for local residents and traders. Exasperated local shopkeepers and residents continue to tell me how they often end up clearing up the mess, including providing emergency food, clothing and money to these people, as well as literally cleaning up vomit and excrement.

With streets like Chapel Street becoming the dumping ground for people with complex needs abandoned by this government, shoppers stay away and small businesses suffer. Many traders are taking the heartbreaking decision to close their businesses, which shatters their own dreams, reduces local employment and further destroys the vibrancy of our shopping strip. The government promised to implement the recommendations of the royal commission in full, but the last four years have been marked by delays, changes and a clear lack of will to help some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

### Tourism funding

**Alison MARCHANT** (Bellarine) (09:55): Last month the Bellarine celebrated some exciting news: we received two significant grants under the Regional Tourism Investment Fund to support our tourism accommodation and visitor economy. Congratulations to Bellarine, Bayside and Barwon Coast, who were able to invest in new cabins for their caravan parks. This funding is a fantastic opportunity for our Bellarine communities to enhance the visitor experience and support longer stays on the Bellarine, especially over those colder months. It is great for our tourism and small businesses, who rely on visitors to the Bellarine.

### **Anzac Day**

**Alison MARCHANT** (Bellarine) (09:55): Anzac Day stands as one of the most significant moments in our calendar. It provides us all with an opportunity to reflect on and honour the bravery of those who served and continue to serve our nation. I was very fortunate to attend several events across the Bellarine. Leopold's service was personally touching. Having grown up in Leopold, it was incredible to hear from army serviceman Major Alex Vella, who also grew up in Leopold. He eloquently shared his thoughts on Anzac Day and encouraged the large crowds at the service to value the Anzac spirit within our everyday lives. At the Ocean Grove service the RSL acknowledged veteran Roy Porter. Mr Porter, who was 18 when he joined the air force in the midst of World War II, is this year celebrating his 100th birthday and was, in a touching moment, recognised for his service all those years ago. I would like to thank all of the local Bellarine RSLs and volunteers, who provided wonderful services for our communities.

### **Homelessness**

**Will FOWLES** (Ringwood) (09:56): I rise today to highlight some home truths for the government. Right now across Victoria we are facing a devastating and unacceptable homelessness crisis, and it is only getting worse. The Maroondah Winter Shelter, a volunteer-run program, provides a warm meal, shelter and a shower for homeless men in the eastern suburbs. Recently I met with Gitta Clayton, one of the program's coordinators, and was deeply moved by the dedication of all the volunteers involved. Their efforts are truly magnificent, but it is a travesty that they have to do it at all. Every night these homeless men must carry the weight of uncertainty, packing up their belongings and moving to a new shelter just to secure a place to sleep. This is a burden no-one should have to endure.

It is unacceptable that in a prosperous state like Victoria volunteers must fill the gap in a system that has comprehensively failed to provide permanent solutions. Crisis accommodation is severely lacking, and cases of homelessness continue to grow. Government resourcing is a disgrace. Programs like the Winter Shelter reflect the compassion of my community, but they are a temporary fix, not a long-term solution. This government must take responsibility and ensure that every Victorian has access to safe, secure accommodation when they need it most. The government must stop hiding behind volunteers and take responsibility. It is a public problem and it needs a public solution. It is time to provide permanent solutions to the housing crisis. We need real leadership now. Housing must come first.

### **National Road Safety Week**

**Bronwyn HALFPENNY** (Thomastown) (09:58): As Parliamentary Secretary for Roads I recently met with Peter Frazer, president and founder of the Safer Australian Roads and Highways group and also the organiser of National Road Safety Week, which is this week. We are all responsible for keeping our roads safe. I would like to state the pledge that is part of National Road Safety Week:

I pledge to drive as if my loved ones are on the road ahead.

I will remove all distractions and never use my mobile phone while driving.

I will not put other people at risk by speeding, driving while tired or under the influence of alcohol/drugs.

I will protect all vulnerable road users, especially those whose job places them in harm's way, by slowing down and giving them the space they need to be safe.

### **St George Indian Orthodox Church, Epping**

**Bronwyn HALFPENNY** (Thomastown) (09:58): The electorate of Thomastown welcomes the newly formed St George Indian Orthodox Church, Epping. I had the great pleasure of attending the inaugural church service and first Holy Qurbana. The Assistant Metropolitan of the Diocese of Asia Pacific His Grace Dr Yuhanon Mar Diascoros was chief celebrant of the holy mass, and blessings were received from His Holiness Moran Mar Baselios Marthoma Mathews III. Mass was also conducted by parish priest Father Jibin Sabu. I look forward to working with the church, parishioners

and Father Sabu, who makes such an important contribution to our area and provides essential supports, connection, spiritual guidance and fellowship.

#### **Eid al-Fitr**

**Gary MAAS** (Narre Warren South) (09:59): I recently joined the Malay Council of Victoria for their celebration of Eid, a joyous and significant occasion which, as we all know, marks the end of the holy month of Ramadan. It was an honour to represent the Minister for Multicultural Affairs at this event at Arthur Wren Hall in Hampton Park. Many of the 250 attendees were dressed up in their very best Raya outfits as the local Malay community shared music, dance, prayer and delicious food.

#### **Malay Council of Victoria**

**Gary MAAS** (Narre Warren South) (10:00): According to the 2021 census, the Malaysian community in Victoria is the largest in Australia. The Malay Council of Victoria aims to preserve and nurture Malay Muslim culture and foster interaction and appreciation amongst the wider community through social, educational and economic activities. This event was supported by the Victorian government's 2024–25 multicultural festival and events program, which reinforces our government's commitment to supporting inclusion and diversity. The holy month of Ramadan is observed by many across central Asia, the Middle East and happily by those in my electorate who are part of the Muslim faith. I am grateful for the work of all our multicultural groups and organisers who bring together so many to observe holy occasions such as these with warmth and pride. Thank you to Ed Zaid, president of the Malay Council of Victoria, and his team for inviting me to such a well-run event. It is an honour to represent Narre Warren South and its proud multicultural and multifaith communities.

#### **Anzac Day**

**Luba GRIGOROVITCH** (Kororoit) (10:01): I rise to pay tribute to the moving Anzac Day commemorations held across the Kororoit electorate. I had the honour of attending the dawn service at the Caroline Springs war memorial. As the sun rose, our community stood together in quiet reflection to honour those who have served and sacrificed for our nation. The solemn stillness of the morning was a reminder of the courage, the resilience and the mateship that defines the Anzac spirit. The service was especially moving due to the beautiful performance by Southern Cross Grammar students, whose rendition captured the emotion and spirit of the day. It was a reminder that the Anzac legacy is carried forward with great care by the next generation.

Following the service I joined the Caroline Springs RSL for the commemorative event, where I was invited to take part in a game of two-up, a proud Australian tradition that brings us together in mateship and remembrance, bringing people together in a uniquely Australian way to honour our history. A particularly humbling moment was being presented with a handcrafted cane adorned with Anzac symbols by local veteran John Willis. His gesture was deeply touching. It was a reminder of the personal stories that sit at the heart of our national history. The cane stands as a powerful symbol of the respect, remembrance and connection our community holds for those who served. I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to Caroline Springs RSL, Southern Cross Grammar, Victoria University Secondary College, Christ the Priest Primary School, Caroline Springs Scouts and all of the volunteers who continually contribute to making this day as meaningful and as good as it can be in the Caroline Springs area. Lest we forget.

#### **Federal election**

**Sarah CONNOLLY** (Laverton) (10:02): The federal election has come and gone and what a result it was. I wholeheartedly congratulate the Albanese Labor government on securing a resounding second term – our strongest election victory this century – and I want to congratulate my federal colleagues Tim Watts and Daniel Mulino on their successful re-election to serving my constituents in Laverton back in Canberra. I am particularly proud of the efforts in Fraser to fend off a strong challenge by the Greens, who have seen an absolute collapse nationwide.

More importantly, I want to celebrate the resounding message that Melbourne's west sent to Peter Dutton. He came to our state and he promised to gut the heart out of Sunshine by scrapping the Sunshine super-hub. Westies saw right through it and saw the same old Liberal Party, who now pretend to care about our community in the west but still want to cut and starve us of the funding and projects we need, time and time again. On several booths across my electorate I heard reports of Liberal Party volunteers handing out for the wrong candidate. On one booth where I was handing out they were not there at all. There were no signs and no volunteers – that is the level of disrespect that this party shows our community in Melbourne's west, and I for one am absolutely sick of them talking down our communities. They have no commitments to infrastructure and no policies to improve our communities or address our issues – absolutely nothing on offer from the party. They have certainly paid for it with a major collapse right across Melbourne and indeed in every capital city in this nation. I look forward to seeing the Albanese Labor government in – *(Time expired)*

### **Blackburn High School**

**Paul HAMER** (Box Hill) (10:04): Congratulations to Blackburn High School's senior jazz orchestra band on their incredible achievement of being selected to perform at the recent Essentially Ellington high school jazz band competition and festival in New York. Essentially Ellington is one of the world's most prestigious youth jazz events, and these outstanding students have made history as the first school band from the Southern Hemisphere to be invited to perform. Out of hundreds of applicants worldwide, Blackburn High School was one of only three non-US schools selected to complete in this prestigious competition. This achievement reflects the exceptional quality of Blackburn High School's renowned music program and the dedication of its students and staff. I congratulate school principal Joanna Alexander, director of music Mr Jason Ziino and the jazz orchestra's conductor Mr Andy O'Connell, as well as of course the 21 students who represented Australia with such distinction on this global stage. Their dedication, passion and hard work is simply amazing.

A special shout-out to the saxophone and trombone sections as well as Evan Khaw on drums, Ace Aure on the alto saxophone and Jasmine Richards on trombone, who all received competition awards. You are all wonderful role models and ambassadors for this country.

### **Federal election**

**Paul HAMER** (Box Hill) (10:05): I also congratulate our federal members. Firstly, Gabriel Ng, the very first Labor member for Menzies – he ran a terrific campaign just with local volunteers. It will be wonderful to have a partner in federal Parliament such as Gabe. I really look forward to working with him. And congratulations to Carina Garland, who was returned in Chisholm.

### **Anzac Day**

**Belinda WILSON** (Narre Warren North) (10:05): In my electorate of Narre Warren North we had some incredible Anzac Day services, which I was really, really proud to be part of. The morning started at Bunjil Place, where there were well over a couple of thousand people, and the Lysterfield Lake College boys choir did an amazing performance. It was all organised by the Berwick RSL, and we enjoyed a very lovely breakfast, all thanks to the Narre Warren Rotary Club. It was really great to have everyone there from the community, including the CFA, the SES and of course our amazing police force.

I then headed off to the Narre Warren community service, which was an incredible service. We had the Harkaway Hills College girls choir sing there, and the event was hosted by two kids from Harkaway Hills College, Naushali and Deanna, and then by Charlie and Zane from Narre Warren North Primary. They all did such an incredible job reading and guiding the service. The Narre Warren North Girl Guides kindly offered us our morning tea, which was really, really lovely and thoroughly enjoyed. Thanks to Stephen and the guard party from the Australian Air Force, Victoria Police and of course the Narre Warren South CFA.

Then last week I headed to Oatlands Primary, where they did their very own service. It was an honour to meet Les, who has attended 28 of these services, and a big thanks to the amazing kids who hosted the morning and did such an incredible job.

#### **Pakenham electorate volunteers**

**Emma VULIN** (Pakenham) (10:07): I just want to thank the volunteers of the Pakenham district ahead of volunteers week.

#### ***Statements on parliamentary committee reports***

##### **Legal and Social Issues Committee**

###### *Building the Evidence Base: Inquiry into Capturing Data on People Who Use Family Violence in Victoria*

**Eden FOSTER** (Mulgrave) (10:07): I rise to speak on the Legal and Social Issues Committee's final report on the inquiry into capturing data on family violence perpetrators in Victoria, and I wish to draw your attention to the findings and recommendations of the report in relation to the impact of family violence on some of our most vulnerable communities, our young people. This report is a stark reminder that family violence does not discriminate. It permeates every layer of our society, leaving a trail of devastation that demands our unwavering attention and action. While the report offers a comprehensive overview of the challenges we face in capturing data on perpetrators, it also highlights the unique and complex ways in which family violence manifests.

The report paints a disturbing picture of the intersection between youth and family violence. It reveals that young people are not only victims but, sadly, can also be perpetrators – a reality that requires a sensitive and age-appropriate response. The report acknowledges that adolescence and young adulthood are critical periods in which patterns of violence can emerge, shaping future relationships and perpetuating cycles of abuse. As a clinical psychologist who has worked with young people, I have witnessed firsthand how these early experiences can derail a young person's development, leading to long-term difficulties with poor emotion regulation, conflict resolution difficulties and unhealthy attachments. The report highlights the urgent need for age-appropriate services and programs that address the root cause of violence and promote healthy relationships among young people.

Early intervention is paramount, and we must provide young people with the tools and support they need to develop empathy, build healthy relationships and break the cycle of violence before it becomes entrenched. The report also identifies gaps in data collection regarding family violence involving young people, including intimate partner violence among adolescents and violence perpetrated by young people towards their parents and siblings. To address these issues the report recommends a number of things, including improving data collection methodologies to accurately capture the prevalence and nature of family violence within youth populations. We know that accurate data is essential for understanding the scope of the problem and informing effective interventions. It also recommends developing targeted prevention programs in schools and community settings to educate young people about respectful relationships, conflict resolution, and the consequences of violent behaviour. In my experience, school-based programs like Respectful Relationships are highly effective in promoting positive social and emotional development and preventing violence.

Another recommendation is to ensure that young people have access to specialist support services tailored to their unique developmental needs and experiences. Young people require services that are not only age appropriate but also trauma informed, recognising the detrimental impact that family violence can have on their mental health and wellbeing. Schools are a perfect place for this support, and I commend the government for their support with mental health practitioners in schools.

Finally, the report recommends enhancing collaboration between agencies such as schools, youth services and law enforcement to facilitate a coordinated and effective response to family violence

involving young people. A multidisciplinary approach is essential to ensure that young people receive the comprehensive support they need. The multi-agency risk assessment and management, MARAM, framework is a crucial structure for identifying, assessing and managing family violence risk and is underpinned by collaboration and information sharing between agencies such as schools. Having worked in schools, I am very familiar with the MARAM framework and have trained teaching staff on its components. It is essential that training in this framework remains ongoing and is consistently recognised as a vital tool to ensure that individuals at risk of family violence do not fall through the cracks. To strengthen the implementation of MARAM, the report recommends continuing to develop and promote training resources and tools for service providers and enhancing their understanding of MARAM responsibilities, including the collection of data on people using family violence. As the saying goes, you do not know what you do not know. Sharing information to protect our most vulnerable from family violence can truly be life changing, and in many situations it can be life saving.

In closing, I would like to thank the committee members for their hard work on this inquiry and in particular the work of the committee chair, the member for Lara. Thank you for such an important inquiry and putting this valued and detailed report together.

### **Public Accounts and Estimates Committee**

#### *Report on the 2024–25 Budget Estimates*

**Tim McCURDY** (Ovens Valley) (10:12): I am delighted to rise to speak on the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee 2024–25 budget estimates. There are a couple of issues I would like to raise on that, particularly 13.4.1, Treasurer’s portfolio, about land tax and the exemptions from land tax. Properties listed as alpine resorts are exempt: Falls Creek, Mount Buller, Mount Hotham, Mount Baw Baw and Lake Mountain. Dinner Plain, which sits within Mount Hotham, is not deemed by the government to be an alpine resort, which is quite odd because it has an elevation of 1570 metres, which is higher than Mount Buller and Lake Mountain. It has all the attributes of an alpine resort, it has the same snow cycle as all the alpine resorts and yet it is not exempt from the vacant residential land tax, which is a bit of a concern. Now, there is an old saying that if it looks like a duck and it quacks like a duck, it probably is a duck. I think that is where we get to here with Dinner Plain. The residents are really concerned that there are double standards going on here for them, particularly owner-residents in Dinner Plain, when someone just down the road at Hotham, who has the same cycle, is deemed exempt.

Yet the State Revenue Office refuses to see that Dinner Plain is an alpine resort. In fact the Alpine School, which is funded by the Victorian government, is in Dinner Plain. They call it the Alpine School and it is in Dinner Plain, but Dinner Plain is not rated as an alpine resort. I just cannot understand why you would have a school in that region. And the answer is that it is an alpine resort. The other example with Dinner Plain is that it has all the other attributes: it is compulsory to carry chains; as I say, the elevation is higher than Baw Baw and Lake Mountain. It really is an unfair tax, and it should be removed from the residents of Dinner Plain. Even VicRoads, when it advertises on its website, talks about the alpine region, and Dinner Plain is in that region. Everybody can see that. I think the Treasurer needs to really have a closer look at this to see how we can assist the people of Dinner Plain. They too should be exempt from this tax. The other thing is that there are seasonal ambulance, season VicPol and seasonal ski patrol services in Dinner Plain – again, all the same attributes – so it needs to be treated equally to the other alpine resorts.

On another point, in section 9.3, the environment portfolio, I want to address the water and the buybacks in the Murray–Darling Basin. I know that all sides of the chamber are on a unity ticket here when it comes to buybacks and the damage that they do in regional Victoria. We have seen just this week a stark reminder with 300 jobs that will be lost in Strathmerton, in the Bega Cheese factory. Bega is a great factory. Bega are based in the Bega Valley, but they do have sites in Tatura and Strathmerton. They are going to shut down the Strathmerton site – 300 jobs. It will affect Cobram, Numurkah and obviously Strathmerton people. Barry Irvin is an excellent operator, but they have had to make a tough

decision in Strathmerton to close it down to save \$30 million a year. That is primarily because of these buybacks, the water that is leaving our regions.

I know Minister Shing, who was the Minister for Water, Lisa Neville, the minister before that, and I believe Minister Tierney, were all on the same page: buybacks are hurting our communities. This is the proof we have been looking for. This is the proof we need to now tell the new Minister for Environment and Water Murray Watt, who has taken over from Tanya Plibersek. They have got to stop this approach to buybacks at all costs and that we are going to save the environment with all this water when we know there are so many constraints in the system that the river systems cannot handle the flow of water that they are trying to buy back for the environment.

As I say, Bega Cheese are trying to save \$30 million a year – I do not take that away from them. In the early 2000s there were 3 billion litres of milk produced in that region. We are now down to 1.7 billion, and that is the result of the water being taken away. You have heard the saying ‘Just add water’. We know when you add water to coffee or you add water to gravy, you see what happens – it grows. But if you reverse that and you take water away – you take water out of milk, it becomes milk powder. When you take water away from dairy farms and all farms, they just become dust. We are seeing this firsthand now, and as I say, these buybacks are hurting. We have said they would hurt, and this is proof in the pudding – 300 jobs at Strathmerton, which will affect the whole north-east region.

#### **Legal and Social Issues Committee**

##### *Register and Talk about It: Inquiry into Increasing the Number of Registered Organ and Tissue Donors*

**Anthony CIANFLONE** (Pascoe Vale) (10:17): I rise to continue my contribution on the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee’s inquiry into increasing the number of registered organ and tissue donors, which I last spoke on on 2 April. The inquiry heard evidence and highlighted a number of persistent challenges, barriers and misconceptions that continue to influence current donor registration and donation consent rates, including the need for continued data collection about why some families may object to transplantation and donation from a loved one, better understanding of why some families may not consent to fulfilling and recognising the wishes of a registered donor, greater education and promotion throughout the community about the benefits of tissue donation and dispelling the myths about the donation process.

Even if Victoria did return to a fully fledged drivers licence donation registration system, drivers licence renewal generally only occurs every three or 10 years, meaning limited opportunities to engage during these limited intervals. Even if we can improve engagement with families near the end-of-life phase of a loved one, the donation conversation can be very difficult and sensitive. It is a difficult discussion to broach and have given the emotion and the trauma family members may already be going through at that stage of the loved one’s life.

Donation registration rates still remain particularly low, mainly amongst culturally and linguistically diverse and newly arrived communities, whether due to cultural beliefs, misinformation or lack of awareness. As stated by the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria on page 129 of the report, not all cultures are comfortable talking about death, dying and donation. There are many differences between multicultural communities and one approach will not fit all communities.

Victoria’s overall registration rate, at 23 per cent, continues to remain lower than many other states and territories, including South Australia at 72 per cent, New South Wales at 42 per cent, Tasmania at 48 per cent, Western Australia at 38 per cent and Queensland at 31 per cent. That is why in acknowledging all of these challenges and the opportunities, I draw the house’s attention to the very comprehensive 74 findings and 41 recommendations that I encourage the government to support and implement.

Recommendation 1 is that, given the uncertainty around the historical Victorian drivers licence registrations, the Victorian government should advise people aged 42 years and older who hold a licence to check they are registered using the MyGov or Medicare apps. Recommendation 2 is the Victorian government scope the ability of the state's driver licence system to allow Victorians to register on the Australian Organ Donor Register when applying for or renewing their drivers licence, and this should include a 'yes' registration option. Recommendation 3 is around the Victorian government increasing its promotion of the organ donation register through the Service Victoria app and other government websites and channels and avenues like the Victorian Electoral Commission, the proof of age application process, Ambulance Victoria membership and more.

**Recommendation 23:**

The Victorian Government include information about organ and tissue donation in the primary and secondary school curriculum.

**Finding 43:**

Awareness and education about organ and tissue donation should target and include all generations of families from multicultural and faith-based communities to assist them to have effective discussion about donation –

and work towards tailored approaches for each community group. That is why, along with supporting the adoption and implementation of these recommendations by government, I am also very pleased to have been the co-founder in the establishment of the newly formed Victorian Parliamentary Friends of Transplant Australia. The new parliamentary friends group will provide a forum for MPs to partner with health, wellbeing and donation stakeholders – namely, Transplant Australia – to advance the promotion of organ and tissue donation across Victoria. We will look to facilitate opportunities for MPs to engage with the Australian Organ and Tissue Authority; DonateLife; the Healthcare Awareness Society of Australia, HASA; Body Buddies, who particularly specialise in multicultural communities in this respect; and other transplant and donor organisations. We will look to advance the bipartisan recommendations from this parliamentary inquiry into increasing numbers of registered organ and tissue donors across our respective communities.

In establishing the group I want to particularly acknowledge and thank fellow co-convenor the member for Euroa, the Deputy Chair of this inquiry; the secretary; the member for Melton and all of the members who have enthusiastically joined, including the member for St Albans, amongst others; Chris Thomas, the CEO of Transplant Australia; Peter Wain, chair of Transplant Australia's Victorian branch; Dr Raj Khillan of HASA; Dr Preeti Khillan of HASA; and Aayushi Khillan of Body Buddies, also a previous Channel 7 Victorian Young Achiever Award recipient. Furthermore, I would like to encourage members to attend the upcoming Light a Life fundraising gala dinner on 24 May, which is dedicated to advancing organ donation awareness across multicultural communities. Last year the event raised \$125,000 to support the promotion and the awareness of organ and tissue donation across multicultural and culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Again, my strong commendations to Dr Raj, Dr Preeti and Aayushi for their fantastic work in promoting these groups and for their support of the parliamentary inquiry and respective recommendations.

I also want to acknowledge of course the committee members who undertook this comprehensive work: the member for Lara, the member for Geelong, the member for Mornington, the member for Narre Warren South, the member for Eildon, the member for Clarinda and the member for Bayswater. I thank them for their leadership in putting together this comprehensive piece of work, which will hopefully lead to better outcomes.

**Public Accounts and Estimates Committee**

*Report on the 2023–24 Financial and Performance Outcomes*

**David SOUTHWICK** (Caulfield) (10:22): I rise to make some comments on the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee 2023–24 financial and performance outcomes. There are a number of parts of information in this report that look at better financial outputs and performance right across the

sector, and in the lead-up to the budget it is really important that these things are taken into consideration and that we ensure that in every single portfolio there is the funding available to ensure that all the services are delivered properly and effectively for the community.

In my portfolio of police there are some specifics within this particular report that deal with the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. This is a key issue. Particularly since the lockdowns of COVID in 2020 we have seen so many Victorians that have suffered – particularly so many children. There is not a day that goes by when I am not talking to one of my constituents or friends who has a family member that has suffered as a result of that time. There is a lot of work to be done, and I think we need to acknowledge it, we need to support it and we need to ensure that particularly our younger generations have the means and that kind of support to ensure that they can progress forward.

One of the groups that really suffered during that time, particularly with the escalation of mental health issues, is Victoria Police. This report talks of the amount of incidents that Victoria Police have had to deal with. The royal commission found that the mental health system in Victoria was not equipped to handle mental health emergencies, with police often responding first, leading to increased trauma and stigma for people in crisis. From 2014 to 2018 there was a 10.9 per cent average and then that went up to 13 per cent, an increase to a number of some 43,000 events relating to a mental health crisis – equal to a police response every 12 minutes on average.

By 2023–24 this increased to approximately 54,000 call-outs, or one every 10 minutes. If you think about that, every 10 minutes – following COVID it went from every 12 minutes to every 10 minutes, and it has probably just continued on – a police officer is called out to deal with a mental health crisis, a situation or a complex case. Many of those police are not trained to do that. I know one thing that we spoke of even during our time in government back in 2010 to 2014 was the police, ambulance and clinical early response (PACER) vehicles, which put health and police together. I think all of that stuff is really important.

In my concluding time I want to particularly talk about the support not just for many of those experiencing mental health issues but for police as one of the groups that is experiencing complex mental health issues – and it talks about this in the recommendations in this report, how we can support Victoria Police members better. The Police Association Victoria talked to me a lot about this. There are escalations in police leaving the force or on lots of stress leave as a result of the job. The job is becoming more complex. The job is becoming tougher for Victorian police, even in the period, as many people will know from my advocacy, around the events since 7 October. To have 18,000 police shifts babysitting protests in the streets in the city – they are additional shifts on top of other work that police have to do. They have been traumatised, they have been understaffed and they have been underpaid for a long time.

I think one of the things that we would be looking for in this budget is what it is going to do to ensure Victoria Police are better supported, have the mechanisms available to do their jobs better – even basic things; we are told sometimes they have to use their own mobile phones because they are not properly equipped. They have got to be equipped, they have got to be supported and they have got to be funded, and we have to acknowledge the hard work that the men and women of Victoria Police do each and every day to keep us safe, particularly in a crime crisis. They are really overstretched, and I would be hoping in this budget we see the support needed for Victoria Police to ensure we bring down the escalation of the crime rates that we are seeing, to provide the community safety that people expect and ultimately to recognise that working in Victoria Police is a tough job. We thank them each and every day for their service.

## Economy and Infrastructure Committee

### *Inquiry into Workplace Surveillance*

**Alison MARCHANT** (Bellarine) (10:27): I rise to speak on the inquiry into workplace surveillance conducted by the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee, which I had the honour of tabling yesterday in this place. As chair, this was a really interesting inquiry for the committee to undertake and explore, considering the kind of world that we now live and work in. When I think about our everyday lives and the society that we do live in, I think I can confidently say that we are all used to some type of surveillance in our lives. It may be a camera at the front door on the doorbell or a camera on our phone. We have data that is collected by social media platforms and the apps that we all put on our phones, and agencies and companies collect and store personal data for the efficiencies of the world that we live in. But this inquiry had a laser focus on our workplaces. We started to explore and ask the questions around how employers use surveillance, why they are conducting surveillance, what technologies employers are using to watch their employees and what happens to the collection of that data once it is being stored by employers.

Workplace surveillance certainly has accelerated in the last few years and it is a worldwide thing, the result of the technology advancing so quickly but also the shift that we have seen with more people now working from home and remote working. In that short amount of time we have had surveillance go beyond the cameras, which I have talked about, to now more recording, with your computer tracking your key logging. It might be wearable trackers or it might be biometrics, such as your fingerprint or blood, or neurotechnology and artificial intelligence.

Going through this inquiry it was clear that our privacy and surveillance laws have not kept up with the technology. Throughout the hearings and the evidence that we heard what was frightening too was that employees are unaware. Most of them are unaware of the extent of surveillance in their own workplace. Employees told the committee that a lot of the time they did not know they were being surveilled until there was either a problem or an issue that needed to be raised or there was disciplinary action being undertaken. That is not to say that surveillance cannot be legitimate – employers need to undertake surveillance, maybe for health and safety reasons – but it does become problematic when employers are using surveillance in covert situations and other than for the purpose that was originally intended. These privacy concerns then cause distress for employees where their employers' surveillance practices can be described as excessive or unreasonable.

After considering the best practice across our country and overseas, the committee has made some recommendations to introduce new workplace surveillance laws that are technology neutral to ensure that surveillance is reasonable, necessary and proportionate to achieving a legitimate objective. A Victorian employer should also be required to notify and consult with workers about workplace surveillance practices and to disclose how workers' data will be collected, used and stored. These recommendations that the government will now consider are really about getting that balance right – the balance between the workers' privacy and their rights and the workplace having reasonable objectives and purposes for surveillance.

I want to thank the committee and some of the organisations, individuals, experts, unions and academics that presented and made submissions. We do appreciate all the time taken to give us a great sense of what is currently being undertaken in our workplace surveillance practices. I would like to also extend my thanks to the past and present committee members who worked on this inquiry. I will thank also the secretariat – Kerryn Riseley, Marianna Stylianou and Abbey Battista – for their diligence and dedication in preparing this report. Our committee ran smoothly, and as chair I appreciate the support that they offer me in my role.

I would like to speak to this again in this place. I think there is more to say around workplace surveillance. There was a minority report tabled in the report, and I would like to speak to that on another date, so I am just flagging that. As a government we fight incredibly hard for our workers' rights, and I look forward to the government's response.

**Public Accounts and Estimates Committee***Report on the 2024–25 Budget Estimates*

**John PESUTTO** (Hawthorn) (10:32): I rise this morning to speak on the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee (PAEC) report into the 2024–25 budget estimates. I do so noting that I think one of the reasons the Allan Labor government presides over a financial mess of a budget is the lack of integrity, transparency and visibility into the way money is raised on behalf of taxpayers and the broader Victorian community and the way that money is expended for vital public services, whether it is health – the largest spending portfolio – or education and other vital areas. Clearly one of the reasons that Victoria faces this problem is if you do not have that accountability, scrutiny and visibility, you cannot see what the government is doing and, worse, the government does not respond to the necessity to be up-front with the Victorian people and the various stakeholders who speak on behalf of Victorians about how money is spent and whether output objectives are actually achieved.

The PAEC report that I am addressing this morning makes a number of recommendations into how departments such as the Department of Planning and Transport, as well as the departments of health and education, can better report on output and asset initiatives. What I really want to do this morning is put that against the backdrop of what the Victorian Auditor General's Office has pointed out in recent months. I was absolutely dismayed earlier this year when I saw the Minister for Public Transport come out and publicly malign the Auditor-General's office over its *Major Projects Performance Reporting 2024*. That report assessed about \$145 billion of projects currently in the portfolio of infrastructure in the state. That represents about 70 per cent of the capital program at the moment.

I have never seen a government more unedifyingly attack an independent officer, whose position is protected, as you know, Deputy Speaker, in the Victorian constitution – that is how important the Auditor General's office is – and publicly attack the Auditor-General when the Auditor-General and the staff of that important office were simply undertaking what was a very sobering analysis of the state of those infrastructure projects.

What it did find was startling. I want to quote them so as not to misquote them. They, I think at the heart of it, pointed out for all of us that the budget papers under this government cannot be relied upon. Now, that is a startling finding. Do not just take my word for it. Listen to what the Auditor-General's office concluded about budget paper 4, which, for our viewers and those who will read these debates, addresses the capital program from year to year. It said of budget paper 4 under this government that it is 'not useful or reliable for assessing major project performance'. This finding was based on footnotes that do not accurately or transparently report underlying factors impacting a major project's performance.

Let us just take stock of what the Auditor General is saying: we cannot rely on budget paper 4. The Auditor-General goes on to say that the Department of Treasury and Finance:

... prepares BP4 for the Treasurer, it is a document produced at the government's discretion with no format or content requirements set by legislation or ministerial direction. Any content in BP4 is therefore published at the Treasurer's discretion.

There you go. We do not know the truth about how badly major projects in this state are being overseen by this government. When we see announcements like we saw earlier this week with the Premier spruiking \$700 million to switch on the Metro project after nearly 10 years, I think it surprises all Victorians. It is the equivalent of an infrastructure corkage charge. Not only does it cost us \$15 billion to deliver these projects but now we have to pay to open them. It is like being in a restaurant and someone saying, 'We've got to charge you to open your wine bottle.' This is the same with infrastructure projects, or the health portfolio, where we have nearly \$16 billion of capital projects underway with no real visibility. That is what the PAEC report focuses on in its recommendations.

My plea to the government, although it has resisted this for years, is it is about time and past time that the Victorian people were given proper visibility into the way (1) money is raised on their behalf and (2), equally importantly, how it is spent on their behalf.

### *Bills*

## **Corrections Legislation Amendment Bill 2025**

### *Statement of compatibility*

**Anthony CARBINES** (Ivanhoe – Minister for Police, Minister for Community Safety, Minister for Victims, Minister for Racing) (10:38): In accordance with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006, I table a statement of compatibility in relation to the Corrections Legislation Amendment Bill 2025:

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 Corrections Legislation Amendment Bill 2025.

In my opinion, the Corrections Legislation Amendment Bill 2025, 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 Bill amends the *Corrections Act 1986*, *Serious Offenders Act 2018* (SOA) and *Sex Offenders Registration Act 2004* (SORA), to deliver several priority reforms to ensure that safety risks from serious offenders are appropriately managed, to appropriately denounce and deter assaults on custodial workers and make minor amendments to parole and other provisions that are not operating as originally intended.

Specifically, the Bill will:

- amend the SOA to implement recommendations of the 2023 statutory review of the SOA to strengthen the operation of Victoria’s post sentence scheme, address operational issues and reinforce the scheme’s ability to protect the community
- amend the Corrections Act to strengthen sentencing outcomes for people in prison who cause injury to custodial officers
- amend the SORA to ensure that people convicted of serious sex offences who are placed on supervision or detention orders under the SOA (a SOA order) must report to police under the SORA for the duration of their SOA order and at least five years thereafter to help manage their community safety risks, and
- make other miscellaneous amendments to ensure that the parole and other provisions in the Corrections Act are operating as intended.

#### **Human Rights Issues**

The Bill engages the following human rights in the Charter:

- The right to life (section 9)
- The protection from cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment (section 10)
- The right to freedom of movement (section 12)
- The right to privacy (section 13)
- The right to freedom of association (section 16)
- The protection of families and children (section 17)
- The cultural rights of Aboriginal people (section 19(2))
- The right to liberty and security of person (section 21)
- The right to humane treatment when deprived of liberty (section 22)
- The right to a fair hearing (section 24)
- The right not to be punished more than once (section 26)
- The protection against retrospective criminal laws (section 27)

#### **Human rights protected under the Bill**

The proposed amendments in the Bill will strengthen protections for a number of rights in the Charter.

**Strengthening the operation of the post-sentence scheme**

In general terms, strengthening the operation of the post sentence scheme and altering the reporting periods under the SORA for serious sex offenders, will ensure that safety risks posed by serious offenders are appropriately managed, enhancing community safety. In doing so, the Bill promotes the Charter rights of community members, including the right to life (section 9), the protection of families and children (section 17), and the right to liberty and security of person (section 21).

A number of specific amendments in the Bill will also enhance protections for human rights in the Charter.

**Clarifying Post Sentence Authority directions**

The Bill amends the SOA to clarify that the Post Sentence Authority (the Authority) can give directions about who a person on a supervision order can live with. These directions can play a critical role in managing the individual's risk, noting that certain co-residents may increase the individual's risk (e.g. if the co-resident is antisocial or an active drug user), or may be vulnerable to being harmed (e.g. if the person on the supervision order has a history of family violence).

These amendments will therefore support the rehabilitation of the person subject to the SOA order, enhance community safety and help reduce risks of family violence. This promotes community members' right to life (section 9), security of person (section 21(1)), and protections for children and families (section 17).

**Clarifying the actions police can take following an arrest**

The Bill also amends the SOA to clarify the actions Victoria Police can take after arresting a person suspected of contravening a supervision order, including allowing police to release the person unconditionally where appropriate. These changes will make it clear that police can release a person while they conduct further investigations to confirm if a contravention occurred, ensuring the person is not remanded for an extended period. This amendment will therefore reduce the risk of arbitrary detention of people on supervision orders, protecting their right to liberty (section 21).

**Aboriginal representation on the Post Sentence Authority**

The Bill also amends the SOA to require at least one member of the Post Sentence Authority to be Aboriginal. As the Authority is responsible for overseeing people on post sentence orders, Aboriginal representation will facilitate consideration of the specific needs and perspectives of Aboriginal people who are subject to the post sentence scheme. This will strengthen the cultural rights of Aboriginal people who are subject to the scheme (section 19(2)).

**Strengthening sentencing outcomes for causing injury to custodial officers**

The Bill also amends the Corrections Act to clarify that offences involving causing injury to custodial officers are prison offences and attract the presumption of sentence cumulation in section 16(3) of the *Sentencing Act 1991* (Sentencing Act). This amendment will strengthen sentencing outcomes, helping denounce and deter these offences and improve the safety of the prison environment. This will promote the right of custodial officers to security of person (section 21(1)). The reforms also recognise that a safe workplace and workforce are fundamental to a safe, secure, humane and rehabilitative prison system, and, alongside broader reforms being rolled out across the Corrections system, will help protect the rights of both custodial officers and people in custody.

**Parole amendments**

Finally, the Bill also makes amendments to clarify the application of two parole provisions in the Corrections Act.

Firstly, the Bill will amend the 'No Body, No Parole' provision to correct the unintentionally broad application of the provision. The amendment will make it clear that the presumption against parole in section 74AABA of the Corrections Act does not apply if the victim's body or remains have been located and there is no longer a need to incentivise the offender to cooperate with police to locate it. This will reduce the risk that the provision will prevent a person receiving parole even after their victim's body has been located and the Adult Parole Board has assessed that they are suitable – which could otherwise limit the right to protection from cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment, the right to be free from arbitrary detention, and the right to humane treatment when deprived of liberty (sections 10(b), 21(2) and 22(1) of the Charter).

The Bill will also amend the Corrections Act to ensure the Adult Parole Board can revoke an automatic cancellation of parole. This will allow the Adult Parole Board to reinstate a person's parole if it was automatically cancelled under the Corrections Act, protecting their right to protection from cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment and right to be free from arbitrary detention (section 10 and 21 of the Charter).

**Charter rights engaged or limited by the Bill**

Several reforms in the Bill engage or limit Charter rights.

### **Clarifying the Authority's directions**

The Bill amends the SOA to clarify the Authority's power to give certain directions to people on supervision orders. The Bill clarifies that if a court imposes a condition on a supervision order about where a person can live, then the Authority can give directions about who the person can live with in accordance with any authorisation provided by the court.

#### *Right to privacy (section 13(a))*

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

Empowering the Authority to give directions about who people on supervision orders can live with could interfere with the person's privacy, family or home.

However, it is my view that these provisions are appropriately circumscribed so as not to authorise any arbitrary interferences with these matters. As noted above, directions about where a person on a supervision order can live play a critical role in managing the individual's risk by limiting their exposure to possible triggers and protecting people who are vulnerable to being harmed.

There are also a number of safeguards in place to ensure directions are only given where necessary and proportionate to this purpose, thereby protecting against any arbitrary application of a direction. Firstly, under the new section 36A(1), the Authority will only be able to give directions about who a person can live with if the Court both imposes a condition on a supervision order restricting where the person can live, and authorises the Authority to give directions in relation to that condition. Under the new section 36A(2), the Court will also retain discretion to order that the Authority cannot give directions about who a person can live with. Finally, the Authority is also subject to a number of obligations to protect rights of offenders, including the right to privacy. For example, section 139 of the SOA requires the Authority to aim to ensure directions constitute the minimum interference with the right of an offender's liberty, privacy or freedom of movement necessary to achieve the purpose of the condition. The Authority is also a public authority under the Charter and is required to give proper consideration to, and act compatibly with, Charter rights (including the right to privacy) when making decisions in accordance with section 38 of the Charter. This would include any decision to give a direction to a person subject to a supervision order about who they can live with.

For these reasons, it is my view that these provisions do not constitute an unlawful or arbitrary interference with a person's family or home and are therefore compatible with the right to privacy under section 13(a) of the Charter.

#### *Right to freedom of movement (section 12), freedom of association (section 16(2)), and protection of families (section 17(1))*

Empowering the Authority to give directions about who people on supervision orders can live with may also engage:

- The right in section 12 of the Charter, which provides that every person lawfully within Victoria has the freedom to choose where to live,
- The right in section 16(2) of the Charter, which provides that every person has the right to freedom of association with others, and
- The right in section 17(1) of the Charter, which provides that families are the fundamental group unit of society and are entitled to be protected by society and the State.

Directions about who people on supervision orders can live with could limit an individual's ability to choose where to live and who they associate with, including whether they can live with their family or children. This could engage and limit the rights in sections 12, 16(2) and 17(1) of the Charter.

However, I consider that the amendments made by the Bill justifiably and proportionately limit these rights in accordance with section 7(2) of the Charter. As noted above, any limitations placed on these rights are necessary to serve the legitimate purpose of preventing the escalation of an individual's risk of reoffending, including by assisting in their rehabilitation, and may in some instances, protect the rights of children and families under sections 17(1)-(2) of the Charter. These amendments will also promote community safety by reducing the risk of reoffending. The safeguards discussed above will also ensure that the directions are only made where necessary to achieve this purpose and constitute minimum interference with these rights.

For these reasons, I conclude that amendments to clarifying the Authority directions in the Bill are compatible with the rights in sections 12, 16(2) and 17(1) of the Charter.

### **Clarifying procedural requirements for attempted contravention offences**

The Bill will also help reduce fragmentation of criminal proceedings by clarifying that the court that made a supervision order should be responsible for hearing and determining offences of attempting to contravene a

supervision order, not just offences where a contravention has occurred. In effect, this change will require attempted contravention offences to be uplifted to the County Court or the Supreme Court (whichever court made the supervision orders), along with any related summary offences. This will support continuity of judicial oversight of the offender and reduce fragmentation of proceedings.

*Right to a fair hearing (section 24(1))*

Section 24(1) of the Charter provides that a person charged with a criminal offence has the right to have the charge or proceeding decided by a competent, independent and impartial court or tribunal after a fair and public hearing.

Uplifting attempt offences could engage this right by requiring the Magistrates' Court to transfer proceedings for charges of attempting to contravene a supervision order to the higher courts, effectively bypassing the committals process which would ordinarily determine whether there is sufficient evidence to support a conviction of the offence charged.

The *Criminal Procedure Act 2009* and longstanding High Court authority provide that a committal hearing must be held in all cases in which the accused is charged with an indictable offence, except where a direct indictment is filed, or the charge is heard and determined summarily. While it could be argued that uplifting all attempted contravention offences to the higher courts and bypassing this procedural step could limit the right of the accused to a fair trial, I consider that there is no limitation as the County Court and Supreme Court are competent, independent and impartial and would provide an accused with a fair hearing.

Even if there was any limitation, I consider such limitation on this right imposed by the reforms to be proportionate and justified under section 7(2) of the Charter, for the following reasons.

The SOA already provides for the uplift of charges for contravening a supervision order. Consistent with these existing processes, the Bill reduces the risk of unjustifiably limiting the right to a fair hearing by enabling the higher courts to hear and determine a charge for an attempted contravention of a supervision order summarily, meaning the higher court must conduct the hearing and determination of the charge in accordance with Part 3.3 of the *Criminal Procedure Act 2009* as far as practicable, and may impose any sentence that could be imposed by the Magistrates' Court. In most cases, proceedings for contraventions of supervision orders are heard summarily by the County Court or Supreme Court. If the court decides not to hear the charge summarily, a direct indictment is filed. This ensures individuals are not unduly disadvantaged by having the proceedings transferred to the higher courts without a committal hearing, protecting their right to a fair trial. The reforms will apply this same process to attempted contravention proceedings.

Uplifting proceedings for attempted contraventions of supervision orders also serve an important policy purpose, supporting continuity of judicial oversight by enabling the court that imposed the supervision order to hear matters related to an attempted contravention of the order it imposed. It will also reduce fragmentation of proceedings relating to the same offending circumstances across different courts which could also promote the right to a fair trial. I consider the reforms are the least restrictive means available of achieving these purposes.

For these reasons, I am satisfied that these reforms are unlikely to limit the right to a fair hearing in section 24(1) of the Charter, but that any limitation on the right is reasonable, proportionate and justified under section 7(2) of the Charter.

**Information sharing powers under the SOA**

The Bill amends the information sharing powers to clarify that public health services and hospitals can share information under the SOA with certain authorised persons. This will ensure that agencies with functions under the SOA have access to the information they need to perform their functions and keep the community safe, including the Multi-Agency Panel (MAP) and the departmental teams that support MAP members.

*Right to privacy (section 13(a))*

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

The amendments to information sharing powers in the Bill will enable public health services and hospitals to share private information about a person on a supervision order about the person's support needs and risks, including medical information, engaging the right to privacy.

However, for the reasons outlined in previous statements of compatibility for the SOA, it is my view that the information sharing provisions in the SOA are appropriately circumscribed so as not to authorise any arbitrary interferences with privacy.

Effective information sharing under the SOA is critical to ensure the effective operation of the post sentence scheme. In some instances, this can include medical information – as access to details about medical diagnoses, medications and other information held by health service providers and hospitals can be critical to

identifying changes in risk, ensuring people on supervision orders have access to appropriate rehabilitation and treatment services and in turn, protecting community safety.

I acknowledge that it is also important that the personal information of offenders and victims, which can contain extremely sensitive information, is adequately protected from misuse. In my view, the existing protections under the SOA strike an appropriate balance. The SOA provides that information can only be shared with a prescribed list of persons and for a defined list of purposes, which are consistent with whole of government standards on disclosure of information as provided for in the Information Privacy Principles in the *Data and Privacy Protection Act 2014*. The SOA also includes safeguards against misuse, such as penalties for any unauthorised use or disclosure of information and the requirement that relevant persons operate guidelines in relation to accessing of information to ensure that access is restricted to the greatest extent that is possible without interfering with the purpose of the legislation. As a further safeguard, public health services and hospitals are public authorities under the Charter, and will be required to give proper consideration to, and act compatibly with, the right to privacy under the Charter, as well as the *Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014* and the *Health Records Act 2001* when making decisions regarding the nature and extent of any information shared.

For these reasons, I consider that these amendments will not limit the right to privacy of people on supervision orders as any information shared under the reforms would be done so on a lawful and non-arbitrary basis.

#### **Altering reporting periods under the SORA**

The Bill will also alter reporting periods under the SORA for registrable offenders who are on supervision or detention orders under the SOA (SOA orders) for a serious sex offence (affected cohort). The amendments will ensure that the reporting obligations for the affected cohort, which require people to provide certain information to police, will be in place for the duration of their relevant SOA order and at least 5 years after the SOA order expires. These altered reporting periods will help protect community safety by extending a registrable offender's reporting period during a period of transition following the intensive oversight provided by the SOA, and reduce the risk of further sex offending, during a period where a person is considered to pose an unacceptable risk or in the period of transition shortly thereafter where the risk of reoffending remains heightened.

#### *Right to freedom of movement (section 12) and right to privacy (section 13(a))*

Section 12 of the Charter provides that every person lawfully within Victoria has the right to move freely within Victoria and to enter and leave it and has the freedom to choose where to live.

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

Amendments to the SORA introduced by the Bill will extend the period during which affected individuals must provide Victoria Police with personal details, employment details and details regarding their travel outside Victoria. This engages the right to privacy and may place some limitations on the person's freedom of movement.

However, it is my view that the proposed amendments will not result in an arbitrary interference with privacy.

The amendments serve a legitimate purpose of protecting community safety and deterring recidivism by supporting police to monitor the affected cohort. The amendments are also proportionate to that purpose. They target a clearly defined cohort of particularly high-risk individuals and clearly specify the new way in which this cohort's reporting periods are to be calculated, ensuring they apply to a particularly high-risk period when a person is on a post sentence order or transitions away from being closely managed under the post-sentence scheme. It is therefore my view that any interference with privacy is not arbitrary and will not limit the right in section 13 of the Charter.

Furthermore, if the reforms do place any limitations on the right to privacy and freedom of movement, these are likely to be reasonable, proportionate and justifiable under section 7(2) of the Charter. As noted above, the amendments serve an important purpose of protecting community safety, and there are a number of safeguards in place to ensure any limitation on these rights is proportionate to that purpose:

- The Bill will only extend or reinstate reporting obligations if a court has imposed a SOA order for a serious sex offence, which requires the court to find that the individual poses an unacceptable risk of further serious offending.
- The Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police and the Courts will also retain the power to suspend reporting obligations where they are no longer justified – for example, where a person has experienced significant cognitive decline.
- in terms of the right to privacy – Victoria Police are subject to a number of other obligations to protect the privacy of individuals who report under the SORA. There are also explicit protections

in section 24 of the SORA which protect individual's right to privacy when reporting. Victoria Police is also required to abide by the obligations in the Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014 and, as a public authority under the Charter, must give proper consideration to, and act compatibly with, the right to privacy when making decisions.

- in terms of the freedom of movement – the limitations are relatively limited, as they only require individuals to report on their movement rather than placing any restrictions on where the individual can go.

The above factors all serve to ensure that any limitations imposed by the reforms on an individual's right to privacy and freedom of movement are the least restrictive means of achieving the policy intent and are reasonable and justifiable.

As such, in my view, the reforms are unlikely to amount to an unlawful or arbitrary interference with the right to privacy of the affected cohort, and are otherwise compatible with the right to freedom of movement under the Charter.

*Right not to be punished more than once (section 26) and right to be free from retrospective criminal laws (section 27)*

Section 26 of the Charter provides that a person must not be punished more than once for an offence in respect of which that person has already been finally convicted or acquitted in accordance with law.

Section 27(2) of the Charter provides that a penalty must not be imposed on any person for a criminal offence that is greater than the penalty that applied to the offence when it was committed.

These rights may be relevant to amendments in the Bill which alter the reporting periods under the SORA for the affected cohort. However, it is my view that the extended reporting periods do not constitute a penalty or punishment, and therefore do not limit the rights in sections 26 or 27(2).

Both the SORA and the SOA are civil schemes that are preventative rather than punitive in nature. Altering the reporting obligations of people subject to SOA orders is directed towards prevention of further offending and protection of the community rather than further punishment of offenders. The altered reporting periods under the Bill will also only arise if the court has assessed that the individual poses an unacceptable risk of further serious offending by imposing a SOA order for a serious sex offence – a measure targeted at protection of the community and prevention of further offending rather than punishment. For these reasons, the additional reporting obligations imposed under the Bill therefore do not constitute a 'penalty' so as to engage the protections against double punishment or retrospective penalty in sections 26 and 27 of the Charter.

#### **Strengthening sentencing outcomes for causing injury to custodial staff**

Finally, the Bill will amend the Corrections Act to strengthen sentencing outcomes for assaults on custodial staff. These reforms clarify that causing injury offences in sections 15A to 18 of the Crimes Act committed against custodial staff on duty are prison offences, and should thereby attract the existing presumption of sentence cumulation under section 16(3) of the Sentencing Act that applies to prison offences.

*Protection from torture and cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment (section 10(b)), right to liberty (section 21) and right to human treatment when deprived of liberty (section 22(1))*

Section 10(b) of the Charter provides that a person must not be punished in a cruel, inhuman or degrading way.

Sections 21(1) and (3) of the Charter provide that every person has the right to liberty and security, must not be subject to arbitrary detention and must not be deprived of their liberty except on grounds, and in accordance with procedures, established by law.

Section 22(1) of the Charter provides that all persons deprived of liberty must be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person.

Reforms to strength sentencing outcomes for causing injury to custodial officers will operate alongside emergency worker harm laws, which impose statutory minimum sentences for these same offences committed against emergency workers, including custodial officers. The combined effect of these provisions will mean that courts must require people who commit causing injury offences against custodial officers to serve the mandatory minimum sentence cumulatively unless exceptional circumstances exist so as to displace the presumption of cumulation, and unless a special reason exists so as to displace the mandatory minimum sentence.

In some circumstances, statutory minimum sentences have been found to limit the right to be free from cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment (section 10(b)) where a court has been compelled to impose a grossly

disproportionate sentence. By requiring the statutory minimum sentence to be imposed cumulatively, these reforms could increase the risk that this right will be limited.

These reforms could also result in more people receiving longer custodial sentences. Where a law authorises detention that is unjust, it may limit the right to liberty, to not be subject to arbitrary detention and not be deprived of their liberty except on grounds, and in accordance with procedures, established by law (section 21(1)-(3)).

Given the reforms clarify the application of the presumption of cumulation applies to offences against custodial workers, section 22(1) of the Charter may also be limited by the reforms where they apply by virtue of the person already serving a term of detention in custody.

However, I consider that any limitation imposed by the Bill on the rights under section 10(b), 21(1)-(3) or 22(1) of the Charter to be reasonable, proportionate and justified in accordance with section 7(2) of the Charter for the following reasons.

Firstly, the reforms are necessary to ensure effective denouncement and deterrence of assaults on custodial officers and preserve their right to security of person. The existing presumption of sentence cumulation for prison offences in the Sentencing Act recognises that sentences for offences committed in the prison environment may not provide effective denouncement or deterrence if further time is not added on to the person's existing sentence (particularly if they are nearing the end of their custodial sentence). The reforms also recognise that a safe workplace and workforce are fundamental to a safe, secure, humane and rehabilitative prison system, and alongside broader reforms being rolled out across the Corrections system, will help make prisons safer for both staff and people in custody.

The reforms are also carefully tailored to achieve the important purpose of protecting custodial officers' safety and the overall safety and security of the prison environment while minimising any impact on human rights of offenders. That is, the reforms do not constitute an unreasonable expansion or change to the existing law, but seek to clarify the intended application of an existing presumption of sentence cumulation that already applies to prison offences and that some courts are already applying to causing injury offences committed in prisons against custodial workers. The relevant offences are also narrow and well-defined, and target particularly serious and violent crimes against exposed custodial officers. The reforms therefore seek to impose the minimum limitation necessary to achieve the policy purpose. Courts will also retain some discretion to determine sentence length (within the constraints of emergency worker harm laws), and to impose a concurrent sentence in exceptional circumstances. This will help protect against the imposition of a sentence of imprisonment that is inappropriate, unjust or disproportionate to the offending.

Any deprivation of liberty as a result of the reforms will therefore serve a just and legitimate purpose in accordance with the law that is non-arbitrary, and is unlikely to amount to cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment, or inhumane treatment when deprived of liberty. It is therefore my view that, in the event these rights are limited, the limitation is reasonable and capable of being justified under section 7(2) of the Charter.

*Right to a fair hearing (section 21(1))*

Section 24(1) of the Charter provides that a person charged with a criminal offence or a party to a civil proceeding has the right to have the charge or proceeding decided by a competent, independent and impartial court or tribunal after a fair and public hearing.

This right is relevant and engaged because by clarifying the circumstances that attract the presumption that the court must impose a cumulative sentence, the Bill will impact the sentencing discretion of judicial officers.

However, courts retain the sentencing discretion to make a finding that exceptional circumstances exist and consequently apply the sentence concurrently, not cumulatively. Retaining this judicial discretion ensures that the reforms are compatible with the right to a fair hearing.

**Anthony Carbines**  
**Minister for Police**  
**Minister for Community Safety**  
**Minister for Victims**  
**Minister for Racing**

*Second reading*

**Anthony CARBINES** (Ivanhoe – Minister for Police, Minister for Community Safety, Minister for Victims, Minister for Racing) (10:39): 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 Bill will support the Victorian Government's commitment to safer communities and safer prisons by strengthening protections for custodial officers and improving post-sentence management of people who have committed serious offences.

The Bill will implement a range of reforms to address priority issues affecting the corrections system and post sentence scheme:

- The Bill will amend the *Corrections Act 1986* to denounce and deter assaults on custodial officers by strengthening sentencing outcomes for people in prison who cause injury to custodial officers on duty.
- The Bill will amend the sex offender registration scheme in the *Sex Offender Registration Act 2004* to ensure serious sex offenders who are subject to post sentence orders must report to police for an extended period where appropriate.
- The Bill will amend the *Serious Offenders Act 2018* to implement recommendations of the statutory review of the Act and strengthen the operation of Victoria's post sentence scheme, and
- The Bill will make minor amendments to the Corrections Act to clarify the application of provisions that are not operating as intended.

**Denouncing assaults on custodial officers**

To help deliver Government's commitment to safer prisons, the Bill introduces reforms into the Corrections Act to help denounce and deter offences on custodial officers involving causing injury.

Too many people in prison who cause injury to custodial officers are not required to serve any additional prison time for their offending. Despite an existing presumption in the Sentencing Act that requires sentences for prison offences to be served cumulatively, a lack of clarity in the legislation means that some perpetrators who cause injury to custodial officers receive concurrent sentences to be served at the same time as their existing sentences. This means they spend no additional time in prison after assaulting a custodial officer.

Custodial officers have a right to feel safe at work. The impacts of assaults on custodial officers are often significant, and can include ongoing health impacts and trauma requiring specialised support and treatment. Assaults on custodial officers also compromise perceptions of safety at work, leading to difficulties attracting and retaining staff, and can have flow on effects for the safety of prisons more broadly.

The Bill addresses these issues by putting it beyond doubt that certain offences involving injury to custodial officers are 'prison offences' and attract the presumption of sentence cumulation in the Sentencing Act. This means more perpetrators in prison will be required to serve additional prison time if they cause injury to custodial officers.

This amendment will strengthen sentencing outcomes, helping denounce and deter these offences and improve the safety of the prison environment. These reforms also recognise that a safe workplace and workforce are fundamental to a safe, secure, humane and rehabilitative prison system, and alongside broader reforms being rolled out across the Corrections system, will help protect the safety of both custodial officers and people in custody.

**Implementing recommendations of the Review of the Serious Offenders Act**

The Bill will also amend the Serious Offenders Act to implement recommendation of a statutory review.

The Serious Offenders Act provides the legislative framework for Victoria's post sentence scheme. Under the scheme, a court can order the ongoing detention or supervision of individuals who have committed serious sex and violent offences but continue to pose an unacceptable risk of reoffending after completing their prison sentence.

The government completed a review of the Serious Offenders Act in 2023. The review found that the Serious Offenders Act is operating effectively and as intended, and also made 13 recommendations to further enhance the post sentence scheme.

Following government's commitment to implement the recommendations from the 2023 Review of the Serious Offenders Act, the Bill introduces a number of legislative amendments to improve the operation of the post sentence scheme. These amendments will help strengthen community safety and support effective operation of the scheme by:

- clarifying the actions police can take after arresting a person suspected of contravening a condition of their supervision order,
- improving when victims must be engaged by the Post Sentence Authority to ensure they can be kept informed of important information without unnecessary trauma

- clarifying the directions the Post Sentence Authority can give to people on supervision orders to reduce their risk of reoffending
- creating more flexibility around membership of the Post Sentence Authority to respond to increases in workload, and increasing Aboriginal representation to improve consideration of the specific needs and perspectives of Aboriginal people on the post sentence scheme
- clarifying the information sharing powers under the Serious Offenders Act to ensure that agencies with functions under the Act have access to the information they need to provide appropriate supports to manage risks posed by people on the scheme
- clarifying procedural requirements for attempted contravention offences to reduce fragmentation of criminal proceedings

#### **Altering reporting periods under the Sex Offenders Registration Act**

The Bill will also amend the Sex Offenders Registration Act to help manage community safety risks posed by serious sex offenders.

The Sex Offenders Registration Act requires people who have committed certain serious sex offences to provide information to Victoria Police, including personal details, work arrangements and travel plans. These reporting obligations help reduce the risk of reoffending

Many people on the post sentence scheme also have reporting obligations under the Sex Offenders Registration Act. These reporting obligations provide an additional mechanism to manage the ongoing risk of reoffending, and are particularly critical when a post sentence order expires and individuals transition away from the intensive supervision and oversight of the post sentence scheme.

The Bill will amend the Sex Offenders Registration Act to ensure that people who are on post sentence scheme for a serious sex offence must report to police for the duration of their relevant Serious Offenders Act order and at least 5 years after the order expires.

These altered reporting periods will help protect community safety and reduce the risk of further sex offending.

#### **Amendments to the Corrections Act**

Finally, the Bill will also make minor amendments to the Corrections Act to clarify the operation of provisions that are not operating as Parliament originally intended.

The Bill will clarify that the ‘No Body, No Parole’ provision only applies if the body or remains of a victim have not been located. The amended provision will preserve an important incentive for people in prison to cooperate with police to locate the body or remains of their victims and bring some closure to victims’ families. A person will not be eligible to be granted parole if the body or remains of their victim is missing unless they can satisfy the Adult Parole Board that they cooperated to help locate the body.

The Bill also makes a minor amendment to allow the Adult Parole Board to reinstate a person’s parole in appropriate circumstances if it is automatically cancelled. Currently, a person’s parole is automatically cancelled if they are sentenced to a further term of imprisonment while on parole. The Bill clarifies that the Adult Parole Board can revoke an automatic cancellation of parole wherever appropriate. For example, if the sentence of imprisonment is very short, it may be appropriate for the Adult Parole Board to reinstate the person’s original parole order rather than requiring the person to go through the whole parole application process again.

#### **Conclusion**

The reforms in this Bill support safer communities, safer prisons, and increased efficiencies in the corrections system.

I commend the Bill to the house.

**Cindy McLEISH (Eildon) (10:39):** I move:

That this debate be adjourned.

**Motion agreed to and debate adjourned.**

**Ordered that debate be adjourned for two weeks. Debate adjourned until Wednesday 28 May.**

## Roads and Ports Legislation Amendment (Road Safety and Other Matters) Bill 2025

### *Statement of compatibility*

**Melissa HORNE** (Williamstown – Minister for Ports and Freight, Minister for Roads and Road Safety, Minister for Health Infrastructure) (10:40): In accordance with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006, I table a statement of compatibility in relation to the Roads and Ports Legislation Amendment (Road Safety and Other Matters) Bill 2025:

#### **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 Roads and Ports Legislation Amendment (Road Safety and Other Matters) Bill 2025 (the **Bill**).

In my opinion, the Bill, as introduced to the Legislative Assembly, is compatible with the human rights protected by the Charter. I have this opinion for the reasons outlined in this statement.

#### **Overview of the Bill**

The purpose of the Bill is to amend the *Road Safety Act 1986* (**Road Safety Act**), the *Road Management Act 2004*, the *Port Management Act 1995* (**Port Management Act**), the *Marine Safety Act 2010* (**Marine Safety Act**), the *Marine (Drug, Alcohol and Pollution Control) Act 1988* (**Marine (Drug Control) Act**), the *Transport (Safety Schemes Compliance and Enforcement) Act 2014* (**TSSCE Act**), the *Transport (Compliance and Miscellaneous) Act 1983*, the *Transport Integration Act 2010*, the *North East Link Act 2020*, the *Fines Reform Act 2014* and other Acts, including to make minor and technical amendments.

Relevant to Charter rights, the Bill introduces a licencing scheme for people providing mooring services in Victoria's commercial ports, streamlines processes for disposing of abandoned things from ports and waterways, expands the powers to compel the production of documents for the purpose of an investigation into a transport safety or marine safety matter, expands the ability to share information with port and waterway managers for law enforcement purposes and excludes particular documents from being accessed under the freedom of information regime.

#### **Human rights issues**

The human rights protected by the Charter that are relevant to the Bill are:

- the right to privacy (s 13(a));
- the right to freedom of expression (s 15(2));
- the right to property (s 20);
- the right to a fair hearing (s 24(1));
- the right to be presumed innocent (s 25(1));
- the right against self-incrimination (s 25(2)(k)); and
- the right not to be tried or punished more than once (s 26).

#### ***Right to privacy***

Section 13(a) of the Charter provides that a person has the right not to have their privacy, family, home or correspondence unlawfully or arbitrarily interfered with. An interference will be lawful if it is permitted by a law which is precise and appropriately circumscribed, and will be arbitrary only if it is capricious, unpredictable, unjust or unreasonable, in the sense of being disproportionate to the legitimate aim sought.

#### ***Expansion of the class of person who is authorised to collect urine and blood samples***

Clauses 3, 59 and 101 expand the class of persons authorised to collect blood and urine samples under the *Road Safety Act*, *Marine (Drug Control) Act* and *Rail Safety National Law Application Act 2013* to include a person prescribed by regulation. The purpose of collecting these samples, includes, for example, the collection of samples in relation to offences involving alcohol or other drugs under Part 5 of the Road Safety Act, Part 4 of the Marine (Drug Control) Act and alcohol and drug controls for rail safety works under Part 4A of the *Rail Safety National Law Application Act 2013*.

While the relevant assessment of compatibility with the Charter of prescribing a class of person will be conducted through the requirement for the Minister to certify a Human Rights Certificate with respect to the appropriateness of the specific class of persons proposed to be prescribed, at a general level, I consider that this Bill does not impose any additional interference with the right to privacy. This is because the Bill does

not expand the circumstances in which samples can be taken [and any person prescribed will be appropriately qualified to collect pathology specimens].

*Collection and disclosure of information*

New s 73ZX and s 73ZZC inserted into the Port Management Act by this Bill require a person to provide certain personal information as part of their original or renewal application for a mooring service licence.

Clause 58 amends s 298A of the Marine Safety Act to clarify that the sharing of information held by the Safe Transport Victoria that can identify an individual, for example, vessel registration information, with Ports Victoria, a local port manager or waterway manager is permissible for particular purposes. This includes for the prevention, detection and the investigation of offences, and for various enforcement purposes.

New s 49R inserted into the TSSCE Act expands the power of the Chief Investigator to require production of documents to include where the Chief Investigator believes on reasonable grounds that the document may contain information that is relevant for the purposes of carrying out an investigation into a transport safety or marine safety matter.

New s 49ZY inserted into the TSSCE Act provides for the publishing of investigation-related materials, being reports of an investigation into a public transport or marine safety matter, safety advisory statements and recommendations, if the Chief Investigator considers it is necessary or desirable for the purposes of transport safety. Published materials may only include personal information in circumstances allowed for under the regulations.

While not all information required under these clauses will be of a private nature, or be information concerning a natural person, as opposed to information concerning a corporation to which the Charter does not apply, the power afforded to an entity to collect, use and share information or documents may engage the right to privacy. However, to the extent that these

provisions do require disclosure of personal information, this will occur in lawful and not arbitrary circumstances.

The requirement for a prospective or current mooring service licence holder to provide certain personal information is clearly linked to the legitimate aim of properly assessing the application for a new or renewal of a licence to ensure the person meets the relevant legislative requirements and standards and so should properly be afforded the licence. The aim is important as matters of licence holder suitability are critical to safeguarding the health and safety of personnel, property and efficient port operations. The requirements will apply to individuals who are voluntarily seeking to work in a regulated industry where special duties and responsibilities attach.

The amendment of s 298A the Marine Safety Act is circumscribed in its scope and allows for the further sharing of information with port and waterway managers in accordance with the requirements of Part 8.8A of the Marine Safety Act and for the legitimate law enforcement purposes outlined in s 298C(1)(k) of the Act, including in relation to criminal offences and for legal proceedings. As such, the circumstances in which information may be used and disclosed will only be as allowed under legislation and for specified non-arbitrary purposes.

The expansion of the powers of the Chief Investigator under new s 49R inserted into the TSSCE Act are similarly circumscribed, including a limitation on the power that it can only be exercised where there are 'reasonable grounds' to believe the document contains relevant information, and sits within a regime designed to improve public transport and marine safety by providing for the independent investigation of public transport safety matters and marine safety matters by the Chief Investigator (new Part 2A of the TSSCE Act). For these reasons, I consider that the expansion of the power to compel the production of documents is clear and precise and proportionate to the legitimate aim of ensuring the Chief Investigator is able to effectively investigate public transport safety and marine safety matters.

The prescribing of circumstances in which personal information can be published under s 49ZY will be assessed for compatibility with the Charter through the requirement for the Minister to certify a Human Rights Certificate for any associated regulations.

I therefore consider that any interference with the right to privacy resulting from these provisions will be neither unlawful nor arbitrary.

*Right to freedom of expression*

Section 15(2) of the Charter provides that every person has the right to freedom of expression, which includes the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds. However, s 15(3) provides that special duties and responsibilities attach to this right, which may be subject to lawful restrictions reasonably necessary to respect the rights and reputations of others, or for the protection of national security, public order,

public health or public morality. The right to receive and impart information and ideas under s 15(2) has been held to create a positive obligation on government to give access to government-held documents.

The Bill inserts new s 197AA into the Transport Integration Act to provide for an exemption from the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* for documents that are in the possession of the Chief Investigator, or their agents, delegates or particular employees, where those documents are obtained, received or created as part of an investigation into a public transport safety matter or a marine safety matter or where the documents are incident reports or complaints made in relation to a public transport safety matter or a marine safety matter.

By providing for this exemption, the Bill restricts access to documents which may otherwise be accessible to the public through the freedom of information scheme and so may limit rights under s 15(2). However, I consider that this is a lawful restriction which is reasonably necessary to both protect public order and the rights of others within the meaning of the internal limitation in s 15(3). The expression ‘protection of ... public order’ is a wide and flexible concept and includes measures for ‘peace and good order, public safety and prevention of disorder and crime’ (*Magee v Delaney* (2012) 39 VR 50). The meaning of protecting the rights of others is similarly broad and would include restrictions reasonably necessary to protect the right to life of the general public who may be at risk during a transport safety incident.

The object of the Chief Investigator is primarily to seek to improve transport and marine safety by providing for the independent, no-blame, investigation of transport safety matters. The purpose of excluding these documents from possible disclosure under the Freedom of Information regime is to ensure that individuals are not discouraged from candidly providing information and disclosing all possible relevant documents. This may hamper the investigation of transport safety matters and impair the ability of the Chief Investigator to make meaningful findings and recommendations for improvements. Reports and safety advice and recommendations are still able to be published publicly where it is considered necessary or desirable for the purposes of transport safety (new s 49ZY inserted into the TSSCE Act by this Bill). I consider that the restriction on s 15(2) is tailored to this purpose and reasonably necessary to encourage frank disclosure, ultimately protecting public safety and the right to life of the general public by improving transport and marine safety.

For these reasons, I consider s 197AA falls within s 15(3) of the Charter and so imposes no limitation on the freedom of expression.

#### ***Property rights***

Section 20 of the Charter provides that a person must not be deprived of their property other than in accordance with law. This right requires that powers conferred by legislation which authorise the deprivation of property are confined and structured rather than unclear, are accessible to the public, and are formulated precisely.

Clauses 30 to 38 and 49 to 56 amend the provisions under the Port Management Act and Marine Safety Act dealing with the management, including sale and disposal, of abandoned things from ports and waterways.

The Bill expands the circumstances in which an item can be classified as abandoned, such that in addition to the current criteria, it shall also be sufficient for an item to be unattended for 1 month and for the owner to have failed to move the property after being asked in writing by the port manager within the time specified in the written request (clauses 31 and 50). Once classified as abandoned, the item is liable to be moved, stored or disposed of, including being

sold by the port or waterway manager pursuant to the requirements of Division 4 of Part 5B of the Port Management Act and Division 2 of Part 5.5 of the Marine Safety Act as amended by this Bill. Clauses 35 and 54 also insert new provisions to clarify that a person who is given or sold a thing under s 88T of the Port Management Act or 219D of the Marine Safety Act acquires that thing free from all encumbrances. A person may also be liable for costs associated with the movement, storage and disposal of the item and entitled to compensation for the sale of the item in particular circumstances (s 88U and 88V of the Port Management Act and s 219E and 219F of the Marine Safety Act as amended by clauses 36, 37, 55 and 56).

The ability of a port or waterway manager to deal with a person’s property in this manner will engage their property rights under s 20. However, in my view the right is not limited, as the circumstances in which property can be treated as abandoned and how it can then be dealt with by port or waterway managers will be under a clearly formulated, publicly accessible law and confined to specific circumstances necessary, for example only after reasonable enquiries as to the owner of the item are made or notice has been given, to meet the legitimate purposes of ensuring ports and waterways are kept clear of abandoned property that may be detrimental to the operation of ports, the use of waterways or be environmentally or otherwise harmful. For these reasons, I consider that these provisions are compatible with the right to freedom of property in the Charter.

***Right to a fair hearing******Taking disciplinary action against mooring service licence holders***

Clause 44 inserts new Part 4C into the Port Management Act introducing a licencing scheme of mooring services in Victoria. Under Division 8 of new Part 4C, licence holders may be subject to disciplinary action and have their licence cancelled or suspended where Ports Victoria has reason to believe that the licence holder has contravened a condition imposed on their licence, has contravened new Part 4C or that the licence was obtained because of false or misleading information given as part of the application. The introduction of a disciplinary regime for mooring licences may be relevant to the right to fair hearing.

Section 24(1) of the Charter relevantly provides that a party to a civil proceeding has the right to have the charge or proceeding decided by a competent, independent and impartial court or tribunal after a fair and public hearing. The concept of a ‘civil proceeding’ is not limited to judicial decision makers but may encompass the decision-making procedures of many types of tribunals, boards and other administrative decision-makers with the power to determine private rights and interests. While recognising the broad scope of s 24(1), the term ‘proceeding’ and ‘party’ suggest that s 24(1) was intended to apply only to decision-makers who conduct proceedings with parties. As the administrative decisions at issue here do not involve the conduct of proceedings with parties, there is a question as to whether the right to a fair hearing is engaged.

In any event, if a broad reading of s 24(1) is adopted and it is understood that the fair hearing right is engaged by this Bill, this right would nonetheless not be limited. The right to a fair hearing is concerned with the procedural fairness of a decision and the right may be limited if a person faces a procedural barrier to bringing their case before a court, or where procedural fairness is not provided. The entire decision-making process, including reviews and appeals, must be examined in order to determine whether the right is limited.

Having the ability to take disciplinary action provides an important mechanism by which Ports Victoria can ensure licence holders are complying with the terms of their licence and obtained their licence on the basis of truthful information. Compliance with the licencing regime will work to improve mooring operations, reducing the significant risks of serious injury or death to personnel, damage to property and disruption to port operations which can result from poor mooring practices. For example, where a vessel breaks away from its moorings, it can injure personnel, damage itself and other vessels in the vicinity and disrupt operations at the port. In this regard, I note that there have been many examples of near misses occurring at the Port of Melbourne and, in addition, mooring services have been observed contributing to delays at the Port.

The disciplinary regime inserted by the Bill affords the licence holder procedural fairness. Any decision by Ports Victoria to take disciplinary action is made pursuant to a show cause process (new s 73ZZJ) in which the licence holder is provided with the opportunity to provide written submissions on why the proposed action should not be taken (s 73ZZJ(2)(d)) and is subject to internal review (new s 73ZZN and s 73ZZO). Finally, the decision on taking disciplinary action is subject to external review by VCAT (new s 73ZZR). This affords licence holders a hearing before an independent and impartial tribunal and satisfies the requirements in s 24(1) of the Charter.

As such, I conclude that the fair hearing rights in s 24(1) of the Charter are not limited by the provisions referred to above.

***Right to be presumed innocent***

Section 25(1) of the Charter provides that a person charged with a criminal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty according to law. The right is relevant where a statutory provision allows for the imposition of criminal liability without the need for the prosecution to prove fault. The right is also relevant where a statutory provision shifts the burden of proof onto an accused in a criminal proceeding, so that the accused is required to prove matters to establish, or raise evidence to suggest, that they are not guilty of an offence.

***Strict liability offences***

The Bill introduces two new offences into the Port Management Act that do not require proof of fault, for example, being that the relevant party acted ‘knowingly or recklessly’. The inclusion of these strict liability offences in the Bill may limit right to be presumed innocent under s 25(1) of the Charter. These strict liability offences are:

- New s 73ZW which provides that a person must not provide mooring services in particular commercial ports without a licence; and
- New s 73ZZA which provides that a mooring service licence holder must comply with the conditions to which the licence is subject.

It is noted that new Part 2A inserted into the TSSCE Act by clause 67 of the Bill includes a number of strict liability offences. However, these offences are already in force and are only being re-enacted subject to minor

and technical amendments under this Bill, none of which result in an altered impact on Charter rights and so will not be discussed further in this Statement.

Strict liability offences will generally be compatible with the presumption of innocence where they are reasonable, necessary and proportionate in pursuit of a legitimate objective. It is generally considered justified to impose strict liability to protect public safety, and in the context of regulatory offences where a person is placed on notice to guard against the possibility of inadvertent contravention.

These strict liability offences are directed to the legitimate objective of ensuring that people undertaking mooring services in commercial ports have the requisite expertise and are subject to requirements necessary to encourage the provision of mooring services in a safe and effective manner. As identified above, this ultimately reduces the significant risks to personnel, property and port operations that can arise as a result of poor mooring practices.

It is reasonable and necessary that the offences do not require proof of fault given significant consequences and loss that can arise regardless of whether a licence holder acts knowingly or recklessly. The penalties provide a sufficient and proportionate deterrent of non-compliance with the licencing regime in response to identified risks of poor mooring practices. Further, the offences are reasonable in that they do not exclude the common law defence of honest and reasonable mistake of fact, and they do not attract penalties of imprisonment.

For these reasons, the limitation to s 25(1) of the Charter imposed by the strict liability offences is reasonable and justifiable within the meaning of s 7(2) of the Charter.

#### *Reverse onus provisions*

New Part 2A inserted into the TSSCE Act by clause 67 of the Bill also includes a number of offences which contain an exception in the form of an excuse. As above, these offences are being re-enacted, subject to generally minor and technical amendments under this Bill, most of which does not result in an altered impact on Charter rights.

However, new s 49R expands the scope of the existing offence such that a person must not, without reasonable excuse, fail to comply with a direction to provide any document the Chief Investigator believes on reasonable grounds may contain information that is relevant for the purposes of the investigation into

This offence contains an excuse (also known as an exception) which places an evidential burden on the accused. In other words, the accused is required to present or point to evidence that suggests a reasonable possibility of the existence of facts that would establish the exception or excuse. The Supreme Court has held that evidential onus provisions on an accused to establish an exception do not transfer the legal burden of proof and do not limit the right to the presumption of innocence. Once the accused has pointed to evidence of a reasonable excuse, the burden shifts back to the prosecution who must prove the essential elements of the offence to a legal standard. Further, the exception relates to matters which are peculiarly within an accused's knowledge, being why particular documents cannot or should not be provided, and would be unduly onerous for a prosecution to disprove at first instance.

Should the right to the presumption of innocence in fact be limited by these provisions, I am of the view that any limitation is reasonable and demonstrably justified, in that it is a proportionate measure to the legitimate purpose of the offences, which is to facilitate the effective investigation of transport or marine safety matters with the aim of making improvements to reduce the risk of future accidents or safety incidents. Courts in other jurisdictions have held that the presumption of innocence may be subject to reasonable limits in the context of regulatory compliance, particularly where the commission of regulatory offences may cause harm to the public. Finally, the offences are not punishable by a term of imprisonment.

Accordingly, I am of the view that these offence provisions are compatible with the Charter.

#### *Right against self-incrimination*

Section 25(2)(k) of the Charter provides that a person charged with a criminal offence is entitled not to be compelled to testify against themselves or to confess guilt. This right is at least as broad as the common law privilege against self-incrimination. It applies to protect a charged person against the admission in subsequent criminal proceedings of incriminatory material obtained under compulsion, regardless of whether the information was obtained prior to or subsequent to the charge being laid.

As outlined above, new s 49R of the TSSCE Act expands the power of the Chief Investigator to require production of documents. This has the consequence of also expanding the class of documents to which the existing abrogation of privilege against self-incrimination (as re-enacted in new s 49T) will apply. New s 49T provides that a person is not excused from answering a question or providing information or a document on the ground that to do so would incriminate the person. However, the privilege against self-incrimination is protected by providing both a direct and indirect use immunity in clause 49T(2), which ensures that neither

the person's answer nor evidence obtained as a consequence of that answer can be used against that person in a criminal proceeding, other than a proceeding arising out of the answer being false or misleading or out of a failure to attend before the Chief Investigator, a refusal to take an oath or affirmation as required by the Investigator or refusing or failing to answer a question lawfully asked by the Investigator.

To the extent that the protection against self-incrimination is abrogated in circumstances where the person has provided false or misleading information or documents, or refused to co-operate with the Chief Investigator, I consider that any limitation to the right under s 25(2)(k) is justified having regard to the need of the Chief Investigator to ensure compliance with the transport and marine safety schemes in Victoria and the broader safety purposes of those schemes. To permit the provision of false information or the refusal to co-operate with lawful requests of the Chief Investigator, and to allow a person to escape sanction for doing so, would fundamentally undermine the enforcement of the scheme.

For these reasons, I consider the Bill is compatible with s 25(2)(k) of the Charter.

#### ***Right not to be punished more than once***

Section 26 of the Charter provides that a person must not be tried or punished more than once for an offence in respect of which they have already been finally convicted or acquitted in accordance with law. This right reflects the principle of double jeopardy. However, the principle only applies in respect of criminal offences - it will not prevent civil proceedings being brought in respect of a person's conduct which has previously been the subject of criminal proceedings, or vice versa.

Penalties and sanctions imposed by professional disciplinary bodies generally do not usually constitute a form of 'punishment' for the purposes of this right as they are protective in nature and not punitive.

As outlined above, new s 73ZZA of the Port Management Act introduces a new offence for failure to comply with the conditions imposed on a mooring service licence. Ports Victoria can also take disciplinary action to cancel or suspend mooring service licences for the same reason. However, this does not mean that taking disciplinary action where an offence has been committed would engage this right. This is because the purpose of taking disciplinary action against licence holders is to protect personnel and property in ports from potential future harm and to minimise risks of disrupting port operations, as discussed above. As these sanctions are for protective rather than punitive purposes, they do not engage the right against double punishment set out in s 26 of the Charter.

#### **Conclusion**

I am therefore of the view that the Bill is compatible with the Charter.

**The Hon Melissa Horne MP**  
**Minister for Roads and Road Safety**

#### *Second reading*

**Melissa HORNE** (Williamstown – Minister for Ports and Freight, Minister for Roads and Road Safety, Minister for Health Infrastructure) (10:41): 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:**

##### **Overview**

The Bill will deliver a range of legislative amendments to improve safety, achieve operational and administrative efficiencies, and improve the effectiveness of transport laws. The Bill achieves this by improving enforcement practices and requirements to improve road safety outcomes, addressing known safety risks to workers and reliability at commercial ports by regulating the providers of mooring services, improving the management of certain road infrastructure and making processes for the consent of works on roads more effective, making improvements to legislation that governs the operation of local ports, and a range of other legislative amendments to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of transport legislation.

##### **Improved enforcement of road safety offences**

The Government remains committed to improving road safety outcomes across Victoria. The road safety reforms in this Bill represent a continued focus on identifying areas where our road safety regulatory framework can be adjusted to improve enforcement and supporting processes to better detect those drivers that are doing the wrong thing and to provide a general deterrence.

The Bill amends various provisions and offences in the *Road Safety Act 1986*, to support their investigation and enforcement. Under the *Road Safety Act 1986*, it is an offence for a driver to fail to stop and render assistance after a traffic accident where someone is injured or property is damaged. These offences are commonly known as ‘hit and run’ offences. There are two categories of penalties for these offences. If a person is killed or seriously injured, the act of failing to stop and render assistance is an indictable offence with significant penalties including up to 10 years imprisonment. The second category of offences cover incidents that have resulted in minor injuries. These are summary offences and have lesser penalties. Summary offences also come with a 12-month period (after the incident) in which Victoria Police can commence proceedings. This limitation has been proven to be insufficient in some cases, because it takes time to investigate and identify who was driving the vehicle at the time of the alleged offence. This Bill will extend the time that Victoria Police have to bring a proceeding for this summary offence from 12 up to 24 months to increase the likelihood that the alleged offender can be identified, located and prosecuted.

We know that driving while impaired by alcohol or drugs is a major contributing factor to the road toll and to serious injuries in Victoria. Part 5 of the *Road Safety Act 1986* contains alcohol and drug-related offences to reduce this risk. When detecting these offences in a range of circumstances a blood sample must be obtained, which can only be done by a registered medical practitioner, or an ‘approved health professional’ which includes nurses and other persons approved by the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine. This blood sample must be obtained within three hours of the person driving the vehicle. In practice, Victoria Police can in some circumstances find it difficult to conduct the necessary impairment assessment and find a registered medical practitioner or approved health professional to take the blood sample. The amendment in this Bill will allow for additional professionals to be prescribed as approved health professionals for the purposes of obtaining these blood samples, improving Victoria Police’s ability to detect drink and drug driving offences.

A range of other offences in the *Road Safety Act 1986* also seek to reduce injuries and fatalities on Victoria’s roads. Some of these offences are detected by way of prescribed road safety cameras, and include speeding, red light, seatbelt and distracted driving offences. The range of offences detected via these cameras has expanded in recent years and sworn police officers

are required to issue infringements for these offences. This Bill will amend the Road Safety Act 1986 to allow for specifically authorised Victoria Police employees to be able to issue infringements for these offences, freeing up sworn police officers for other duties. Victoria Police employees would need to be authorised in writing by the Chief Commissioner of Police before they can issue these types of infringements.

#### **Addressing safety and reliability risks for mooring in commercial ports**

The Government is committed to addressing safety and improving reliability in Victoria’s commercial ports. Recently, port stakeholders have raised concerns about the safety of mooring services provided at Victoria’s commercial ports. Mooring, and unmooring, of vessels is an inherently high-risk activity where a vessel’s mooring lines come under high tension as a vessel is secured to berth and is performed at ports in an industrial-like environment and is subject to sudden and unpredictable changes in mooring line tension. These activities are currently unregulated under the *Port Management Act 1995*.

Mooring operations are vital to a port’s operations. Poor mooring practices have the potential to injure or kill personnel operating in the port and the potential to damage wharf infrastructure or vessels. Poor mooring practices can also increase the likelihood of a vessel breaking away and causing considerable damage, both to itself and to other vessels in the vicinity. In addition, inadequate mooring practices can serve as a critical vulnerability in a bustling port environment like the Port of Melbourne, and in the event of the mooring service being significantly compromised, shipping movements could stop, potentially closing the port. For these reasons, the Government is taking action to regulate mooring services to ensure that the providers of such services adhere to minimum standards and conduct their operations in a safe manner.

To manage these risks to personnel and to ensure port operations are run efficiently, the Bill will introduce both a licensing scheme for mooring services and new powers to make a determination setting standards and requirements for mooring services at commercial ports. The new regulatory requirements will be administered by Ports Victoria. The new scheme is substantially similar to the existing scheme that applies to towage services under the *Port Management Act 1995*.

Ports Victoria will have powers to make a mooring services determination to establish the different standards and requirements that will apply to the provision of mooring services in a prescribed commercial port. The determination is expected to include various requirements, standards and obligations related to the training of staff engaged or employed by the provider, the equipment, vehicles and vessels used by the provider, as well as procedures for the reporting of incidents and damage.

To provide a mooring service at any commercial port where a mooring service determination is in effect, a license will be required. Ports Victoria will be responsible for issuing mooring services licences, which are subject to conditions and are valid for a period of five years, unless suspended, cancelled, or surrendered. The

licence will effectively certify that an applicant has sufficient knowledge, skills and expertise in relation to the provision of mooring services and directions by the harbour master, amongst other things, so that they can provide mooring services safely in commercial ports.

#### **Increased flexibility for the management of road assets and improved processes for works on roads**

The *Road Management Act 2004* provides the statutory framework for the management of Victoria's roads. This framework establishes a coordinated road management system for public roads, which includes the clear allocation of responsibilities between coordinating road authorities and responsible road authorities. Section 37 of the *Road Management Act 2004* specifies which public body is the responsible road authority for road and its road infrastructure (e.g. roadway, pathway, structures forming part of roadway or pathway) and road-related infrastructure (e.g. traffic signs and streetlights). This Bill expands the regulation-making power in that section so that regulations will be able to specify the responsible road authority for particular types of road infrastructure (infrastructure that forms part of the roadway). This increased flexibility will allow for regulations to specify a different responsible road authority (other than the default authority under the Act) to address circumstances such as municipal road over rail bridges which by default are the responsibility of the relevant local council, but where ongoing maintenance responsibilities more appropriately sit with the Head, Transport for Victoria or VicTrack.

The *Road Management Act 2004* requires that the approval of the coordinating road authority for a road must be obtained before works on that road can be undertaken, unless an exemption applies. The requirement to obtain consent is there to ensure that the works are conducted in a way that is safe, minimises traffic impacts, and doesn't negatively impact the integrity of the road. There are recurring issues with applications for approval, including that many are submitted with insufficient information for the coordinating road authority to properly assess them. Further, some applications are receiving deemed consent, that is consent is automatically granted after the expiry of the relevant period which is between three and 20 business days after an application is submitted. Deemed consent, in some cases, is not appropriate particularly when the coordinating road authority doesn't have enough information about the proposed works or how safety risks are to be managed.

This Bill will reform the consent for works process to limit who can apply for consent for works, so that only those entities with responsibility for the proposed works are able to apply. It will introduce a "stop the clock" mechanism to allow for the coordinating road authority to request additional information and to have sufficient time to assess the additional information once it is received. The Bill will remove the availability of deemed consent for higher risk applications. These include applications for works within freeways, and applications from entities that are not road authorities, providers of public transport, or utilities. The reforms in this Bill will also allow for regulations to specify what information must be included with an application, to ensure that it is clear to applicants what information a coordinating road authority must receive to make a timely and informed decision.

#### **Continued improvements to the operation of local ports**

The Bill increases the efficiency of local port operations to ensure these important environments are well maintained for future generations. Local port assets and infrastructure such as piers, jetties, navigation aids, vessel equipment and storage sheds all require regular inspection and maintenance. Under the *Port Management Act 1995*, local port managers may provide services to maintain and develop these types of assets outside their local port area. The Bill will clarify that they may also provide services within their own local port area to other bodies such as municipal councils. The Bill specifies that the types of services local port managers may provide include technical, advisory, maintenance and related services. These services will enable local port managers to better assist other bodies both within and outside the local port, who have responsibilities for marine assets and other infrastructure.

The cost of providing these services is also addressed in the Bill. The Bill will enable the Minister to permit a local port manager to charge a fee for the use of a facility or the provision of a service. The Minister may specify that fees be charged to recover costs, on a commercial basis, or calculated on another basis. While the Minister may permit commercial rates to be charged, this will not be mandated unless the Minister explicitly states fees must be set on a commercial basis. This means there will still be some flexibility for local port managers to exercise discretion to set different charges in different circumstances, for example, in emergency situations.

The Bill will also improve processes to remove abandoned vessels and other things from ports and waterways. Abandoned vessels and other items can cause environmental and safety risks in ports and negatively impact the aesthetic value of the area. The Bill will amend the *Port Management Act 1995* to improve the processes related to the removal of abandoned vessels and other things. The Bill will clarify the steps a port manager must follow to determine a vessel or thing as abandoned. The Bill will also outline certain requirements to move an abandoned vessel or thing, and to identify, locate and notify the owner. These amendments will

enable port managers to act more efficiently while providing greater consistency and transparency in the management of abandoned vessels and other things in ports. Similar changes will be made to the equivalent provisions in the *Marine Safety Act 2010* with respect to the disposal of abandoned things by waterway managers.

The Bill also makes other minor amendments to the *Port Management Act 1995* and the *Marine Safety Act 2010* to improve the administration and operation of these Acts. The Bill will require the appointment of local port managers to be published in the Government Gazette. The Bill will also clarify liability for the actions of harbour masters when providing services to another port; clarify costs which may be retained and the order of priority of payment of any proceeds of sale of disposed vessels and things; and make other minor and technical amendments.

#### **Improving the efficiency and effectiveness of transport legislation**

This Bill also contains a range of amendments to improve the clarity, efficiency and effectiveness of transport legislation and to align Victorian transport legislation with broader objectives.

The Bill will clarify arrangements for responding to marine pollution incidents by amending the *Marine (Drug, Alcohol and Pollution Control) Act 1988* to clarify that the Secretary, DTP's functions in relation to marine pollution incidents is to take action to deal with marine pollution incidents where the pollution is from a maritime source, while supporting other agencies in responding to marine pollution incidents that result from inland sources. The Bill will also ensure that Victoria is not left to bear a higher cost of any pollution response resulting from the escape of oil from an oil tanker, by removing the outdated liability limit for such incidents from the *Marine (Drug, Alcohol and Pollution Control) Act 1988*, and relying instead on the internationally agreed liability limit given effect under Commonwealth legislation.

The Bill reforms the current legislation that establishes the investigative powers of the Chief Investigator Transport Safety by consolidating those powers into the *Transport (Safety Schemes Compliance and Enforcement) Act 2014* and repealing Part V of the *Transport (Compliance and Miscellaneous) Act 1983*. The Chief Investigator conducts an important public function of 'no-blame' investigations of transport incidents. The results and outcomes of investigations are an important input into public policy development relating to the safety of transport services and infrastructure. Accordingly, it is vital the Chief Investigator has clear and appropriate powers to conduct these investigations. The consolidation of the powers will improve clarity for the public and also deliver fixes to known deficiencies in the investigative powers of the Chief Investigator. Additionally, the Bill amends the *Transport Integration Act 2010* to provide that the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* does not apply to documents obtained by CITS in the course of investigations. Such a restriction is appropriate having regard to the nature of the investigations that the Chief Investigator conducts and the types of confidential information that the Chief Investigator is able to obtain using their powers.

The Bill contains other amendments to the *Transport Integration Act 2010* to provide that the CEOs of Safe Transport Victoria, the V/Line Corporation, and the North East Link State Tolling Corporation can be employed on a full time or a part time basis, and to streamline consultation processes for short-term appointments for an acting CEO of the V/Line Corporation.

This Bill also contains a range of other minor and technical amendments, including statute law revisions.

I commend the Bill to the house.

**Cindy McLEISH** (Eildon) (10:41): I move:

That the debate be adjourned.

**Motion agreed to and debate adjourned.**

**Ordered that debate be adjourned for 14 days. Debate adjourned until Wednesday 28 May.**

#### *Business of the house*

#### **Standing and sessional orders**

**Steve DIMOPOULOS** (Oakleigh – Minister for Environment, Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events, Minister for Outdoor Recreation) (10:41): I move:

That so much of standing and sessional orders be suspended on 20, 27 and 28 May 2025 to allow:

- (1) The house to meet at 9.30 am on Tuesday 27 May.

- (2) The order of business to be:

**Tuesday 20 May**

Question time and constituency questions  
Formal business  
Statements by members  
Government business

**Tuesday 27 May**

Formal business  
Statements by members  
Statements on committee reports  
Government business  
Question time and constituency questions (2.00 pm)  
Government business continued  
Grievance debate (4.00 pm)  
Government business continued

**Wednesday 28 May**

Formal business  
Statements by members  
Government business  
Question time and constituency questions (2.00 pm)  
Government business continued

- (3) In relation to the grievance debate:

- (a) at 4.00 pm on Tuesday 27 May, unless a division is taking place, the Chair interrupts the business before the House and the bells are then rung for one minute;
- (b) if a division is taking place at 4.00 pm:
- (i) it will be completed without interruption and the result announced;
- (ii) if the division is on a closure motion, and the motion is agreed to, the question or questions then required to be put to close the issue before the House will also be dealt with;
- (iii) business is then interrupted following the procedure in sub-paragraph (a);
- (c) the Chair announces the grievance debate;
- (d) any business under discussion and not completed at the interruption will be resumed immediately at the end of the grievance debate, and any member speaking at the time of the interruption may then continue their speech.

- (4) The Speaker to interrupt business under sessional order 2 at 5.00 pm on Wednesday 28 May.

**Motion agreed to.**

*Bills*

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

*Second reading*

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

That this bill be now read a second time.

**Ben CARROLL** (Niddrie – Minister for Education, Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC) (10:42): Under standing orders I wish to advise the house of amendments to this bill and request that they be circulated.

**Amendments circulated under standing orders.**

**Bridget VALLENCE** (Evelyn) (10:43): I rise to speak on the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025, a bill which relates to the Rozen review – completed over four years ago – into WorkSafe Victoria’s management of complex workers compensation claims. It also relates to an internal WorkSafe review, also conducted four years ago, into family supports and entitlements for dependants of workers who have tragically died at work.

To say this bill has been a long time in the making – over four years – might be considered an understatement. It is indicative of how tired this Labor government has become, to take that long to implement important legislative reform. This is a bill that appears to have had somewhat of a tortured history for reasons that I cannot really fully understand. To top it off we have just had the minister and Premier hopeful quite embarrassingly circulate further amendments, just moments ago, to fix poor drafting errors in the bills.

It is little surprising that, although this bill was introduced on 5 March, it was not until late on Friday afternoon last week that I was informed that further amendments were necessary. Thankfully these drafting errors that the minister is seeking to fix with the house amendments he just circulated, whilst important, do not impact the bill to any material extent. If anything, they will only serve to benefit families who may lose loved ones as the result of tragic accidents at work.

I do not know why it took so long for Labor to identify these errors, but it does appear to be consistent with how this bill has progressed to this current point – perhaps a lesson for the Labor government to have consulted properly first, and no wonder the minister and this Labor government refused to go into consideration in detail on this bill. Having said that, I do thank the minister's office for arranging a briefing on the bill. Given the extent of the amendments included in this bill, the briefing was useful in answering a number of questions that we had and also our request for some particular materials that were referred to in the minister's second-reading speech, although there are still a couple of unanswered questions, which I will refer to later on in the debate.

The bill is a result of various recommendations made in two separate reviews undertaken into the WorkCover scheme: first, the Rozen review, being the review of WorkSafe Victoria's management of complex workers compensation claims undertaken by Peter Rozen QC, now Judge Rozen. In February 2020 the government commissioned Mr Rozen to undertake this review as a consequence of adverse findings made by the Victorian Ombudsman concerning WorkSafe's management of the scheme in December 2019. The Ombudsman found systemic problems concerning the management of the claims process and disturbing examples of injured workers being denied their legal entitlements. The Ombudsman recommended an independent review be undertaken, and the Rozen review was completed in April 2021, more than four years ago. Almost a year later, in March 2022, the government finally announced its response to the Rozen review by accepting in full or in principle 19 of the 22 recommendations.

As part of the response the government announced an implementation plan which required WorkSafe to provide quarterly reports to the minister on progress of implementation of the recommendations. The implementation plan originally indicated a number of the recommendations of the Rozen review would be the subject of legislative changes, with those reforms expected to be introduced into the Parliament by 2023. WorkSafe issued its last quarterly report on the implementation plan in September 2023. At that date, 17 of the 22 recommendations had not yet been implemented. The last quarterly report advised a number of the recommendations required further engagement and anticipated this would occur early in 2024, over 12 months ago. After almost four years of delay and equivocation since the completion of the Rozen review and the implementation plan pretty much just disappearing off the map, the government is now seeking to implement five of the recommendations included in the Rozen review. These recommendations are concerned with improving the experience of injured workers and other claimants, the introduction of a Code of Claimants' Rights and mandatory training and provision of facilities for return-to-work coordinators. The Rozen review found in recommendations 19 and 20 that the statutory objectives of both the WIRC act and WorkSafe were out of date. Further, Rozen recommended WorkSafe should have clear legislative responsibility to actively manage claims and to treat injured workers with dignity and respect. The government has taken these recommendations a bit further, also amending the objects of the Accident Compensation Act 1985 to ensure injured workers and other claimants of the scheme are treated fairly, respectfully and with dignity and that they receive high-quality service.

These amendments are intended to help ensure WorkSafe, its agents and self-insurers adopt a person-centred approach which is consistent with the government's policy. The Rozen review at recommendation 14 recommended that WorkSafe should develop and publish a Code of Claimants' Rights in consultation with key stakeholders. The purpose of the code is to identify the rights of claimants and the corresponding responsibilities of WorkSafe and insurers when managing claims under the scheme. Rozen noted a similar code operated in New Zealand under its accident compensation legislation, which helped enshrine the primacy of the injured person. The government has stated the code is intended to provide clear service standards that injured workers and other claimants on the scheme will be entitled to receive when engaging with WorkSafe, its agents and self-insurers. However, the bill makes clear, and I think this is an important point, that the code does not create any legally enforceable rights. No damages or compensation can be awarded if a breach of the code is found, nor is there any power for WorkSafe to prosecute for a breach of the code. The government has indicated that, if an investigation finds a breach of the code has occurred, possible remedies may include an apology, an explanation of how the breach occurred or a direction that outlines what steps need to be taken to avoid breaches into the future. Perhaps this is yet another aspect of the bill that the government failed to include, and they might say in the future it is another drafting error.

The bill provides for the code to be subject to public review and comment. The minister's office has advised that the code is not likely to come into operation until 12 to 18 months from the time that this proposed legislation may be passed in this Parliament, which does allow for further drafting and public consultation to take place, and we will be keenly watching to ensure that a proper public consultation does take place.

Further, the bill inserts a new criterion in relation to persons who may be eligible to become members of the WorkSafe Advisory Committee and the Occupational Health and Safety Advisory Committee. Persons will now be eligible for appointment by the minister if they have been affected directly or indirectly by a workplace incident that involves death or serious injury or illness. The government considers that persons with lived experience will be able to provide valuable insights and a voice for those persons who have suffered serious workplace injuries so that they can provide a contribution appropriately. But interestingly, this amendment was not recommended by the Rozen review. However, the government argues the amendment picks up and is consistent with the spirit of other reforms recommended in the review.

One of the more contentious aspects of the bill relates to return-to-work coordinators. This bill makes changes requiring employers to allow return-to-work coordinators paid leave to undertake mandatory training and to provide extra facilities for the coordinators to perform their role. Currently, under section 106 of the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013, an employer with a total rateable remuneration of \$2,895,000 or more must ensure an appropriate person is appointed to act as a return-to-work coordinator. A similar obligation is imposed on employers who have a rateable remuneration below that amount, but only while one of their workers has an incapacity to work. Rozen review recommendation 17 is that the WIRC act should be amended to impose a duty on an employer to provide return-to-work coordinators, appropriate training and facilities to perform their functions. However, the reasoning relied on by Rozen for this recommendation appeared to lack substance. Rozen observed that after considering the arguments, the time had come for this duty to be imposed, relying principally on the fact that New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia all required return-to-work coordinators to receive mandatory training. In contrast, neither Western Australia nor Tasmania imposed this measure. This argument therefore is somewhat flawed because Victoria, unlike most other states, has resisted the pressure of calls for it to harmonise its OH&S laws to be consistent with the Commonwealth model. Whilst the rest of the country has adopted these model laws, Victoria generally has resisted.

It was also noted by Rozen that a previous review of the Accident Compensation Act 1985 undertaken by Peter Hanks KC in 2008 did not recommend mandatory training for return-to-work coordinators.

In contrast, Hanks observed there was a concern that for some employers, especially those who have few claims, mandatory training may impose an unreasonable cost. As such, competing views have been expressed by eminent lawyers as to whether such a requirement is appropriate and reasonable, and under the bill employers are required to ensure return-to-work coordinators complete mandatory approved training and have assistance and facilities reasonably required to fulfil their functions. The proposed new requirements in this bill will likely translate into significant additional costs for employers.

Further, under this bill the minister can determine the training must be completed by a return-to-work coordinator, when it must be completed and the qualifications that must be held by the return-to-work coordinator. The minister can also choose who can provide the mandatory training. The minister's office has advised these decisions will be made under regulations after a public consultation process has been undertaken. In the bill briefing they could not specify exactly who will be providing the training. An employer who fails to comply with these new return-to-work coordinator requirements faces the prospect of being prosecuted by WorkSafe and ordered to pay a penalty of up to \$118,554.

The minister's office, in the briefing, also quite curiously advised that training requirements might be different for large businesses and small businesses. Again, that is a different obligation for large businesses and a different obligation for small businesses.

For instance, a large employer may be required to attend a course of training that is longer than a course undertaken by a small employer. The minister's office also said there may be scope for prior experience or training to be recognised; however, these would be matters that would be dealt with in regulation. That does not really provide the confidence level that businesses or industry bodies are after. After I pressed department officials in the bill briefing, the minister's office disclosed that financial modelling undertaken by the government found that the cost impact on Victoria's business community to comply with these new requirements was up to \$10 million. This is a significant cost impost for employers to manage and was a key point of concern for many of the stakeholders in my consultation with them. That is something that I will return to a little later in the debate.

Further, this bill makes provision for persons or bodies to be approved by WorkSafe to deliver the training. During the bill briefing the minister's office did not rule out the possibility that WorkSafe would approve only trade unions to deliver the training – another concern for stakeholders and business, and just more revenue raising for Labor's electoral donors.

Rozen also recommended, at recommendation 9, that there should be periodic reviews of the operation of the scheme rather than waiting for a crisis to occur. Rozen noted that similar statutory schemes provided for regular reviews. Interestingly, Rozen recommended that the first review be undertaken by 1 July 2024. It appears that Mr Rozen had a mistaken impression that it would not take four long years for the government to act on and legislate his proposed changes. The bill has adopted this recommendation and will provide for reviews of the scheme to be undertaken every five years, with the first review to be completed by 31 December 2030. A report of each review will then be tabled in Parliament.

The second review referred to in the minister's second-reading speech is known as the family supports review. In the government's media release announcing the introduction of the bill the minister said a number of the reforms contained in the bill were the result of the government's review of the adequacy of support available to family members following a work-related death. After I was unable to locate a copy of any report related to such a review, I requested the minister's office to provide me with a copy of the review's report. I was subsequently advised by the minister's office:

[QUOTE AWAITING VERIFICATION]

A report was not prepared for public release on the review of family supports. Rather the review was in fact an internal review undertaken by WorkSafe after receiving a directive by the then Minister following the death of a worker in 2021. The findings of the –

so-called –

review were communicated to the Minister by way of a ministerial briefing prepared by the Department of Treasury and Finance and WorkSafe.

After I made several attempts to find out on what date this ministerial briefing occurred, the minister's office refused to advise me on what date that briefing took place – quite curious. They did advise me that they did not have access to the then minister's diary, but given the fact that the department arranged the briefing it is curious that they cannot provide the date of the briefing. I can only imagine that they are seeking for some reason to keep the date of the briefing secret. It is clearly not accountable at all, and the only inference that can be drawn is that the government has something to conceal or potentially is facing embarrassment about how long it has taken to implement changes as a result of this review that was conducted four years ago.

However, at my request the minister's office did provide a summary of the findings of the WorkSafe review, and the WorkSafe review was on the basis of the proposed changes in the bill relating to increasing the weekly pension payable to dependent children and lump sum payments to other dependants of a deceased worker as well as other measures. During the bill briefing it was confirmed by representatives of the minister's office and WorkSafe that the family supports review was not the subject of any public consultation or submissions from key stakeholders. Rather, DTF and WorkSafe were solely responsible for making the recommendation contained in this internal review. As such, we have today a bill before us that includes a number of new entitlements and payments that have not been subject to any community consultation or engagement with stakeholders. Do they hit the mark? Are they even enough? Whilst the measures may have considerable merit, it is remarkable that this government refuses to engage with those in the community and interested stakeholders such as injured workers or family members of a deceased worker on such important issues as these.

Currently the WIRC act does not provide compensation to a person who is economically dependent on a worker's earnings at the time of their death if there was also compensation payable to partners or children. This means if a worker was providing economic support to a partner, a child and also a parent or sibling, the parent or sibling would not be entitled to compensation. The new provision will create a new lump sum compensation entitlement for dependants of the deceased worker who are not partners or children, such as siblings or parents. Eligible dependants will be able to receive compensation of up to \$20,000 for their economic loss. The specific amount payable will be determined by WorkSafe or the insurer.

Dependent partners of workers whose death is work related are currently entitled to receive a provisional pension for up to 12 weeks while the liability for their claim is determined. However, for around one in four claims it can take much longer than 12 weeks for liability to be determined, causing financial hardship, so the bill does amend the WIRC act to extend the provisional payments period for up to 26 weeks after the death of a worker. The bill will also remove the current exclusion on making provisional payments in connection with a worker's death that was caused by suicide. We consider this to be a welcome change and acknowledge the additional suffering for families who may have been unable to access supports as a consequence of this exclusion.

Now, this bill is not without concern. The bill presents several concerning provisions that may have significant and in some cases detrimental impacts on employers and jobs across Victoria. While we support initiatives aimed at improving workplace safety and ensuring appropriate treatment and rehabilitation of injured workers and supports for family members of workers who die at work, there is concern the bill may increase the complexity of the scheme, present compliance challenges for businesses and jeopardise business viability and therefore jobs through even higher premiums.

In relation to a return to work, the requirement to provide mandatory approved training and facilities to return-to-work coordinators will come at a cost for employers. Despite the Hanks review in 2008 finding that mandatory training of return-to-work coordinators may impose an unreasonable cost on employers, especially those with very few claims, the bill will impose this mandatory requirement.

Hanks was at pains to stress in his review that small employers should be allowed sufficient flexibility to meet the requirements to appoint a return-to-work coordinator without imposing an undue financial burden.

As I indicated earlier, when officials were pressed during the bill briefing on how much this measure would cost employers to implement, the officials advised their modelling suggested these changes could cost up to \$10 million for Victorian businesses to implement. This is a considerable additional burden for employers to carry and represents how the cost of doing business in Victoria is becoming much harder under this Allan Labor government – much harder and much more expensive. The minister's office has since tried to walk back from these figures by advising that, depending on the type of training undertaken, the costs could be between \$185 for an online training course or \$485 for a two-day facilitator-led course. So there are different types of training but all for the same type of return-to-work coordinator – again, curious. However, none of the figures provided by the government appear to measure or take into account any of the on-costs that employers will be required to pay. This includes the cost of providing additional paid time off to attend the training, which means a loss of productivity while the person is away from the workplace. There is also the cost of providing the return-to-work coordinator with facilities required to undertake their role. Facilities could include a dedicated office with necessary equipment, IT facilities, floor space and the provision of equipment. It all comes at a cost. Clearly employers are going to face additional costs in complying with these requirements at the same as in Victoria taxes are increasing. Stakeholder groups with whom I consulted were opposed to the increased compliance costs the return-to-work measures would impose. A two-day training course was considered excessive, and there appeared to be insufficient recognition of prior training. It is not clear how often this training must be undertaken, and it is yet again just a matter for the minister to determine, which provides further uncertainty.

Now, with the family supports amendments, whilst there is no objection to family members of workers who have died at work receiving compensation as a consequence of suffering that tragic work-related death of a family member, no data or information has been provided as to how the amounts included in the bill have been arrived at or calculated, whether they will hit the mark for family members or whether they will result in higher premiums for employers.

As noted earlier, the family supports amendments were not subject to any public consultation process. Rather, they were a product of an internal review conducted by WorkSafe and the Department of Treasury and Finance. When asked in the bill briefing how much these additional payments were likely to cost the scheme, the officials advised the new entitlements were not expected to have any material impact on the scheme, because they did acknowledge that there is a low rate of work-related deaths in Victoria. For instance, in 2023–24, 50 Victorians tragically lost their lives as a result of a work-related death. Departmental officials did indicate that it would cost the scheme around \$24.3 million to operationalise. However, again no stakeholders, including workers, employers, unions or industry bodies, were consulted about these proposed changes before the bill was introduced. The introduction of a new \$10,000 grief and loss payment for deceased workers' families alongside expanded funding for therapy and support services will likely lead to higher insurance premiums and administrative burdens. Increasingly, the scheme is being used to solve issues, and employers are being asked to cover the cost.

For several years Victoria's WorkCover scheme has been in decline in performance, and the quantity of claims, in particular mental injury claims, has significantly increased. In 2023–24 there were 35,575 claims, an increase from 32,780 in the previous year. That represents an 8 per cent increase in one year and a 28 per cent increase since 2019–20. Mental health claims represented 18 per cent of all claims in 2023–24, an increase from 16 per cent in the previous year. Employers were forced to accept a massive 42 per cent increase in their premiums in 2023, making Victoria the most expensive WorkCover scheme in the country. The average premium rate in Victoria is now at 1.8 per cent, having increased from 1.27 per cent in 2023. The government has admitted the WorkCover scheme is fundamentally broken and have done that publicly but have done very little to make meaningful reform

to the scheme or protect it from being abused. Stakeholders have advised the increasing cost of WorkCover premiums for small to medium-sized businesses was a factor when considering the ongoing viability of their business in Victoria. While there was a freeze last financial year as a result of pressure from the Liberals and Nationals, employers remain very fearful of an inevitable increase in premiums going forward, especially as a consequence of the various changes in this bill. Given the concerns that we have raised about certain measures contained in the bill, I move a reasoned amendment:

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

- (1) agrees to freeze the average premium rate at 1.8 per cent for 2025–26 to provide certainty to Victorian employers;
- (2) consults with interested stakeholders and the public on proposed changes recommended by a WorkSafe review into family supports;
- (3) makes available all modelling prepared for the legislative impact assessment for this bill in relation to the additional costs and financial impact the bill will have on employers and the WorkCover scheme;
- (4) consults with industry to minimise fees for training for return-to-work coordinators; and
- (5) implements measures to prohibit entities responsible for corruption on Big Build and Victorian construction sites from becoming an approved training provider.’

The government’s bill will result in further compliance burdens and costs being placed on employers, and given Labor’s massive 42 per cent hike in premiums last year, costing businesses an additional \$1.7 billion, we call on this Labor government to agree to our call to freeze WorkCover premiums to give cost relief and certainty to Victorian businesses when they need it most. Further, given the bill gives the minister the ability to authorise the return-to-work training providers, it is important that only appropriate organisations can be approved. As such, the reasoned amendment is a sensible measure to ensure disgraced and corrupt organisations like the CFMEU are prevented from deriving any benefits from the potential opportunities this bill may offer in terms of new revenue streams via training provision for return-to-work coordinators. Further, it is imperative that there is consultation with industry about fees for return-to-work training. The minister’s officials confirmed that to date there had been no consultation with businesses and no consultation with industry groups about training costs, which I find, again, astonishing and just smacks of the arrogance of this Labor government.

There should also be proper and meaningful public consultation on the proposed changes recommended by the WorkSafe review into family supports for those families who have lost a loved one at their workplace, simply because the government conceded that they have done no public consultation on these new entitlements. Are these new entitlements enough? Do they hit the mark? Our minds should be with those family members who have lost a loved one at their place of work, and yet this Labor government could not be bothered to consult with family members who have had a family member die at work when it comes to these entitlements.

The government would be hypocritical in the extreme if it attempted to criticise us for seeking to delay the passage of the bill with this reasoned amendment to achieve this, because the government has been sitting on the recommendations of both the Rozen review and the internal family supports review for over four years. As it has taken the government four years to introduce these changes, it is worth taking a little more time to ensure that a proper public consultation process takes place on some of these very important reforms, particularly the family supports for family members who have lost loved ones at work.

Again we urge the government to accept our proposal to freeze WorkCover premiums and provide employers with certainty and tax relief, which will only assist in creating further jobs in the future, assist Victoria to have a business-led recovery and make Victoria a more attractive location for existing and new businesses to invest and grow and provide Victoria with the competitive advantage that it needs. We know that businesses, particularly small businesses, are the backbone of the Victorian economy. But under this Labor government they are hit with tax increase after tax increase after tax

increase. Again, as I said, in Victoria, under this Allan Labor government, Victorian businesses and Victorians are the highest taxed in the country, and our Victorian businesses are suffering. They are making choices about not employing extra people or potentially moving their operations offshore or interstate or closing altogether, and this is something that we do not want to see. These businesses suffered a 42 per cent increase in their WorkCover premiums last year. Again, as I said, for Victorian businesses that amounted to \$1.7 billion in additional contributions to the WorkCover scheme.

We think it is only reasonable that this government agrees to this part of the reasoned amendment around freezing WorkCover premiums. It is Liberal–Nationals policy that we freeze WorkCover premiums for this period of time, and we are calling on the government to match us with that and give that cost-of-living and cost-of-business relief to employers that they so deserve. We think there should be some additional consultation taken. We also believe that the modelling should be made public and available in relation to the legislative impact of this bill and the additional costs and the impact it will have on employers. I commend the reasoned amendment.

**Gary MAAS** (Narre Warren South) (11:13): It is with an immense amount of pride that I rise today to speak to the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025. In doing so, I consider this premise: that while no-one plans to get injured at work and while we want all of our loved ones to come home from work, if the worst does happen, it is absolutely essential that the right support is available, whether to the worker who is injured or to the families of loved ones who have been lost in the workplace.

I find it absolutely astounding that the member for Evelyn, the opposition spokesperson on this bill, would talk about the length of time that it has taken, talk about the cost to business and talk about lack of consultation. All of these things are covered in the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 under a section which talks about the formation of the Workplace Incidents Consultative Committee. If the opposition spokesperson had taken the time to read the OH&S act and to see the WICC that has been formed under there, she would see why those elements, which she referred to as the basis for her reasoned amendment, and that committee are so important and why those elements have been covered.

When you are talking about the death of someone injured at work, guess what, there is trauma, right? And this government will always make sure that it speaks to workers, injured workers and the families of people who did not survive going to work. There is an enormous amount of trauma that is involved with that, and thankfully, through this Workplace Incidents Consultative Committee, there are lived-experienced members, people who have actually experienced what has happened on the worksite. It takes time. Have you ever come and spoken to a lived-experience member, member for Evelyn? Have you ever spoken to a lived-experience family member of someone who has died at a worksite?

**Bridget Vallence:** Yes, I have.

**Gary MAAS:** Well, the member for Evelyn would understand the trauma that goes with Coroners Court hearings, would understand the trauma that goes on in the community and would understand the trauma of losing a loved one, whether it is your son, whether it is your brother or whether it your husband. On the Workplace Incidents Consultative Committee we have lived-experienced members, and we also have all of those family members on the committee. When people come to this committee and speak to them about the cost to business, they will always retort, ‘Well, what about the cost to the community? What about the cost to family? This is our loved one that we have lost here.’ Who does the economy operate for? Does it operate for the benefit of small business, does it operate for the benefit of business or does it operate for all of us as a society? Does it operate for all of us as a community? These are the types of questions and the types of balance that we need in having this debate.

The government does speak to a business advisory council, and it gets input from them, but equally it has formed the Workplace Incidents Consultative Committee under the OH&S act to ensure that injured workers will have their say. When it comes to employers implementing return-to-work

training, it is actually not a \$10 million cost; it is a \$4.9 million cost. But what cost do you put on an injured worker? On that basis, the reasoned amendment that has been put forward by the opposition just does not stand up, and the government will not be supporting that reasoned amendment.

The Workplace Incidents Consultative Committee I am very proud to be the government co-chair on. I am a co-chair with Brett Struhs, who is the current lived-experience co-chair. I think that whole committee acknowledges the enormous work of the former co-chair, Dr Lana Cormie. We also have some fantastic work on that committee that is done by the deputy co-chair, lived-experience member Samantha Burns. I would like to acknowledge that whole committee for the extraordinary work that it does in giving the government advice from a lived-experience perspective. I turn up to that committee every few months. I sit and I look at the pain in the faces of lived-experience members, and I know through what they say what they are feeling. It takes time to be able to get it right, to get those laws right and to ensure that the laws that are being passed in this place are going to improve lives and improve the support that is available to workers' families.

The Workplace Incidents Consultative Committee has been absolutely instrumental in helping to inform that work. I have seen the way that they speak to members of our police force in being able to help through the investigations process. I have seen the way they speak to representatives of the Coroners Court about the processes that take place there. I have seen the way that they speak to WorkSafe executives to describe to them what it is like. It is visceral. It hurts. It is the sort of feeling that needs to be conveyed when a bill like this is put together. Do not come into this place with some simple drib drab about the cost to business. The cost to business will always be balanced, under this government, with what the cost is to the community. And you know what? In the medium to long term the cost will well and truly balance itself out – with young people who live in this world, grow up and go on to be what their parents would have hoped that they would be: contributing members to our society, contributing members to our community.

Labor is and always will be the party and the government for workers – it is a part of our great legacy – whether it is by protecting wages or whether it is by protecting workers rights and safety and ensuring that when the worst happens workers and their families can get the assistance and the compensation that they need. This bill has a core aim of improving the experience of injured workers and their families throughout their time on the WorkCover scheme through people-centred policy. This government's priority is to ensure that this scheme continues to be contemporary and that it is fit for purpose and supports workers, unlike those opposite, who have put a reasoned amendment forward. I thank the members of the WICC and all of those who have shared their stories to help inform these chambers.

It would be remiss of me to finish my contribution today without quoting a comment I received from Dr Lana Cormie last night. Let us face it, Dr Lana Cormie always gets the last word. She said to me:

I'm excited –  
about this bill –

... I really hope this goes through. The aspect relating to an increase in the children's pensions is particularly close to my heart and something which I raised many years ago now. It's been a long time coming and will make a tangible difference to the support of families with young children in the future. Fingers crossed!

Lana, I have got my fingers crossed as well. It is with the support of this government that we will get this bill through this house. I commend the bill.

**Tim McCURDY** (Ovens Valley) (11:23): I am delighted to rise and make a contribution on the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025, and I am pleased to follow the member for Evelyn, who led the charge for this side of the chamber with her high level of knowledge in this space. I certainly do support the reasoned amendment that she has put forward, which I will go into a bit further on in my contribution.

Workplace safety, we all know, has come an enormous way from years gone by. As a former dairy farmer and having spent 25 years in the dairy industry, I know just how unsafe and high risk farming is, whether it is dairy farming or any other farming occupation, working long days, working long nights and working alone. Although my family has left agriculture, we still see the need for workplace safety and reform wherever possible, both physically and mentally.

We know that the bill includes the introduction of a Code of Claimants' Rights to prescribed service standards that must be met by WorkSafe and self-insurers when assessing claims by injured workers. The bill will introduce a lived experience membership criterion for the Occupational Health and Safety Advisory Committee and the WorkCover Advisory Committee, and it will amend return-to-work provisions by requiring employers to provide return-to-work coordinators, with paid time off to undertake mandatory approved training. Again, all of these changes I do not have any problems with.

I do have a problem where there is rorting in the system. We know this happens by a small percentage across every industry. We get that, but it comes to the employer to have to pay that price in many cases and that is why we always have to put as much energy and effort into making sure the system is not rorted. It will also introduce new compensation entitlements and supports for family members after a work-related death by allowing family members of a deceased worker to receive provisional payments after a death by suicide – again a commonsense inclusion. It will also increase weekly pensions payable to dependent children of deceased workers, extend the duration of provisional pension payments for dependent partners up to 26 weeks, create an entitlement to lump sum payments for economic loss for dependants who are not the partner or child of a deceased worker and create an entitlement to lump sum payments for non-economic loss for close family members of a deceased worker. It will also provide access to a broad range of therapy and other support services, introducing a new entitlement to compensation for forensic cleaning where a worker dies at home or at the home of a family member – another commonsense initiative. It will also improve the operation of the Workplace Injury Commission by allowing the Workplace Injury Commission to certify consent agreements made between parties to resolve arbitration disputes and order costs in favour of an injured worker where the parties resolve the dispute in arbitration. There are some other minor drafting errors, but we will go into that a little later on.

WorkCover, as we know, is a wild and unruly scheme that has always been very complicated, and when it comes to streamlining and making changes it is difficult. That is what incurs a cost to business owners. Small and medium business owners are already overtaxed and over-regulated in Victoria, and they simply cannot afford to pay more, which is why the member for Evelyn has moved a reasoned amendment to ensure that they will not be hit by a massive increase in WorkSafe premiums, as was the case last year with a 42 per cent increase. Businesses are struggling at the best of times from being overtaxed, and certainly in regional Victoria we are finding with the seasonal conditions and a late break it is going to get very tough this year – even if it rains tomorrow. People think it is all fine, but it is not all fine, because if it rains today or tomorrow it still takes six weeks in cooler weather to get grass to grow and feed to grow. Those who are out there purchasing feed now will still be purchasing feed for the next six to eight weeks until probably the best part of August. That is provided we get a break in the near future. That flows on to the community. What farmers are not making does not flow on to the shops in town and the businesses in town. As I say, we really cannot afford premiums to go up like they did last year. I was speaking to some larger businesses in Wangaratta recently. They had an increase of 288 per cent over two years. That was massive as far as they were concerned, and they were saying they just cannot support anything like that as an increase again, let alone the other taxes we have got coming like the emergency services tax which may or may not get through. Those are the concerns that we have.

In terms of the reasoned amendment, as the member for Evelyn has said, we want the government to agree to freeze the average premium rate at 1.8 per cent for 2025–26 to provide that certainty to employers. It is not just for regional, whom I have spoken about, but all employers in metropolitan Melbourne and all across Victoria, because we know the 42 per cent we saw last year is a result of

poor management, and it took a long time to catch that up. We now need to make sure that does not happen again, such a massive increase. The second part of the reasoned amendment is to consult with interested stakeholders and the public on proposed changes recommended by a WorkSafe review into family supports. It will make available all modelling prepared for the legislative impact assessment for this bill in relation to the additional costs and financial impact the bill will have on employers in the WorkCover scheme. We simply do not trust the government when they say they have got it right this time. We need the evidence, we need the modelling, to see for ourselves that these changes that will take place are not going to end up in massive increases in WorkCover premiums, which we have spoken about. It also calls for consultation with the industry to minimise fees for training to return-to-work coordinators and, finally, implements measures to prohibit entities responsible for corruption on the Big Build and Victorian construction sites from becoming approved training providers.

You simply cannot allow Dracula to be in charge of the blood bank in this instance. Those responsible for the Big Build have never achieved a budget target on any project, and those responsible for the Big Build should not become an approved training provider. I think that is a very important concept that we should include, and I do hope the government seriously considers the reasoned amendment to improve this bill. We talk about work safety. I do not think there is anybody in this place who wants to oppose or see less work safety. We just want to keep the costs in control and make sure that the system is not rorted, as I said.

Mental health is a concern. One of the employers in my region said that it is always very easy to work out when someone should come back to work with a broken arm or a broken leg or something like that. For mental health it is far more difficult to understand when the right time is. Again, it is only a small percentage, and we just have to try and keep that percentage as small as we can regarding those who do want to rort the system. I certainly believe that mental health is a significant issue in the workplace, and we do have to monitor it. People are entitled to support for that, as long as they do not just milk that system, milk that cow, because our premiums will continue to go up. It is the government who need to be spending more time, more energy and more resources on making sure that rorting does not get out of hand, because if it does, that small percentage becomes a larger percentage. It becomes very, very costly for all employers, not just the ones who are affected directly. As I say, some of my businesses have had a 228 per cent increase, one of them an \$860,000 increase over two years, despite last year's freeze. They are absolutely fearful that they will see more increases, and they want to make sure that does not happen.

I have spoken about the rorting. I have spoken about making sure that mental health recovery is adhered to. I certainly accept that it needs to be part of this and also that it is difficult to measure, but we do have to stop anyone from milking the system. On the whole, there are a lot of complex and technical changes in the bill. There is a lot of room for improvement. As I say, I do hope the government takes into consideration the reasoned amendment that was put forward by the member for Evelyn. There are considerably good points in there. The government has taken a long time to get to the table. Even as late as today it is still making amendments. I think if they also take note of the amendments that we have put forward, we can genuinely make this better legislation for all and not find ourselves in a predicament like we did last year when, through poor management by this government, we ended up with a 42 per cent increase to employers. As I say, workplace safety is paramount – absolutely paramount. It is not just one side of this chamber, it is both sides of the chamber that support work safety, and we certainly support what we can do further with this bill.

**Bronwyn HALFPENNY** (Thomastown) (11:33): I am not sure if I heard correctly, but I think I heard the comment 'milking the system', and it is the most shocking and appalling attitude that I have ever heard. Here we are, talking about legislation amendments that have been recommended by a ministerial consultative committee of people with lived experience and their own professional lives, who have brought all sorts of incredible, professional, intelligent and also compassionate proposals to the minister that make up the majority of this bill, and all we hear from the opposition is 'milking the system'. I am absolutely disgusted that you could behave in that way when we are talking about people

whose families have lost loved ones – who have lost their father, their mother or their son – and in this sort of circumstance this is the way that you talk. Anyway, let us get on to what the bill is about. I have said my bit on that.

The amendment bill that we are talking about is the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025. This legislation, as you may know, is very close to my heart because the substantial amendments that will be debated here today will change various workers compensation and health and safety laws, and they are a direct result of the dedication and commitment of the members of the Workplace Incidents Consultative Committee (WICC).

I also commend the member for Narre Warren South, because he is now co-chair, along with Brett Struhs, the new co-chair. I would like to acknowledge members of the WICC who are in the gallery this afternoon, who have come all the way from many parts of regional Victoria to listen to and see the work that they have put in for years really come to fruition. Thank you for your dedication and your commitment to do this work on behalf of other people really. You have had the experiences, which is what we value as the Allan Labor government, to advise us, but you are really doing this for those that come after you, to help them with what they will be going through. It would be the most terrible thing a person would ever have to experience, to hear the news of a loved one having been needlessly killed at work or, in other cases, seriously injured.

As I think I said, in my previous role as Parliamentary Secretary for Workplace Safety I also had the honour of co-chairing this committee, with the amazing Lana Cormie, who I understand cannot be here today. I really did have the privilege of working with a group of people who, whilst they had tragic lived experience, volunteered to join the Workplace Incidents Consultative Committee, which is now enshrined in law and regulation as a body to provide advice directly to the minister. It is the WICC from which many of these amendments that we are talking about today came – they arose from the industrial manslaughter legislation which the state Labor government introduced I think in 2020.

A key part of this, again on the advice of many of the families that agitated and campaigned for this workplace legislation for industrial manslaughter – they also lobbied and advocated for this – is that advice is to be provided by those with lived experience. I guess this is one of many pieces of legislation. I know there has been legislation in the past, but the legislation we are talking about today really is continuing that work, and it has been a long time coming. For example – and this is what really gets me with the opposition – one of the amendments is to ensure that the WorkCover system, the WorkCover authorities and the health and safety legislation treat people with dignity and respect and provide the entitlements that they are entitled to. How could anybody argue with that?

Also within this legislation is the formation of, or the opening of, the way to having a sort of bill of rights for those who have lost loved ones, the families, and those with serious injuries. These are just basic human rights. We need a system. We hear too many stories of how the system brings people down and in fact often makes people more hurt and injured than they were previously with the original injury. Here we are talking about having proper systems in place that ensure that there are, for example, objectives and a format of rights so that injured workers and families of loved ones who have died at work are treated with the proper respect and provided the entitlements – no more, no less – that they have under the legislation.

I have talked about the objectives and the rights of injured workers. There are also a number – again these were suggestions and matters put forward by members of what is called the WICC, the Workplace Incidents Consultative Committee – of small changes that really cost very little but will have a huge impact on the individual or the families of those whose loved ones have been killed at work. In many cases the person who has died at work has had dependants. They were working in order to provide for their families, and with their passing a great amount of the necessities of life that you need to pay for have gone with that person.

As well as having those overarching rights and considerations, the legislation we are talking about today deals with things such as – do not tell me the opposition is opposing this – at the moment, a dependent child of a person who has died at work receives 5 per cent of that person's pre-injury average weekly earning as part of the compensation, on a weekly basis. Five per cent – that is not much. That is going to be increased to 12.5 per cent per dependent child. I do not think anybody would say that when a loved one passes away at work, the family that is left behind is better off financially. They are at all times financially worse off. Of course that is not the main consideration of the family, but they still need to have those bills paid and they still need to make sure, and we want to make sure, that that is not a burden in addition to the grief, which is completely life changing, not just for one or the other parent but also for the children, that trauma passing down the line. We want to make sure that finances are not the thing that has to be looked at in the forefront.

And well done and congratulations – when I was involved there was not a lot of support in some circles for adding a lived-experience person to the WorkSafe board advisory committees, but one of these amendments is for that very thing to happen. Therefore the membership of both the Occupational Health and Safety Advisory Committee and the WorkCover Advisory Committee will include members with lived experience. I think everyone would say that that is a great step forward. It really is important that people with lived experience are on these advisory bodies and can provide another perspective.

There are also requirements under these amendments in the bill that the minister will cause an independent review of the WorkCover safety scheme at least every five years, with the first review to be completed by 2030. This fits with other parts of these amendments around the treatment of families of injured workers and how the scheme is working to support and not further damage those that have been affected by a workplace serious injury or death. These are small things in the scheme of things but very important to those individuals that are dependent on the scheme and are requiring certain supports. There is also another change that was advocated for through the week. Sometimes dependents may not necessarily be children of a person that has been – (*Time expired*)

**Cindy McLEISH** (Eildon) (11:43): I rise to make some comments on the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025. I have listened to the previous two speakers of the government, and fair dinkum, they are living in la-la land. They are talking up a scheme that has consistently let down injured workers over the last decade. Things got so dire that the former minister had to make some fairly big changes to try and bring the scheme back onto sustainable footing with an organisation that actually has injured workers at its heart, because that is not what has been happening. The member for Thomastown is completely out of touch.

Under the Labor government WorkSafe has suffered greatly. They have had so many deficits that they have not been able to manage the scheme, let alone the injured workers. We have seen that in previous years this state government had to inject \$1.3 billion into the organisation. This is an organisation that should be fully funded through the premiums it collects from employers, but it was not. In the year 2021 they had to inject \$550 million; the following year, \$450 million; and then \$300 million, so they propped it up by \$1.3 billion.

Realising that the government should not have to be doing that, because the scheme was in such a desperate state of mismanagement, they looked at what they had to do. They had to make some legislative change, but also they whacked employers to an extraordinary extent of 42 per cent. Most people, I heard, did not have a 42 per cent increase; it was much, much more. The \$1.7 billion that was collected actually represented a 53.23 per cent increase on the previous year's premium.

Not only was it financially a basket case but also the claims were up. Claims were up, and return-to-work rates had stagnated. Instead of looking after injured workers and preventing injury to workers, it was going in the wrong direction. We can have a look at return-to-work rates in six months for physical injury, which is the rate that is measured, and in 2023–24 it got to 75 per cent. It had been at 80 per cent in 2016–17, so in 2016–17, 80 per cent of workers with a physical injury got back to work. It

dropped down to 73 per cent and 74 per cent in the last couple of years, so the return-to-work rates have gone backwards. The longer people are off work the more complex their condition can become. If it is a physical injury it can become a lot more complex. Perhaps they have multiple operations, their mental health deteriorates and they become quite complex cases. The return-to-work rates in a six-month period for mental injuries have only been measured in more recent times. They are most recently about 42 per cent, so not even half of the people with a mental health injury are getting back in time.

The government have completely failed injured workers, and for them to talk it up is quite astounding – it really is – because we have seen the history behind this. Let me give the members over there a little bit of history. The Ombudsman had a report, number one, in 2016 on the treatment of workers with complex injuries. It had completely disturbing reports and identified systemic issues. There was not only that report in 2016. In 2019 the Ombudsman had to go back and do another report because things had not got better. The government, who talk their work up, were failing even more. The Ombudsman went back and found continued systemic issues and disturbing reports, to the point that the government said, ‘Gosh, we’ve been failing these people for four years. Let’s pretend it hasn’t happened. We’d better get an independent review,’ so we had the Rozen report.

As we know, the Rozen report, by the now Judge Rozen, was handed down in April 2021. It was looking at what the government needed to do to actually fix the system which they had broken piece by piece. It was looking at the agent model and the administration of complex claims. The agent model includes self-insurers, so we have the four main agents plus self-insurers. Complex claims can be when somebody has had multiple injuries as a result of a trauma at work, or it could be a health condition that continues to deteriorate. There can be a mental component associated with it, or indeed it can be as a result of multiple robberies at work. I remember, having worked in rehabilitation some years ago, speaking to people who had been subject to many traumas at work such as that.

One part of this bill is because the government went away and had a look at the experience of the families. They are having to make it better for the families. Numbers of workplace deaths jiggle around a little bit. In the last four years we have had between 50 and 69 deaths each year. That is 50 to 69 too many. The family sometimes are left hanging on a bit of a limb. They are not adequately compensated. This bill looks at the number of families – and as I said, it is 50, 69 or 68 families each year; that is too many – but the numbers in relation to helping and making a difference to those families’ financials are not huge. The figure is only \$20-odd million, I think the government has said. Some of the things that needed to be looked at were pensions for dependent children.

Every family circumstance is different, and the injured or deceased worker may not just have a spouse who is dependent and may or may not work but they may have children. I have known people who have also had disabled siblings that they have been the prime carer for and prime supporter of, so it picks up some of those guys with lump sum payments and the like.

I want to talk about the investment in return to work. I mentioned earlier the return-to-work rates and the failures of the government in that regard, with the physical and mental injuries, and the government have realised that they have actually got to do something about this. It was only a few years ago that they looked at how to save money in the scheme, rather than work out what works and what does not work, and they had a bit of an attack on occupational health and rehab providers. They thought, ‘Gosh, look at the cost that’s being spent here. So much money is being spent; let’s reduce referrals to rehabilitation. Let’s reduce that and try and save a bit of money.’ But what do you think happened with saving a bit of money by not referring people to rehab? Well, return-to-work rates deteriorated. Hello! You know, there is a direct connection between sending people to rehab, helping them gain the confidence and the skills and working with their employer to get them back to work so that they do not have longer term complex issues.

The government failed in this regard. Now they have realised they need to do something about return to work, and it is one of the things that is being addressed here. We are looking at the return-to-work

coordinators. Now, if you are a large employer, it is quite easy for you to have a return-to-work coordinator. For smaller employers that is more difficult. Then you get some very small employers who in 20 years may never have a claim, so we need to understand exactly what the obligation is of a small family-run business with three employees who may never have an injury. They need to know what systems are in place and what they can do at the time to be guided through to help them manage the worker so that the worker has a good experience, not a joke of an experience, which is what has happened for a decade under Labor. The fact that Labor have got their head in the sand here and keep talking up all the great work that they have done is laughable, and it is an insult to those injured workers.

One of the other things that are being introduced here is the Code of Claimants' Rights, and that is going to set out clear service standards for injured workers when they deal with WorkSafe the body, whether they deal with their agent or the self-insurer, so that the worker has an understanding of what standards they can expect and vice versa – the agents, WorkSafe itself and self-insurers need to know what they need to deliver. They need to have a very clear understanding. Now, that is yet to be released. There will be some public comment on that, and I am looking forward to seeing that. I would have liked to have seen that done here.

Finally, I want to mention that it is pretty ordinary that the government come in and say they have got a couple of minor amendments to make to the bill, two pages. There are a lot of words on that. They did not get it right at the time. They have had to do a substantial rework on clause 15 with other dependants and also parts of the Accident Compensation Act 1985.

**Ella GEORGE** (Lara) (11:53): It is always a pleasure to follow the member for Eildon when making a contribution in this place. I am always incredibly impressed by her passion for Victoria and her innate curiosity. I am proud to rise today to speak on the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025. I would like to acknowledge the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC and his team for the tremendous work that they have done with this bill and across the portfolio to keep people safe at work and ensure that every worker comes home safe to their family at the end of the day.

This bill is an important piece in our state's legislative framework to protect all Victorians and their right to return home safely from their workplaces. We know that no-one plans to get injured at work, but the reality is, sadly, sometimes this does happen. And when it does, we need to ensure that those workers are supported by a system that treats them fairly and respectfully while navigating those tough times. The bill aims to enhance the effectiveness of Victoria's workers compensation system by ensuring that all users receive high-quality service focused on treating them with respect, fairness and dignity. The legislation implements suggestions from the Independent Review into Complex Workers' Compensation Claims Management, the Rozen review, which I will discuss a little later on in my contribution, and these amendments are focused on the handling of complex workers compensation cases, ultimately benefiting all injured workers.

One of these involves the minister gaining the authority to create a Code of Claimants' Rights, establishing service standards and outlining the responsibilities of WorkSafe, its agents and self-insurers. There will be new requirements for employers to ensure that return-to-work coordinators undergo approved training and receive the necessary facilities and support to carry out their duties effectively. Additionally, the amendments will allow for the appointment of individuals with lived experience to the advisory committees at WorkSafe and mandate an independent review of the entire scheme every five years starting in 2030.

This legislation also introduces reforms aimed at enhancing support for family members who are affected by work-related fatalities, following the Victorian government's review of existing provisions. This includes raising the weekly pension for dependent children, establishing new lump sum payments to acknowledge the grief and loss experienced by close family members as well as compensating dependents who are not partners or children. Furthermore, entitlements to provisional

payments will be expanded. These changes will facilitate broader funding options for therapy and other types of support for the families of deceased workers and those facing eligible progressive diseases or severe injuries. Lastly, this bill will incorporate minor adjustments to improve the functioning of the Accident Compensation and Conciliation Service, which is now referred to as the Workplace Injury Commission, while also streamlining some administrative processes.

This bill delivers on the Victorian government's commitment to implement recommendations provided in two separate reports. Firstly, the independent review into complex workers compensation claims management undertaken by Peter Rozen KC and provided to the government in April 2021, known as the Rozen report, and the review of the adequacy of the compensation and supports for family members of workers whose death is work related, known as the family support review.

In 2019 the Victorian Ombudsman released a concerning report titled *WorkSafe 2: Follow-Up Investigation into the Management of Complex Workers Compensation Claims*. This report unveiled troubling instances where injured workers faced unfair treatment and were denied their rightful legal benefits. This report highlighted a systemic flaw in how complex claims are managed, alongside a noticeable lack of oversight and review mechanisms. In considering these findings, the Victorian government took action by commissioning Peter Rozen to conduct an independent review of the claims management process.

In March 2022 the government responded to the Rozen review, with the then Minister for Workplace Safety announcing that the state government would support 19 of the 22 recommendations made in the review. This included a commitment to amend the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013 and mandate the creation and publication of a code of injured workers' rights. This code will ensure that WorkSafe is obligated to treat every worker with the dignity and respect that they deserve, guaranteeing high-quality service and fair treatment.

Since the Rozen review, under this government, WorkSafe has undertaken substantial efforts to enhance the management of complex claims and improve outcomes for injured workers. One of these was the establishment of the claims and recovery support team in 2021. This specialised team now directly manages the claims of long-term injured workers. Following the recommendations of the review, this team was expanded in 2022, allowing WorkSafe to support an even greater number of complex claims.

Furthermore, WorkSafe has initiated a pilot program known as the recovery model office. This is an innovative approach that utilises advanced data, claims management and analytics to identify workers with intricate needs, ensuring they receive tailored high levels of support. As a government we have been closely monitoring the outcomes of these initiatives, using the insights gained to refine agent contracts and guide any future transitions of claims to WorkSafe, because it is only under a Labor government that we understand how important it is to ensure that the experiences of injured workers in our system reflect fairness, respect and the right to high-quality services.

I would like to spend some time speaking about the Workplace Incidents Consultative Committee, because in my opinion this is one of the most important parts of our government's reform work in this space. It was under a Labor government that we established this committee in June 2021 to strengthen the voice of Victorians who have been affected by serious workplace incidents. The committee was established to provide advice to the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC about a number of important areas, including the needs of persons affected by workplace incidents involving death, serious injury or serious illness and the development, review and improvement of policies, practices, strategies and systems relating to serious workplace incidents and occupational health and safety more generally.

This embeds lived experience into the important reform work that this government is doing. The committee currently comprises 13 lived experience members and one government representative, and this group of people have already achieved some really significant accomplishments since they first came together in 2021. These include finalising the report *A Best Practice Model of Workplace*

*Incident Support*, which outlines opportunities to improve the experience of affected families, injured workers and co-workers following a serious incident. They have provided advice to the Department of Treasury and Finance, including best practice principles for better support for injured workers to inform the future work of Return to Work Victoria. They have provided advice to WorkSafe Victoria to influence legislative amendments included in the Workplace Safety Legislation and Other Matters Amendment Act 2022 and they have provided advice on the design of the bereavement support service provided to families after a workplace death, amongst other things.

I acknowledge the hard work of all the members of the Workplace Incidents Consultative Committee. This committee has been instrumental in contributing to these reforms to support injured workers and families who have lost a loved one from a workplace death. In particular, I want to acknowledge three members who have joined us today to hear the parliamentary debate on this important legislation: Brett Struhs, co-chair and lived-experience member; David Brownlee, a lived-experience member; and Ralph Snider, also a lived-experience member. I thank the members of the committee for being here with us today, and I thank them for all of their work fighting to protect workers safety.

Labor has a proud history of fighting for workers, workers rights and workers safety. Labor built the WorkCover scheme to support workers, and this is at the heart of what Labor governments do. In fact, it was this that drew me to the Labor Party. In 2006 I was one of thousands of workers affected by the Howard government's WorkChoices policy. Like many people who were adversely affected by policies like these, I was a young university student, and like most of my friends, I relied on a casual job in hospitality. Overnight I saw my rights and the rights of my friends disappear, and it was that which led me into the Labor movement, because I knew that my values aligned with those of the Labor Party. I knew that fighting for the rights of all Victorians was something I firmly believed in and wanted to do. That is why I am proud to be a member on this side of the house – because on this side of the house, we are fighting for the rights of all Victorians. We are fighting for the rights of Victorian workers. We are fighting for the rights of Victorian workers who are injured at work, and the rights of their families when they lose a loved one due to a workplace incident.

We will always prioritise the safety of workers, and that is exactly what this bill does. When the worst happens, it is essential that timely support is given to families who are grieving the loss of a loved one. No-one should die at work, and no-one should have to fear a loved one not returning from work. I commend the bill to the house.

**Jess WILSON** (Kew) (12:03): I rise to make a number of comments on the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025. Can I begin by saying that WorkCover is an incredibly important scheme for Victoria and for workers in Victoria, and it is so important that we strive for it to be a strong and viable scheme for all workers in Victoria. But unfortunately, under the administration of the Labor government in this state, we have seen the scheme fall apart at the seams. You do not have to take my word for it – the former minister, the member for Essendon, has called WorkCover fundamentally broken in this state.

Can I, from the outset, commend the member for Eildon for her considerable work last year when this scheme was undergoing a number of major reforms and the work that she did at the time to ensure that not only did those reforms actually deliver for workers in Victoria and for injured people in Victoria who suffer workplace injuries but indeed that Victorian businesses and Victorian industry did not see further premium increases. She secured a premium freeze for employers in this state at a time when they simply could not afford to be hit with another hike from this government.

If we look at the administration of the WorkCover scheme over the past decade, we have seen the Labor government simply run it into the ground. We have seen the state government have to inject billions of dollars of taxpayer money into the scheme to prop it up. In 2022–23 it was \$300 million; in 2021–22, \$450 million; and in 2020–21, \$550 million, adding up to \$1.3 billion of taxpayer bailout for WorkCover under the Allan Labor government. This follows the fact that the scheme has simply not been delivering for injured workers in this state. How do we know that? Because of a series of

reviews and reports into the scheme that showed that injured workers were not being looked after under this scheme under the administration of this government. We saw the 2016 Ombudsman's report, and then because the recommendations in that report were not picked up by the government, were not implemented and were not delivering for injured workers the Ombudsman came back in 2019 to look again at what was happening in the administration of this scheme. Then of course we have seen the Rozen review as well.

As I said, in the words of the former minister, WorkCover is fundamentally broken in this state. The impact of that is that time and time again the poor financial administration of this state and of the various schemes and agencies in this state means that Victorians pay the price. Because of this we have seen premiums increase time and time again under the Labor government's administration. Over the past few years we have seen an average premium increase of 42 per cent for businesses in this state at a time when they are being hit with tax after tax by this government: COVID debt levies, mental health levies, payroll tax increases and land tax increases. Under this government they are also being hit with an average 42 per cent increase when it comes to WorkCover premiums. But I am yet to meet with a business in this state that only saw a 42 per cent increase. I have heard stories from small businesses, from family businesses and from businesses in regional Victoria that have suffered 70, 80, 90 per cent increases when it comes to their WorkCover premiums. These are businesses that have not even had to submit a claim for their workers for years, yet they are seeing these massive hikes when it comes to premiums.

This is a system that is designed to ensure that workers who are injured in the workplace when they are undertaking their employment have security when it comes to ensuring that they are looked after as a result of those injuries. But if we do not manage the scheme well and if we do not manage the financial capacity of the scheme, then the consequences of that are that it is no longer sustainable. We can see that when we look at the detail of how this agency is being managed. This is an agency that is now reporting \$870 million of negative equity. How is that sustainable over the long term? The consequence of that will be simply to put up premiums time and time again. We only have to look as far as another government insurer, the VMIA. This is in a very similar position to WorkCover. This is where we have once again seen poor financial administration in this scheme. We have seen the fact that the IFR, the insurance funding ratio, threatened to fall below 100, as it has with WorkCover. We saw that there had to be put in place a potential capital management plan for the VMIA. Once again, like WorkCover, it is in negative equity – \$477 million last financial year – and it is \$98 million in the red. What does it have in common with WorkCover as well?

Under this government we are seeing insurance premiums rise right across the board. Domestic building insurance premiums increased 43 per cent in 2023 and 65 per cent in 2024. What we are seeing from the Allan Labor government right across this state is the fact that it cannot manage money. Ten years of financial mismanagement when it comes to the budget, when it comes to these agencies and when it comes to the insurers means that Victorians are paying the price, whether that is through poorer services or higher premiums or not being able to access the insurance coverage they need when they are injured at work.

If we look at the bill here today and what we are looking at in terms of the various amendments being made, we are looking once again at a myriad of reforms that do not go to the core sustainability of WorkCover in this state. We are looking at the fact that we are going to see once again the risk of premiums increasing. We will see once again businesses being put under pressure in this state. The quantity of claims continues to rise. The return-to-work provisions are not meeting what we would expect in terms of supporting people to get back into the workplace.

What we know is that the decline in the financial performance of the WorkCover scheme will only result in more businesses being put under pressure in this state. Ultimately what does that mean? It means that these businesses cannot employ Victorians. They cannot grow their businesses. They cannot look for other opportunities. I remember visiting a small business in regional Victoria, in Ballarat, and they were looking at opportunities to start exporting their product overseas and they

showed me their premium increase when it comes to WorkCover. That premium increase, combined with the increase in payroll tax and the fact that they have seen their land tax bill go up as well meant that they could not take on the extra employees to do the extra shifts required to ensure that they could export those products overseas. That is a missed opportunity for this state. That is a missed opportunity to employ more people in this state, and that is a direct result of the financial mismanagement under this government.

I commend the member for Evelyn for the reasoned amendment that she has put forward today and the importance that the Liberals and Nationals are placing on the call to freeze the premium rate for WorkCover on employers to ensure that we do not put businesses and industry in this state under any more pressure at a time that they can least afford it. This government continues to tax business out of business. They simply cannot make it stack up anymore in this state. You ask any business that has a national operation, and they will say that Victoria is the hardest place to operate, the hardest place to do business. Why? Because this government has managed the economy into the ground. It has, time and time again, put up taxes on business. It has increased payroll tax, land tax and an average increase of 42 per cent when it comes to WorkCover premiums. The poor, poor state of finances in this state means that Victorians are paying the price and Victorian businesses are paying the price.

**Dylan WIGHT** (Tarnait) (12:13): It is a pleasure to rise this afternoon and contribute in favour of the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025. I do so as a member of a movement – the broader labour movement here in Victoria – that has the plight of injured workers at the core of absolutely everything that it does. I said in my first speech that I will spend all of my days in this place trying to improve the lives of injured workers, so you can imagine how I feel when I walk into this place to debate a bill that is so important to helping the plight of injured workers only to find that there is a reasoned amendment from the member for Evelyn that would mean that injured workers in this state and their families get less for longer, and for what reason?

What reason was provided for this reasoned amendment, which would delay the passage of this bill? There were two main reasons, from what I understood and from what I heard. The first is just the old impost to business – it is just, ‘This is a bit hard for business, so what we’ll do is we’ll just stop debating this until we can go out and drum up a little bit more fear in the community.’ And in particular, what was cited was the need for return-to-work coordinators to be adequately trained. Now, as somebody who has represented workers in a past job, the impost to business for a return-to-work coordinator to be adequately trained is pretty minimal. You know, if we are talking about even SMEs, the return-to-work coordinators already exist; they are already in the business, so we are not forcing businesses to go and employ somebody else at \$80,000 or \$90,000 a year. These return-to-work coordinators already exist – they are typically somebody that works in HR or perhaps they are somebody in middle management. So the return-to-work coordinators already exist, and they play a pivotal role within the business.

If you do not get your return-to-work systems within your business right, then your business will pay more, and what will end up happening is you will have injured workers who end up with secondary injuries because they have returned to work too quickly or they have returned to work in roles that they should not have returned to work in. Given that those return-to-work coordinators already exist, I would have thought that it was pretty sensible to have them adequately trained. Training obviously comes at a cost. The cost for a return-to-work coordinator to be trained – let us say you want to go and do it with AIG, the Ai Group – is \$495 and one day. It is one day’s training at \$495, which of course can be claimed as a business expense. For the member for Evelyn to come in here and say that this is going to cost Victorian businesses millions is utter garbage.

The other reason that I picked up on was, ‘Oh, we need to do this reasoned amendment because we just need to make sure that none of this training money is going into the hands of the CFMEU’, and then they cited the normal sort of fear stuff that those opposite do with really any union but the CFMEU in particular. I would just like to remind the member for Evelyn, in case she has been living under a

rock, that the CFMEU is in administration. So to sit there and say, ‘Oh, some of this money might end up in the corrupt hands of the CFMEU’ –

*Members interjecting.*

**Dylan WIGHT:** If you want to stand there and call a former judge corrupt, then go right ahead. But I would remind the member for Evelyn that the CFMEU is under administration.

We also had the member for Eildon come in with a contribution after that, which was quite considered. I deeply respect the member for Eildon’s knowledge in respect to workers compensation and in respect to this act. But I would just make the broad point: for those opposite to come in here and to have a go at this government in respect to how we deal with workers compensation is just the biggest case of gaslighting that I have ever heard in my entire life. It is a pretty quick google to find out what former Liberal governments tried to do to this scheme when they were in power. I have got an article here headed ‘Kennett Govt’s changes to workers’ compensation laws draconian’. In 1993 what we had was a former Liberal government break an election promise and rip the common-law rights –

**James Newbury** interjected.

**Dylan WIGHT:** I was; I was three – and rip common-law rights away from Victorian workers. So what that meant was that there could absolutely be a decision where a worker was entitled to let us say \$20,000 in compensation, and there was no way for the worker to actually seek it, because those opposite ripped those rights away from them. And they want to come in here and lecture us about our performance in respect to workers compensation. Supporting injured workers is at the core of everything that we do, and we will continue to do it. We know that if those opposite ever get the gift of government again they will cut and cut and cut. They should be honest with the Victorian people as to whether this scheme is something that they will cut if they ever find themselves in government, because it is in their DNA, and we know that.

This is a piece of legislation that, like I said, is incredibly important for Victorian workers, especially injured Victorian workers. This is a piece of legislation that benefits every Victorian worker. Even if they do not go through the horrible situation of being injured – or worse – at work, having that safety net there is incredibly important. It adds objectives to the act and WorkSafe to expressly provide for fair, respectful and dignified treatment. It develops a code of rights and requires return-to-work coordinators to be trained and for that training to be completed within a set time frame. As I said, return-to-work coordinators in businesses, particularly SMEs, often do not hold a singular, defined role. Typically it is somebody from HR, it is someone from middle management and it is somebody who really should have adequate training to be able to perform the role.

I have seen in my time the consequences when return to work goes wrong; I have seen that firsthand and it is not a pretty sight. It often ends up with the worker sustaining a further injury. There have been situations where I have seen return to work go wrong, the worker has sustained a further injury and that worker has not been able to work ever again. That obviously is horrendous for that worker. It is horrendous for that worker’s family, for their health, for their mental health and for their financial security. It is also horrendous for the business. It is a significant impost on the business. If that part of your business goes wrong at the rare time that you have to activate it – to say that it is an impost on business to spend \$500 and have one employee at training for one day a week, as compared to the consequences when it goes wrong, I think is incredibly short-sighted. But let us be honest: the reasoned amendment has nothing to do with the substance of the bill; it is just to try and delay it. It is not to try to improve the bill at all, and the reasons given make that incredibly clear.

There are new lump sums and increased lump sums for economic loss of up to \$20,000 for dependants and a new lump sum for non-economic loss of up to \$10,000 for close family to recognise grief and trauma. There is also an increase in child pensions from 5 per cent to 12.5 per cent of pre-injury earnings and an extension of provisional payments to partners from 12 to 26 weeks.

Behind every workplace injury, indeed behind every workplace death, there is the worker who is obviously immediately affected. But often there is also a family that relied on that worker's wage to be able to get through and live their life. Those on this side of the house have always and will always try to improve the lives of Victorian workers and injured Victorian workers, as opposed to those opposite, who have a history of ripping the guts out of this scheme. I commend the bill to the house.

**Martin CAMERON** (Morwell) (12:23): I rise to talk on the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025. Everybody in this chamber wants to get a piece of legislation through in this amendment bill that does work for every Victorian worker, not only if they are working on Big Build projects in Melbourne or if they are small business owners in the city or in regional Victoria. We need to look at getting a system that works right across the board, because for far too long the WorkCover compensation that we get and the premiums that we are paying have been out of kilter.

As a former small business owner who employed mums and dads in regional Victoria, the one thing that I wanted to do, and I think the one thing that every person in this chamber wants to do, was ensure that if a worker left through the front door, they returned to that front door at night to go home to their family.

I have seen people get minor injuries at work, where it might have been a two-week or a four-week injury before they stepped back into the area of getting back to work, and where there was a longer injury; I have seen friends of mine have years off before they were able to step back into the workforce. We need to be mindful that we are covering the whole range for everybody because, as the member for Tarneit just stated, it has got a huge impact not only on the worker but the family that relies on that wage. Unfortunately, in the building industry, which I was in, I have seen people pay the ultimate price with their life – of going to work and not being able to return home – friends of mine, people that I have known. If you are involved in a sporting community in your electorate, somewhere along the line, for a person going to work – and they should be able to go about their day's work – coming home is the number one option that should be able to be achieved, and sometimes that does not happen. I know the member for Narracan is going to get up and speak shortly. In the building industry it happens all the time where things go wrong. In some workforces the jobs are more dangerous than others. I have spoken to small business owners that have had coffee shops and have had employees that have slipped on the floor or they have burnt their hand and they have been off work. But in the plumbing industry, in the building industry and in the power station industries down in the Latrobe Valley, people unfortunately lose their lives.

What we do here in this place, changing the laws and making it easier for injured workers to get compensation, is a good thing. But on the flip side, for small businesses we need to make sure that their premiums are kept under control so they can continue to provide the opportunity for people to actually come to work. For a lot of small business owners the number one thing, when you talk to them, for them to open their doors every day, is that they are paying insurance premiums and they are paying WorkCover premiums, and they are all going up. We need to make sure that we create a safe working environment. One of the things that happen if you cannot afford to pay your premiums is you may start to cut corners; you may start to not employ that extra set of hands that you need to make sure that the working day and the working life of everyone in the business is being taken care of. We need to make sure we can do that also.

In my own business I was fortunate that we did not have many WorkCover claims, but as I spoke of before, our premiums every year would go through the roof, so to speak. It is the cost of doing business, making sure that our businesses are complying with the rules and regulations and knowing that, if they do get a worker that does become injured and has to have time off work, we have these mechanisms in place that the worker can go through to make sure they are financially compensated and to make sure that there are rehabilitation pathways for them to do what it takes to get back to work. At the end of the day the worker wants to come back to work, and the business owner wants that worker to come back to work. In a small regional community everybody knows each other. Maybe in the Big Build

here in Melbourne, where you have got workers coming from everywhere, you do not have those close interrelationships that you do in a town. In a small town the number one issue is: we want everybody to come back to work. There was mention before that sometimes there is rotting, unfortunately, of the system – it does not matter what system it is. We need to make sure that we have got mechanisms in place and that we can work through those as well.

As hard as we all want to work here in the chamber to make sure that the legislation going through covers injured workers and covers business owners, there are always going to be some grey areas that need to be improved. I do not think we as an opposition put up suggestions or put in reasoned amendments just for the sake of causing issues. We want to make sure that the legislation that comes through here, especially when it involves the building industry, is fit for purpose and is going to work for everybody, because there is always going to be one area with maybe a little grey area with a loophole that people can jump through. The government spoke before about people with lived experience who are putting these recommendations forward. Well, we have got people on our side, like me and the member for Narracan, that have lived it for 40 years in the industry and know what the shortcomings are. We know what the pressure issues are for business, because if we do not have a workforce, our business industry suffers, and that is no good for anybody.

It is amazing as a small business owner the joy that you do get from your workers being at work, knowing that you are providing a workplace where they can get paid so they can pay for their house, their mortgage or their rent and so they are able to send their kids to school or to engage in sport, whether it be football, soccer, netball or basketball – it does not matter what it is. To be able to contribute to the community as a small business – it does not just come as the owner of the business, it actually comes through the people that work in the business.

I know that we are doing our best, and the former minister, the now Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs, who is sitting at the table, to his credit put his hand up to say, yes, we do have a problem. He faced the music and was willing to listen to questions from our side and answer them where he could. Now, we need to make sure that we carry that baton on, and if we do see areas where we can have improvement, we need to now bring them up with the new minister and say, ‘Hang on a minute, we need to have a little step back here and have a look at what exactly is going on,’ because at the end of the day, when we sit in here and vote on this amendment bill going through, we want to get it as close to perfect as we can. I do not think we will ever get it perfect, because the way business is, it changes all the time. So we need to make sure that we are doing the right thing – that we are doing our due diligence for everybody in the working fraternity. So I do want to have the government look at the reasoned amendment put forward by the member for Evelyn, taking on face value that we are doing it for the right reasons for the workers of Victoria.

**Danny PEARSON** (Essendon – Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs, Minister for Finance) (12:33): I am delighted to join the debate on what is an important piece of legislation. As the previous member said, I have the great privilege of being the former minister in this place for the reforms – reforms which I felt were essential. I want to talk a bit about some of the contributions of those opposite, because when I stood here and introduced the previous bill and we had a consideration-in-detail debate, the member for Eildon sat at the table and the member for Narracan was in his spot and both of them asked very thoughtful, considered and measured questions. They were genuinely interested in why we were trying to come up with the solutions we were proposing. They genuinely were trying to engage in the subject matter. I have got to say the member for Eildon was an honourable person to deal with in all of those debates – honourable, decent, fair – and I could not take exception to the way in which we conducted that debate as we worked our way through those issues. Now, I just want to park that there for a moment because I think it is important.

The member for Evelyn, in her contribution, started off by being critical of the minister for circulating some house amendments. What I would say to the member for Evelyn is that this legislation is incredibly complex. The reforms that this government introduced were the most comprehensive and wideranging reforms to this scheme in 20-odd years. From my perspective as the responsible minister,

I wanted to get that right, and I knew how hard it was to get it right. For the member for Evelyn to turn around and be critical of the Deputy Premier saying there were a couple of minor typos we have got to fix – that is nothing. That is nothing in the scheme of things.

The member for Kew made a contribution as well. She quoted me saying that the scheme was fundamentally broken. Absolutely I said that before the reforms – it was fundamentally broken. It was a scheme that was costing business a fortune. It was a scheme that required \$1.3 billion worth of investment. It was a scheme that was making injured workers sicker. I said it was fundamentally broken because I looked at it and I thought, ‘Nobody’s winning out of this – nobody.’ That is why we pushed those reforms. The member for Kew also talked about the negative equity, based upon page 72 of the annual report. The member for Kew made those comments. That annual report was for the 2023–24 financial year. These reforms were passed in April. The operating result for the same period showed a surplus of \$388.727 million. The member for Kew was talking about the balance sheet, taking into account the fact that there had been an increase in claims, which was precisely why we said we wanted to reform the scheme because it was fundamentally broken. Of course when you have got a large volume of claims an actuary is going to try and price it and value it accordingly, but what we are doing and what we have done with the scheme reforms is give people the dignity of work.

I made a point of making sure I went to the WorkCover awards night, and I met a truck driver who was in his early 60s. He was driving a truck and witnessed a fatal. When he went home that day he was fine; the next day he could not go back to work. A few weeks later he was drinking beer and watching *Days of Our Lives*, and he said, ‘I thought to myself, is this what my life has come to?’ What happened was he worked with his agent and his agent got him back to work. She was on stage with him, and he put his arm around her and he said, ‘This woman saved my life.’ When you talk about the value of a claim, that is what an actuary says – ‘This person is never going back to work.’ What we did with these reforms is give Victorian workers the dignity of going back to work and making sure they can have the opportunity of living meaningful, fulfilled lives. It naturally follows when more people have the dignity of going back to work, claims fall.

The other point I would make is that yes, premiums increase, but that is dependent upon a number of factors. The first is that for every single business that has got a remuneration of \$200,000 or less, it is based upon the classification – that is, if I am working on a construction site and I have got a payroll of \$200,000, it will follow that, because of the industry I am in, I will have a higher premium than say you who might be working in a café and it is just you and your sister. Once you go beyond \$200,000, then it comes down to your claims experience and the industry you are in, and one of the weaknesses with the former legislation was that the inspectorate arm could not talk to the insurance arm. What does that mean? The member for Narracan is off doing inspections on a worksite. He sees something wrong. I am running the insurance business. He cannot tell me what he is seeing, so I cannot mark up or mark down the premium. Similarly, I get half a dozen claims come in. I cannot tell the member for Narracan, ‘Listen, there’s something going on with that workplace. You need to go and inspect it.’ That was why the scheme was fundamentally broken. That is why we did the things that we did, and that is why I feel very confident that under the stewardship of this portfolio by my good friend the Deputy Premier you will start to see a trend up in terms of the insurance funding ratio (IFR). You will start to see those improvements.

The member for Kew can come in and say, ‘I can read; I know what IFR stands for’, and she can pick out stats, but she fundamentally did not do the work to understand the scheme, unlike the member for Eildon and unlike the member for Narracan, who have done the work. You have got to give credit where it is due. And in this place, time reveals all. You will always find out in the end. You know who are the hard workers. You know who are the people who are across their issues. The member for Narracan, when he sat there during the consideration-in-detail debate, made a very thoughtful and measured contribution. He wanted to know if a person in his community who was a paramedic who had PTSD be covered by these reforms, yes or no.

It was a very thoughtful contribution, but he came to this place in good spirits to try and come up with the right response. That is why you have got to do the work. I do not profess for a moment these schemes are simple to understand – they are complex. But similarly, as we saw with the Victorian Managed Insurance Authority, yes, there was a deterioration of the IFR for the VMIA. Why? Because we had the single biggest collapse because of Porter Davis not doing the right thing. I do not suggest for a moment that if it was a Liberal government that had been in place it would have been their fault that the private sector shonks had done the wrong thing. It was the private sector shonks who had done the wrong thing – they had not paid their premiums. That was why we had these problems.

The other point I would make to the member for Morwell is that one of the things I was really keen on was to make sure that we had proper regulatory check-ins and reviews of this scheme. That is why I gave an undertaking that we will have a statutory review three years into the scheme's operation, to make sure we have got three years worth of data points to get it right. Because I did my very best – I gave my best efforts and my best endeavours – to get this right. But there are unknown unknowns. You do not know what is going to happen, and that is why you need three years of data points to say in 2027, 'Yeah, we're going to have a look at this and make sure we get this right. We have to get this right. We've got to get the balance right.'

Similarly, we also made a commitment that we were not going to take money out of WorkCover in the event that we saw an improvement in terms of the finances. Why is that important? Well, I think it is only fair and reasonable that if you end up having a better situation, a better financial position, then you can turn around and say, 'Well, all right, maybe we should be thinking about doing something for premiums into the future. Because of the strength of the balance sheet, because of the strength of the operating statement, we are in a position to turn around and say, "Well, let's do something about that."' But you have got to make sure that you have got the right fiscal settings in place and you have got the right approach in place.

I had the great privilege of working with the Workplace Incidents Consultative Committee, and I want to thank the member for Thomastown and the member for Narre Warren South for their contributions. What I found with the WICC was I thought it was really important as the responsible minister to go before them and talk with them. Can you imagine what it is like? You have lost your son in a trench collapse and you come in time and time again wanting to improve the system so the next person who suffers a loss like that feels less pain than what you felt, retraumatising yourself again and again and again because you believe in the scheme and you believe in making sure that Victorian workers live.

I saw that with Dr Lana Cormie as well as Dave Brownlee and Samantha Burns. I have nothing but credit to give them. I do not think I could have done it. Imagine you have lost your son in a workplace incident and for years after you are going back before this group reliving that trauma. I was in awe of the WICC, and I want to thank them for what they did for me. They made me a better minister. They told me what was important, and they made sure that I always felt that so long as I was doing what was right by them we would get it right.

I want to commend the minister for this work. This is important work. I recognise the fact that members might have different views on issues like this, but I will always value and respect those members who come here and are prepared to look at the subject matter, prepared to inquire and prepared to do the work to understand how this stuff works, because that is what this issue should be all about. You can have the show ponies sworn in and sworn out who might quote the odd acronym here and there, but they will always be shown up to be nothing more than dilettantes.

**Wayne FARNHAM** (Narracan) (12:44): I am pleased to rise today on the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation Compensation Amendment Bill 2025. The first thing I am going to start off with is to actually thank the minister for his contribution. It is a pity he has just run out. It was a very thoughtful contribution, and I am taking on board a few points he said. I had quite a few conversations with the member for Essendon, the former minister, in regard to the workplace reform that was brought in in 2023 I think, or 2024 – I cannot remember, but when that happened. We did have quite a few

conversations. But I have to make this point, because I need this chamber to appreciate that there is not one employer that I know in this state that ever wants to make a phone call for a workplace injury or death on site. It is just something you do not want to do. I have had to do it.

It was not a death, but it was an injury, and it is not a pleasant thing to do. Even though the injury did not create a lifelong disability, it was still not a pleasant phone call. No employer likes it. In my 30 years as an employer I had two workplace accidents – just two. It is a pretty good record in the construction industry, because everything we do is high risk. The first one was just one of those things that happens. It was an icy morning, and a fella slipped and hurt his shoulder. He was on WorkCover for about nine months. The second one was a lot more serious; that was a fall from height. It was not even one of my contractors, actually; it was another person's contractor who had not been inducted. He did something very silly and fell 6 metres onto his head. When you are in charge of a site that is the last thing you want to see – to walk onsite with two ambulances there and to see a fella inverted into a table and chairs who has had a 6-metre fall straight down.

For the members on that side, I just want them to take this on. There is really no employer that likes seeing that, likes reporting that or likes making that phone call to someone. It is the worst thing in the world to do. I just want that side to realise that as an employer, and I was an employer for 30 years, it is the last thing you want. You do everything you possibly can to make your worksite safe, you really do, but sometimes, unfortunately, people do dumb things. I am not saying it is the fault of the employee, and I am not necessarily saying it is the fault of the employer. You can take all necessary caution and address all necessary safety concerns, but sometimes, unfortunately, things happen. We do not want it to happen. You never do. I just want the other side in their contributions going forward to just bear that in mind, because there is not one employer I know that really wants to make that phone call or have that happen on their building sites. It is a very important point. I suppose I should get into the bill, but I had to make that point.

I will take on board what the former minister said in his contribution. I did have a conversation with the minister, and you will see that our shadow minister has put forward a reasoned amendment to agree to a freeze of the premium at 1.8 per cent. What we have to realise is that in business – I hope those are over there are listening, because this is important – a WorkCover premium always comes out in March. You have got your premiums there, and you have got the next 12 months. You are forward planning on 12 months, and you think maybe your premium might be the same. You come around to those 12 months, and what happened last time was that premiums went up on average from 42 to 85 per cent. I know a lot of premiums that literally nearly doubled. As a businessperson, it is very hard to budget for that. Let us say, for example, I have tendered for a project, and my premium previously was \$30,000 but it goes up to \$60,000. That is money lost. The one thing we need in this state is employers. If we do not have employers, we do not have employees. It is as simple as that. It is a very, very simple equation. What I would like to see the government do – and yes, we have asked for a freeze – is to have the ability, if there is going to be a rise, to give businesses six months notice so they can adjust. Because if you cannot adjust, you start to lose money. If you keep losing money time and time again, you will eventually close the doors. That is just the way it is. What I would like to see the government do is to have that ability. I spoke to the former minister about that exact point. When that significant rise came in my phone blew up because people just could not believe how much their premiums had gone up. It does cost the business on the bottom line.

I just want to lean in to the member for Tarneit's contribution. He said the member for Evelyn was pretty well full of it because she said it would cost small business millions and millions of dollars. Well, the member for Tarneit needs to do a quick Google search himself, because when I did a Google search for 'small businesses in Victoria' the latest data I could get was from July 2024. We had about 604,379 small businesses. The definition of a 'small business' is one with a turnover under \$3 million.

If those businesses all have to go out and spend \$495, that is \$300 million, so the member for Tarneit might want to think about that before he says someone is full of it. It will cost business \$300 million. If it was my business and I had to spend \$500 to train to be the RTW officer, the return-to-work officer,

I would be okay with that. I would do it, because as a businessperson you have to tick all the boxes anyway. If you do not do it – and I think there is a quote here – an employer who fails to comply with these new RTW coordinator requirements could be liable to a penalty of up to \$118,000. Even as a sole trader I would train myself to avoid a \$118,000 fine. It is common sense.

The other side of this chamber need to understand the pressures of running a business, building a business and all the implications that come with it. I have heard some claims here today, especially when the member for Tarneit was referencing the CFMEU. It is true what he says – it is in administration – but what I would like to know then is: if the CFMEU is in administration, and I am sure the Incolink figures will come out after July this year, is Incolink giving them another \$34 million this year? I do not know why you would give \$34 million to a body that is in administration. It does not seem to be common sense to me. If they are in administration, obviously they are not trustworthy. ‘Don’t give them \$34 million’ is my advice to Incolink.

The debate has gone pretty wide today. I understand that WorkCover injury is complex and there are a lot of moving parts to it. The bills are not always going to be right. I understand that. I can see why WorkCover bills come back every two to three years – it is a very shifting space. We do need to get people back to work. I could not agree more. I was off work once for three days, and it drove me nuts. I got blown off a frame and landed on my back. It drove me nuts lying there for three days. I probably went back to work too early, but I was bugged if I was going to sit at home watching telly for three days. That sucked. Trying to get people back to work is extremely important, and it is the most important thing too because of their mental health. There is nothing worse than seeing a worker that cannot get back to work for various reasons. The member for Essendon referenced my friend with PTSD. It is so important, but it is so important that we get the rehabilitation right. If we get that right, it does take the pressure off the WorkCover system.

Any bill that comes into this place, especially around workplace injury and rehabilitation – that aims into that space – we deserve to talk about and debate. I would have loved to have gone into consideration in detail on this bill so we could get questions answered. We on this side want the bills – as the member for Morwell said, we are never going to get it 100 per cent right – that we are putting to Victorians to be the best they can possibly be at this point in time. That is our job in this chamber, and that is what I want the government to consider. Going forward in your contributions, just remember that not all employers are bad people.

**Steve McGHIE** (Melton) (12:54): I rise today to contribute to the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025. I think we are all here to say that every worker deserves to work in a safe environment and to come home safely. Unfortunately that does not always happen, and that can be due to a range of reasons. Following on from the member for Narracan, who made the comment that no employer wants to make the call about someone being injured or killed at work, I accept that. There are still a number of employers that do not provide safe workplaces, and unfortunately too many workers still get injured at work unnecessarily. If their workplaces were safer, we would not have these issues that we are raising today through this bill. This is a complicated area – there is no question about it – and nothing is perfect. It is very difficult in regard to dealing with workplace injury compensation and return to work.

It is very complicated, and I will make reference to the fact that as the previous secretary of the ambulance union I dealt with WorkCover every day of the week for paramedics and for healthcare workers that worked in the ambulance industry across this state. I have got to say that sometimes the system and the scheme injured the workers more than the initial injury in the processes that they had to go through in regard to, firstly, justifying their injury and, secondly, getting proper compensation but trying to get back to work. Unfortunately, ambulance was not a great area to try and return people to work, because it had limited places for people to return to work.

What do you do with a paramedic that has a mental health injury? Where do you place them within the ambulance service that will assist them with their mental health injuries? What do you do with a

paramedic that has an injured back and can no longer lift patients? Where do you place them if they cannot work on the road? The ambulance service has limited avenues for paramedics to return to work, and that is why, when governments are dealing with legislation supporting injured workers, the issues of weekly payments, compensation, proper return-to-work programs and very active return-to-work officers within the respective industries are so important.

This bill amends the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation (WIRC) Act 2013, the Accident Compensation Act 1985 and the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004. It also is correcting minor drafting errors from the Workplace Safety Legislation and Other Matters Amendment Act 2022 and the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment (WorkCover Scheme Modernisation) Act 2024, and ultimately these amendments aim to ensure that WorkSafe can continue to provide the best possible support to injured workers and to the families after work-related deaths in line with findings of the Rozen report and the family supports review.

I take a moment just to acknowledge the important work that WorkSafe Victoria undertakes. Just before the Easter recess we had the opportunity to attend the launch of the newest WorkSafe campaign, Don't Cross the Line, which was held here at Parliament House. It was very informative to hear about the many ways that WorkSafe endeavours to reduce workplace harm and improve outcomes for injured workers. And this was about workers in the different industries, hospitality in particular, with aggression, violence and even physical assault against them. I will refer back to my previous occupation as the secretary of the ambulance union. I was involved with many other health sector unions that organised a campaign in regard to aggression, violence and assaults against healthcare workers, and out of that campaign WorkSafe formulated some commercials that were placed on TV not dissimilar to the Don't Cross the Line campaign. It did have an effect. It did raise with the community that you are not to harm healthcare workers, as it should be with any worker in a workplace – that people should not have aggression, violence and even physical assault towards them.

Of course there were recommendations out of the Rozen report, which recommended that the objectives of the WIRC act and WorkSafe be amended to expressly provide for fair, respectful and dignified treatment of injured workers and their dependants by WorkSafe and the provision of high-quality services – and that is really important, getting high-quality service and fair treatment. We know that some of these insurance agencies sometimes do not act appropriately when it comes to fair treatment and high-quality services. Unfortunately, insurance agencies always look at the almighty dollar, and I think they put profits before people, which is disappointing when we are talking about people that have been injured at their work. Of course work-related injury or illness is not a choice by an individual. I do not know of anyone that wants to go to work and deliberately injure themselves. It is certainly one of the worst outcomes that could happen in a worker's life. And again, as a previous –

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

**Business interrupted under sessional orders.**

*Questions without notice and ministers statements*

**Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund**

**Brad BATTIN** (Berwick – Leader of the Opposition) (14:02): My question is to the Premier. Premier, members of your own team have spoken publicly against Labor's big tax, stating they want to see massive changes due to the huge impact on farmers caused by the government's emergency services tax. Given the Premier will not listen to struggling home owners, drought-stricken farmers, under-resourced councils and emergency services workers and volunteers, will the Premier now confirm she will also ignore members of her own backbench?

**Jacinta ALLAN** (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:03): In thanking the Leader of the Opposition for his question, I did go into great detail yesterday on why supporting all of our emergency services at a time when we are seeing more fierce and more frequent fire, flood and storm events is so critically

important. It is just so critically important, and it is about making sure that we are listening to the state emergency services; listening to country communities, who are most exposed in many instances to these events; and understanding the need to bring more resources, more fire trucks, more SES units, more stations – more resources.

**Brad Battin:** On a point of order, Speaker, in relation to relevance, the question was very, very specific, about the backbench of the Labor Party, who are putting forward that they need to see massive changes in this tax. Will the Premier continue to ignore them?

*Members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER:** Order! Member for Eureka!

**Mary-Anne Thomas:** On the point of order, Speaker, there is no point of order. The Premier was being entirely relevant to the question, which was about the emergency services volunteers levy, and I ask that you advise the Leader of the Opposition that his point of order is out of order.

**The SPEAKER:** Order! The Premier was being relevant to the question. I cannot tell the Premier how to answer the question, but she was being relevant.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** I will say the question actually did not refer to any specific measure that the government is taking. I took the assumption that the Leader of the Opposition was talking about the emergency services fund, because he actually did not specify that in his question. We will continue to support our emergency services.

*Members interjecting.*

**Jacinta ALLAN:** You actually did not mention it in your question, Leader –

*Members interjecting.*

**Jacinta ALLAN:** No, he did not mention it. Maybe you wrote the question. He asked it, and he did not mention it.

This is an important measure building on the work of the –

*Members interjecting.*

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

**Sam Groth:** On a point of order on relevance, Speaker, the Premier just demonstrated she did not listen to the question, just like she is not listening to her backbench.

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

**Jacinta ALLAN:** We will continue to support our emergency services. I know some, when they were in government, cut funding to the CFA. They cut funding to the MFB.

**Bridget Vallence:** On a point of order, Speaker, the Premier is required to be factual and not mislead the house. I would ask you to ask the Premier to come back to the very narrow question about whether she is actually listening to her backbench in bringing forward constituents' concerns about this big new tax.

**The SPEAKER:** The Manager of Opposition Business knows not to repeat the question in a point of order. Premier, I would ask you to come back to the question.

**Jacinta ALLAN:** We will continue to listen to members of the community, members of our emergency services and members of the Parliament, who are all focused on providing more support for our emergency services, particularly at a time when they go out and protect us in some of the most difficult and dangerous conditions, which we are seeing more and more frequently here in Victoria.

**Brad BATTIN** (Berwick – Leader of the Opposition) (14:07): Premier, have any other backbenchers come to you and complained that they have to speak against this big new tax in their electorates and then vote for it in this chamber?

*Members interjecting.*

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

**Member for Eureka withdrew from chamber.**

**Mary-Anne Thomas:** On a point of order, Speaker, I was listening carefully to the supplementary question. I am not quite sure what it has to do with government administration. I ask that you have a look at that question and rule it out of order.

**Bridget Vallence:** On the point of order, Speaker, it relates directly to government business. The government in its December midyear budget update actually referred to this tax. The question absolutely directly refers to the big new tax, so I would ask you to rule out the Leader of the House's point of order, because it does precisely and expressly relate to government business.

**The SPEAKER:** I will allow the question.

**Jacinta ALLAN** (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:08): In the development of government policy and initiatives of course we take on board a whole range of views and understand that the responsibility of being in government is doing the hard work, doing the detailed work and understanding the need to make decisions that are about supporting the future, whether it is the future of the funding for emergency services or the future of protecting regional communities. And I say this very, very clearly to the Leader of the Opposition: he might have his own issues on his backbench, appointing his special envoy over to the western suburbs there, upsetting a lot of his own people –

**Bridget Vallence:** On a point of order, Speaker, the Premier is debating the question. It was very narrow about whether any backbenchers have asked to go against the tax but have then been forced to vote for it.

**The SPEAKER:** The Premier has concluded her answer.

#### **Ministers statements: Victorian economy**

**Danny PEARSON** (Essendon – Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs, Minister for Finance) (14:09): I am absolutely thrilled and delighted to once again update the house on how Victoria continues to be the best place to live, to work and to invest. Victoria is the ideas and skills capital of this great nation, and we have good reason to be confident about our economic future. Do not listen to the naysayers on the other side who constantly try to talk down our economy and the hardworking Victorians who are making it move. Every month I am visiting innovative businesses who are doing some incredible work, taking a risk, backing themselves in and just growing and expanding this economy and growing their businesses. These businesses are the ones that are powering our economy.

Last month I was lucky enough to visit Atmo Biosciences with my good friend and parliamentary secretary the member for Box Hill. This company is epic. It has created a capsule the size of a vitamin pill that can gather data supporting more targeted investments for gastrointestinal issues, thanks to support from this government. I was really pleased recently to join my good friend the member for Ripon when we visited Mount Langi Ghiran Vineyard, who we are supporting to get Victorian wines on international shelves as a result of our wine export program.

I was also lucky enough to visit CSL. I was delighted to see firsthand the brand new facility they are building in terms of their flu vaccine business, CSL Seqirus, which is Australian owned and one of the world's largest flu vaccine companies. The Tullamarine facility is absolutely fantastic and will be fully operational next year. It is going to employ hundreds of Victorians making these life-saving products.

CSL is a fantastic success story here for Victoria, with cutting-edge, 21st-century innovation, part of the new economy and creating high-value jobs right here in Victoria.

Our economic strategy is working. As shown in the CommSec’s latest *State of the States* report, we are second in the nation. I know some of the members opposite are worried about a few of their mates who have recently started looking for new jobs – (*Time expired*)

### Country Fire Authority

**Danny O’BRIEN** (Gippsland South) (14:11): My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services. Given the \$2.1 billion additional slug on Victorians under the Labor government’s emergency services tax, will the CFA operational budget increase next financial year, and by how much?

**Vicki WARD** (Eltham – Minister for Emergency Services, Minister for Natural Disaster Recovery, Minister for Equality) (14:12): It is always a great pleasure to stand in this place and talk about the extraordinary work of our Country Fire Authority – these volunteers, these people who work consistently across our state, who do so much to protect our state and are an incredible workforce that I know everybody on this side of the chamber absolutely supports and absolutely respects. We do know the budget will be delivered next week, and we do know that the information that the Leader of the Nationals requires will be found in next week’s budget.

**Danny O’BRIEN** (Gippsland South) (14:13): The CFA budget has been cut each year for the past five years according to both the annual reports and PAEC last year. If Victorians are to pay an additional \$610 million in tax next year, why isn’t the CFA getting more money?

**Vicki WARD** (Eltham – Minister for Emergency Services, Minister for Natural Disaster Recovery, Minister for Equality) (14:13): As those on our side of the chamber at least would expect, I refute the premise of the Leader of the Nationals’ statement. This government continues to invest in the CFA, as we do with all of our emergency services, and we will continue to do so. He is wrong.

### Ministers statements: housing

**Sonya KILKENNY** (Carrum – Attorney-General, Minister for Planning) (14:14): At the heart of our housing problem is the fact we have not built enough homes in the areas where we need to build them. For too long our outer growth areas have carried the burden of new homes, and this is not fair. For too long suburbs that are well connected to transport, jobs and services have been locked up. In fact we live in a world where our first response is no – no to more homes and no to opportunity, especially for young Victorians. Those opposite say no to homes – no to homes for young Victorians, for older Victorians wanting to downsize and for people who rely on social and affordable homes. It is not just mean, it is reckless, and it just shows how out of touch those opposite are. On this side of the house we do not say no. We are builders. This government’s planning reforms will unlock hundreds of thousands of extra homes –

**Richard Riordan** interjected.

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

**Member for Polwarth withdrew from chamber.**

**Sonya KILKENNY:** diverse homes – from homes with backyards to townhouses, duplexes, low-rise and multi-unit developments in areas best suited to more homes and more opportunity close to public transport, jobs and services. Through our 50 train and tram zone activity centre program we are supporting more than 300,000 new homes, and through our 10-year pipeline of land for family homes and backyards in Melbourne’s growth areas and through our townhouse code we are kickstarting the townhouse revolution so we can say yes to more homes more quickly while improving affordability, liveability and sustainability.

I have got a simple message for those people who time and time again block homes: Victorians deserve the opportunity to have a home to buy or rent, and we need to give them that opportunity. The Liberals should not stand in the way of that.

**Land tax**

**James NEWBURY** (Brighton) (14:16): My question is to the Premier. A Rochester resident whose house was damaged by the floods and who was forced to move to a rental property whilst repairs are being undertaken is being charged land tax. She said, ‘Our lives have been turned upside down by the flood, and while we are trying to repair our home, the government is hitting us with land tax.’ Is the government really so desperate for cash that it is doggedly pursuing flood victims to pay land tax for its financial mismanagement?

**Jacinta ALLAN** (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:17): I thank the member for Brighton for his question. As someone who knows the Rochester community well – but perhaps not as well as the local member, the member for Murray Plains, knows the Rochester community – if the member for Brighton can provide those details, I will follow this matter up and I will particularly also seek advice from the member for Murray Plains. Of course for those of us who do know Rochester, we do know that they have not just been hit by one flood in recent years; there have been a number of incidents. It is a community that has been doing it tough. It has been challenged by those more frequent and more fierce flood and storm events that I was talking to the house about earlier, which is why we have been supporting the Rochester community, making additional investments in their emergency services, like the CFA and like the State Emergency Service. If the member for Brighton could provide those details, I will follow this matter up.

**James NEWBURY** (Brighton) (14:18): In another case, a Bayside woman who left her home to flee an abusive ex-partner is being forced to pay the government \$77,000 in land tax bills. She has since moved back to her home, where she may be at risk, but might now be forced to sell her home to pay these bills. I have attempted to raise this issue seven times with the Premier and had no response over the last year. Why does this government parade around claiming to care about victims of domestic violence and natural disasters while pursuing them for tax to pay for its financial mismanagement?

**Jacinta ALLAN** (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:19): Speaker, along with you on Saturday I was proud to stand with victims of domestic violence in Bendigo at the What Were You Wearing rally, which was held nationwide, and we will continue to stand with victims of family violence and will continue to stand with communities that are affected by natural disasters. Should the member for Brighton wish to provide the information he has provided to the house, I will be willing to follow it up for him.

**James Newbury**: On a point of order, Speaker, on relevance, I have written to the Premier seven times, as has the victim, and had no response.

**The SPEAKER**: Order! The Premier is being relevant.

**Jacinta ALLAN**: Further to the matter regarding support for family violence victims, the Treasurer has already indicated that we are making changes. We are making changes – and the budget will be handed down next week – because we recognise that there are particular circumstances for some vulnerable people in our community. I choose to support them, and I would appreciate the member for Brighton providing the relevant details so we can continue to do that.

**Tim Richardson** interjected.

**The SPEAKER**: Order! The member for Mordialloc can leave the chamber for half an hour.

**Member for Mordialloc withdrew from chamber.**

**Ministers statements: cost of living**

**Lily D’AMBROSIO** (Mill Park – Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (14:20): It is so important that Victorians have homes that are not only warm in the winter and cool in the summer but that they can afford to live in too. That is absolutely important. We know that one of the best ways that we can help Victorians with their bills is to help their energy costs and cut those. Since the start of gas exports in 2014, the cost of gas has more than tripled in the east coast gas market. That is why our priority has been to help Victorians with these costs, and I, together with local members, have been visiting families right across the state to hear from them about the savings they are making every day because of the help we are providing them through our numerous programs.

[NAMES AWAITING VERIFICATION]

We heard from Adam and Effie in Sunbury, Lawrence in Ferntree Gully, Michael and Anne in Pascoe Vale and Mislana and David in Pakenham. These are just some examples of families who were absolutely excited about how much money they are saving on their energy bills every day, and they are telling their friends and families about that. This is real cost-of-living relief for these families that is ongoing. They are joining more than 50,000 Victorian families who have already swapped out their gas hot water systems for cheaper-to-run heat pump systems.

With the up-front cost of installation slashed with our Solar Homes rebates and our Victorian energy upgrades discount, we are providing Victorians with real support now when they need it. That is what good governments ought to do every day. Swapping out just one hot water system alone can save a family \$330 off their energy bills every year, and if they have got solar because of our rebates program, their savings jump to \$520 a year each and every year. The opposition have not once ever supported any of the programs that this government has rolled out to help slash the energy bills of Victorians. They put the big energy companies first and Victorians last.

**National parks**

**Ellen SANDELL** (Melbourne) (14:22): My question is to the Minister for Environment. Four years ago, after decades of community pressure, Labor committed to three new national parks across the central west of Victoria. These are some of the most beautiful and precious places in our state, irreplaceable country for First Nations people and home to more than 370 rare and threatened species, yet four years later Labor has yet to legislate even one of these parks. The minister himself said in October that the bills would be introduced in late 2024, but it is now May 2025 and we still have not heard anything. Minister, has Labor walked away from its promise to create the central west national parks?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS** (Oakleigh – Minister for Environment, Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events, Minister for Outdoor Recreation) (14:23): I thank the member for her question, and I think the form of the Greens political party is improving because that is two questions I have received as environment minister in 18 months or more, one from the member for Brunswick and now from the member for Melbourne. I am only pointing it out there just so the public understand there have been many, many question times in that period but only two questions. But thank you for that question; it is an important question. And yes, we are committed to delivering those parks that we promised in 2021. There is an enormous amount of work that goes on in order to deliver those things in terms of the Surveyor-General, in terms of investments and in terms of the parameters of the parks, what rules will apply to those national parks. So we are doing all that work, but I also say to the member for Melbourne that we are not sitting on our hands, as she well knows, because we have had conversations in the past in terms of protection and preservation of these beautiful lands for future generations. We do that in everyday work through BushBank. We do it in everyday work through Trust for Nature. We do it in everyday work through biodiversity investments and the Office of the Conservation Regulator, in all the work we do in the environment portfolio to maintain an asset base, because it is an asset base

for future Victorians to enjoy. This is something that we are close to finalising, and we will come to it very soon.

**Ellen SANDELL** (Melbourne) (14:25): Thanks to the minister for the answer. I want to underscore that the vast, vast majority of Victorians, no matter their political allegiance, support national parks. Last October Redbridge polling found 80 per cent of Victorians want more national parks – only 8 per cent oppose them – but the community is becoming concerned that Labor seems scared of creating national parks and particularly future national parks. For example, in 2023 the Great Outdoors Taskforce was appointed to investigate and recommend new national parks in areas that were protected from native forest logging, but last year that remit was revoked. Minister, was the remit revoked because Labor is giving in to a scare campaign from the Liberals and Nationals, and will you now give the Great Outdoors Taskforce the remit to protect those previously logged areas in national parks?

**Steve DIMOPOULOS** (Oakleigh – Minister for Environment, Minister for Tourism, Sport and Major Events, Minister for Outdoor Recreation) (14:26): I will say to the member for Melbourne that, whether it be national parks or state forests, what this government is committed to is that 7 million Victorians should be able to enjoy public land in the way they want to enjoy public land and that public land should be preserved for future generations of Victorians. We can do both those things. I am not getting into a binary conversation about national parks or state forests. Both are important for the state of Victoria, and the Great Outdoors Taskforce is working on something that we created the opportunity for, which is ending native timber harvesting. You do not see anyone from the Greens commending one of the only jurisdictions in Australia to end native timber harvesting. We are one of the only jurisdictions in Australia to end native timber harvesting.

*Members interjecting.*

**Steve DIMOPOULOS**: The Great Outdoors Taskforce – there is no muzzling here – have gone around talking to communities, understanding what they want to see in their own community and what the rest of us want to see. That report will land on my desk in the next couple of months, and I will respond to it due course.

#### **Ministers statements: rental reform**

**Nick STAIKOS** (Bentleigh – Minister for Consumer Affairs, Minister for Local Government) (14:27): The Allan Labor government firmly believe that every Victorian deserves a decent standard of living, and we as a government have done more to ease the cost of renting than any other government in history. Around 30 per cent of Victorians are renters, and they deserve the dignity of living in a secure, affordable home. We have addressed the cost of renting at every step. We have banned all types of rental bidding, because no renter should be caught in a private bidding war to secure a home. Once in their home, renters cannot be subject to arbitrary rent increases. We have extended the notice period for rent increases to 90 days to give renters the certainty to plan for the future. We know that from time to time renters encounter financial difficulties. That is why this year we have provided \$15 million for financial counselling services to support renters struggling with the cost of living. As a result of our reform agenda, Melbourne remains the most affordable state capital city in Australia in which to rent. We also understand that disputes arise, and that is why we are about to open Rental Dispute Resolution Victoria. RDRV will provide free, fast and fair dispute resolution for renters and rental providers, resolving disputes in weeks, not months. Next year our portable rental bond scheme will save the average renter around \$2500 in additional expenses when moving to a new home. In the four years that those opposite were in government they had no policies to address the cost of renting, and they have no policies now. Unlike those opposite, we want everyone to live in dignity in a home that is secure and one they can afford.

**Education system**

**Jess WILSON** (Kew) (14:29): My question is to the Minister for Education. Responding to the government's \$2.4 billion cut to public schools, the president of the Australian Education Union's Victorian branch said, 'We are the lowest funded schools in the country. We are the lowest paid teachers in the country. That is going to be a disaster for public school staff and students.' Does the Minister for Education support cutting public school funding by \$2.4 billion, ultimately leaving Victorian public schools almost \$3 billion worse off?

**Ben CARROLL** (Niddrie – Minister for Education, Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC) (14:30): Which state has the best attendance rates in the country? Victoria. Who has the highest performance in the country? Victoria. Who is top of the class for NAPLAN? Victoria. Who has more students and more teachers going into teaching than any other state? Victoria.

*Members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER:** Order! I would ask the minister not to incite members in response.

*Members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER:** Order! Member for Croydon!

**Bridget Vallence:** On a point of order, Speaker, I know that we were not very far into it, but the Premier hopeful was debating the question, because it was a very narrow question around the \$2.4 billion of cuts to state schools under his watch.

**Mary-Anne Thomas** interjected.

**The SPEAKER:** Order! I would like to rule on the point of order, Leader of the House. The Minister for Education has only been on his feet for a short time. I do ask him to come back to the question.

**Ben CARROLL:** Victoria and our Premier have been unrelenting in getting to 5 per cent from the Commonwealth – not 2.5 per cent but a 5 per cent increase to the student resource standard. Our government, when it comes to recurrent funding, has increased funding by 34 per cent. Next year this government, the Allan Labor government, will open up its 100th brand new school. Add to that 2200 upgrades. Every one of our specialist schools has been upgraded by our Labor government. You know what, when I talk about the \$35 billion that has been invested in our education system, 99 per cent has come from the Allan and Andrews Labor governments. The Commonwealth have contributed 1 per cent. We will not be lectured to by those opposite when it comes to investing in education. We have invested more in education than any other previous government. It has been an education revolution under this government. We are not only providing the best NAPLAN results, we are getting on and making sure –

*Members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER:** Order! Member for Rowville and member for Narracan! Member for Rowville, you can leave the chamber for half an hour.

*Members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER:** It will be an hour if you continue this attitude.

**Member for Rowville withdrew from chamber.**

**Bridget Vallence:** Speaker, I am so shocked by you ejecting the member for Rowville that I have nearly forgotten my point of order.

**The SPEAKER:** He might be the father of the house, but that does not make him immune.

**Bridget Vallence:** On a point of order, Speaker, I think the minister is defying your ruling to come back to the very narrow question about why, under his watch, public schools will be \$3 billion worse off.

**The SPEAKER:** The Minister for Education was being relevant to the question that was asked.

**Ben CARROLL:** The question went to funding, and I have got every right in my answer to go back and talk about the funding we have provided – \$35 billion investment, \$17 billion in capital. We talk about Gonski – Gonski originally was meant to invest in capital. This government has invested record funding in capital. We know if you want to inspire in students the importance and the relevance of education, they have got to learn in 21st-century environments.

More than that, we know education is the most powerful investment. That is why we have Best Start, Best Life, because 90 per cent of a child’s brain is developed pre prep. That is why we are embedding explicit instruction. It is why we are making sure we have the vocational major. More people in the state of Victoria than any other place on the mainland finish year 12. Our Indigenous rates are the best in the nation. We are getting on and making sure that no matter your postcode, no matter your parents’ bank balance, you will have every opportunity to have a life of purpose under the Allan Labor government in the state of Victoria.

**Jess WILSON (Kew) (14:34):** Jennifer, a recently retired teacher and former unionist, told ABC Radio Melbourne in response to the cuts:

There’s no reason why I would want to go back into that system ... This is devastating for teachers and for the students that they work with.

Will the Minister for Education reverse these cuts, or will Victorian teachers and students continue to be shortchanged as a direct result of Labor’s failure to manage money?

**Ben CARROLL (Niddrie – Minister for Education, Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC) (14:35):** First and foremost, we could not do the great job we do without world-class teachers. I should remind everyone in this chamber we are the only state to have a Victorian academy of teaching and learning. I got a text message from a friend today who just got his PhD in teaching. We are making sure we back our teachers. We are prioritising and making sure we get more part-time teachers. We are supporting our teaching workforce, and I am committed to working with the union. I met with the union only recently. We have a great working partnership because we know and we back our public school teachers. They have the most important job in society, getting ready for the future –

**Jess Wilson:** On a point of order, Speaker, on relevance, it was a very narrow question as to whether the minister will reverse the cuts.

**The SPEAKER:** I cannot tell the minister how to answer the question. I do remind the minister of the question, but he was being relevant.

**Ben CARROLL:** The only cuts I have ever had to reverse have been Liberal Party cuts to education. In the Niddrie electorate, my own electorate, Jeff Kennett sold the oval of the autistic school. We have upgraded 84 autistic schools. We get on with the job. The only cuts we reverse are Liberal cuts. What Labor governments do, Liberal governments try to undo.

#### Ministers statements: housing

**Jacinta ALLAN (Bendigo East – Premier) (14:37):** My government believes that every young Victorian deserves a fair shot at buying their own home. It might be a home that is somewhere near their job, or it might be somewhere near where they are studying a university or TAFE course or perhaps where they grew up, close to their networks and close to their family and loved ones, to get the support of that network, somewhere where they can belong and build a future that is their own. But right now we know that too many young Victorians are locked out not because they are necessarily doing anything wrong but because building a home has become harder. Building a home has become

slower and more expensive than it needs to be, and that is why on this side of the house we have been focused on looking at how we can get more homes built in this state and building more homes so more young Victorians can build their futures.

This is why we have announced today that we are extending the off-the-plan stamp duty concession, stamp duty cuts, to get more homes built. This will provide a saving, on average, of \$25,000 for a young person buying an apartment. We anticipate 5000 Victorians will have that opportunity under this tax cut. This is reform alongside the other reform that is going on. It is practical, it is going through the planning system and it is working. We know because we have listened to Victorians. We have listened to younger Victorians and we have listened to older Victorians as well, who want to see younger generations have the same opportunity they had to buy their first homes, start their families and build their futures in their own homes. But we know one of the reasons why not enough homes have been built is because there have been plenty of blockers. While we build, these blockers huff and puff and try and blow it all down. We will continue to back Victorians by getting on and working with the industry to build more homes.

### *Constituency questions*

#### **Gippsland South electorate**

**Danny O'BRIEN** (Gippsland South) (14:39): (1110) My question is to the Minister for Agriculture, and I ask: when will the minister extend drought assistance to Gippsland, specifically South and West Gippsland? While I acknowledge that the south-west and west of the state has been going through a particularly difficult time for 12 or 18 months now, the drought is now extending into Gippsland, particularly the dairy farming areas of South and West Gippsland. I had a hook-up with GippsDairy and a number of farmers on Monday. GippsDairy reports that they are currently supporting five dairy farmers that have run out of stock water, with another 30 indicating that they will run out in the next month. There are a number of other issues that they are seeking assistance on, but it is getting to the time that the government needs to actually provide some support to Gippsland farmers, whether they be beef, dairy or otherwise, particularly in that South and West Gippsland area. I met with a farmer at Ruby, between Leongatha and Korumburra, a few weeks ago who indicated that the 1967 drought has always been highlighted as the worst ever. The rainfall for this season has so far been less than that. We need some assistance as soon as possible. Thank you, Minister.

#### **Glen Waverley electorate**

**John MULLAHY** (Glen Waverley) (14:41): (1111) My constituency question is directed to the Minister for Education. What is the Allan Labor government doing to support local schools in the Glen Waverley district, such as Vermont Primary School? My electorate is home to some of the best schools in the state. From outstanding NAPLAN and VCE results to thriving sport, art and drama programs, we take pride in the excellence of our schools. One of these great schools is Vermont Primary School on Nurlendi Road, led by principal Jessica Mann, the leadership team, the staff and the school council, which is led by president Lisa Portell. Our community has rallied behind their plans to get a master plan to upgrade their buildings. Originally opened in 1869, the school has served our community with distinction for over 150 years. We want to ensure that the facilities are modernised to meet the needs of a growing school population. I look forward to working with the minister in presenting our community petition to fund a master plan for the school, and I look forward to his response.

#### **Sandringham electorate**

**Brad ROWSWELL** (Sandringham) (14:42): (1112) My question is to the Minister for Planning. Residents in my electorate are deeply concerned about the government's proposed activity centre plans, which they believe represent significant overdevelopment, the majority of which is unsuitable for our local area. Our community is proud of its green spaces, beaches, quiet leafy streets and the strong sense of local character that makes it such a desirable place for people to live. Since the activity centres were first announced, many constituents from all corners of my electorate have expressed their

fears that these plans will destroy local amenity and livability, whether it be roads, hospitals, schools, local parks et cetera. What is worse is that they also fear their concerns about this project are being completely ignored by the Allan Labor government. So I ask: can the minister advise whether, if a community clearly rejects the government's proposals, the government will in fact listen to that community.

#### **Lara electorate**

**Ella GEORGE** (Lara) (14:43): (1113) My question is for the Minister for Education, and I ask: since the VCE vocational major was introduced in 2023, has there been an increase in enrolments in the program in the Lara electorate and across the region in comparison to the previous VCAL model? This week I have a student, Imogen, undertaking work experience in my office and she has been speaking to me about the role of the VCE vocational major. Imogen is a VCE vocational major student and has seen firsthand students benefiting from it and therefore she believes it is important to track the progress of the program in the Lara electorate. It has been a great choice for secondary students who prefer more hands-on learning or who do not require an ATAR for their future study pathways or career. Through my engagement with multiple local schools in the electorate, I have met and connected with a diverse range of secondary students undertaking various subjects and pathways. I look forward to hearing from the minister about VCE vocational major enrolments in the Lara electorate and the wider region.

#### **Benambra electorate**

**Bill TILLEY** (Benambra) (14:44): (1114) My constituency question is to the Minister for Environment. The information I seek is: what funding will be provided in the state budget to Parks Victoria in the Benambra electorate to fix long-outstanding maintenance and repair projects? My constituents have been told that you have no money. That is why the Yeddonba Aboriginal artworks have been locked up for five years, the Beechworth Gorge bridge has been closed since 2022 and the Parks Victoria portion of Ewerts Road has been reduced to a goat track. I have mentioned the first two on a couple of other occasions in the past, but I want to highlight Ewerts Road, in particular the section after the Baranduda Range national park. It is the only access to the range to fight wildfires. It is the only access to vital communication towers, including TV signals, phones and emergency service comms. There is plenty to burn there this week, and let us just hope there are no issues.

#### **Mulgrave electorate**

**Eden FOSTER** (Mulgrave) (14:45): (1115) My constituency question is to the Minister for Children in the other place. My question is: how is construction progressing on the new early learning and childcare centre at Harrisfield Primary School in Noble Park? I had the pleasure of welcoming the minister to the electorate to officially turn the first sod on this important project and to view the site firsthand. This state government owned and operated centre will be a tremendous asset to our community, eliminating the double drop-off for Harrisfield families and delivering a purpose-built facility that supports the broader community. The new centre will provide long day care and three- and four-year-old kinder programs. It will also include a community room, outdoor play areas and consulting rooms for child and family services. This project is part of the Victorian government's Best Start, Best Life reforms, which are expanding access to free kinder and delivering more early learning and childcare centres, helping children thrive, easing cost-of-living pressures and supporting working families.

#### **South Barwon electorate**

**Darren CHEESEMAN** (South Barwon) (14:46): (1116) My question is to the Treasurer. With the passing of the proposed CFA levy or this upcoming week's budget, will the new fire station promised in the 2018 election finally be delivered?

**Bayswater electorate**

**Jackson TAYLOR** (Bayswater) (14:46): (1117) It is all happening at the site on Burwood Highway and Scoresby Road in Knoxfield as we get on and deliver around 400 homes. A big thanks to the team at Development Victoria. My question is to the Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts in the other place: when can we expect to see works started on the wetlands part of that project? This has been years in the making. This is going to take currently closed-off, fenced-off space into new, beautiful public open space – new wetlands specifically designed for the habitat and nature there, linking into Blind Creek, where we have just spent millions of dollars in partnership with Melbourne Water and Knox City Council. This is going to be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create a new eco-space with more homes for people who need them exactly where they should be, with access to public transport and a whole bunch of other great things. I am looking forward to hearing back from the minister.

**Euroa electorate**

**Annabelle CLEELAND** (Euroa) (14:47): (1118) My question is to the Minister for Agriculture. Will the government support Victorian farmers during this period of drought and worsening weather conditions? While the South Australian government has announced a \$73 million drought support package, Victoria's offering stands at just \$13.5 million and only a small number of our farmers are actually eligible. North-east Victoria in particular has been excluded from the current support arrangements despite suffering from the same devastatingly dry conditions. Our paddocks are bare, dams are empty, hay and feed are scarce and sale yards and transporters are at breaking point. At the most recent cattle sale in Euroa nearly 4000 head went through, and the next sale in June is expected to be at capacity. Farmers are calling out. This is the worst dry period since 1982, and without rain before September we are in serious, serious trouble. Instead of hitting our farmers with higher bills through the emergency services tax, this government must provide them with support. Every extra day without support puts stock, farms and the mental health of our farmers at risk. The sound of rain needs no translation, nor should the call for help from our farmers.

**Ripon electorate**

**Martha HAYLETT** (Ripon) (14:48): (1119) My question is for the Minister for Environment. Minister, when will felling for public firewood collection resume across Ripon and our regions? I have had many concerned constituents contact me about how Forest Fire Management Victoria has not felled enough trees for seasonal public firewood collection this year. Many families within my electorate rely on firewood collection from designated state forest areas to heat their homes. Usually they can collect firewood during the autumn and spring months, but there have been huge shortages this year. I understand that this is in part due to ongoing industrial action by Australian Workers' Union members in FFMV who want to pay parity with their Parks Victoria counterparts. I back FFMV workers in their fight for fairer wages and conditions and thank the mighty AWU for their support of workers. Many locals are keen to see this issue put to bed so they can begin collecting much-needed firewood again. I look forward to providing them with the minister's response.

**Martin Cameron:** On a point of order, Speaker, I have some unanswered questions: questions 1985, 2031, 2195, 2196 and 2197. I am wondering if you could follow up with the relevant ministers. I will have the list to the clerks.

**The SPEAKER:** Could you hand the list to the clerks, please?

**Annabelle Cleeland:** On a point of order, Speaker, about the response times from ministers when it comes to questions on notice, I have 14 overdue and awaiting responses from the ministers for health, public and active transport, housing and government services. My oldest question is 83 days old now and requests essential information about housing for victims of family violence. The questions are 2041, 2042 – I will give it to the clerks instead, to save you some time.

**The SPEAKER:** That would be much appreciated, member for Euroa.

*Bills***Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025***Second reading***Debate resumed.**

**Sonya KILKENNY** (Carrum – Attorney-General, Minister for Planning) (14:50): I move:

That the debate be now adjourned.

**Motion agreed to and debate adjourned.****Ordered that debate be adjourned until later this day.****Energy and Land Legislation Amendment (Energy Safety) Bill 2025***Council's amendments***Message from Council relating to following amendments considered:**

1. Clause 1, page 3, after line 13 insert –

“(ea) to amend the **Electricity Industry Act 2000** to enable licensees that sell electricity to more than 5000 customers, rather than the Essential Services Commission, to set the rate or rates at which those licensees purchase small renewable energy generation electricity from customers; and”.

2. Clause 2, line 17, after “7” insert “, 7A”.

3. Insert the following New Part after Part 7 –

**Part 7A – Amendment of Electricity Industry Act 2000****97A Section 40FBA substituted**

For section 40FBA of the **Electricity Industry Act 2000** substitute –

**“40FBA Rates for purchases of small renewable energy generation electricity**

For the purposes of section 40FB(2)(a), in each financial year the amount to be credited against the charges payable to a relevant licensee by a customer who is a relevant generator is the amount determined at the rate or rates published as part of the general renewable energy feed-in terms and conditions under section 40G.”.

**97B Section 40FBB repealed**

Section 40FBB of the **Electricity Industry Act 2000** is repealed.

**97C Retailer licence condition relating to purchase of small renewable energy generation electricity**

- (1) For section 40G(1)(a) of the **Electricity Industry Act 2000** substitute –

“(a) to publish general renewable energy feed-in terms and conditions including, but not limited to, a rate or rates for the purposes of section 40FBA; and”.

- (2) After section 40G(1) of the **Electricity Industry Act 2000** insert –

“(1A) A rate included in the general renewable energy feed-in terms and conditions for the purposes of section 40FBA must not be less than \$0.00 per kilowatt-hour.”.

**97D New section 124 inserted**

After section 123 of the **Electricity Industry Act 2000** insert –

**“124 Savings provision – Energy and Land Legislation Amendment (Energy Safety) Act 2025**

- (1) Despite the amendments made to this Act by Part 7A of the amending Act, the rate or rates applying for the 2024 financial year under section 40FBA (as in force immediately before the commencement of section 97A of the amending Act) for the purposes of section 40FB(2)(a) are taken to continue to apply until 30 June 2025 for the purposes of section 40FB(2)(a).

- (2) This section does not affect or take away from the **Interpretation of Legislation Act 1984**.
- (3) In this section –  
*amending Act* means the **Energy and Land Legislation Amendment (Energy Safety) Act 2025**.”.
4. Long title, omit “and the **Land Act 1958**” and insert “, the **Land Act 1958** and the **Electricity Industry Act 2000**”.

**Lily D’AMBROSIO** (Mill Park – Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (14:51): I move:

That the amendments be agreed to.

I wish to say some words in support of this. No government has supported more households to access the benefits of rooftop solar than the Allan Labor government, through our \$1.3 billion Solar Homes program, the largest household solar program in the country. The huge uptake of solar in Victoria has helped push daytime wholesale prices to historic lows. This means lower power bills for everyone but also means that the minimum feed-in tariff is no longer required. Solar customers will continue to benefit enormously from using the power generated on their own rooftops, with customers who maximise their solar saving over \$1000 a year. Although there will no longer be a minimum feed-in tariff, solar customers can still find better feed-in tariff rates using the Victorian Energy Compare tool – again, a first for this country. It is independent, supported by government and a tool that every Victorian can have confidence in to get the best advice that suits them.

Victoria’s independent regulator of essential services, the Essential Services Commission, annually sets the minimum feed-in tariff rates for Victoria on a financial year basis. The proposed minimum rate for 2025–26 is 0.04 cents per kilowatt hour, down from 3.3 cents in 2024–25. This continues a decline in feed-in tariffs. Now that the feed-in tariff is effectively zero, the Victorian government is committed to removing the requirement for the ESC to publish a minimum feed-in tariff, via an upper house amendment to the Energy and Land Legislation Amendment (Energy Safety) Bill 2025. This would bring Victoria into line with Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia. Each of these states does not have any minimum feed-in tariffs any longer.

The Victorian government has ruled out ever charging customers to export their solar, even when daytime prices are negative. Feed-in tariffs reflect wholesale prices during the day, when solar is generating. Feed-in tariffs are falling because of declining daytime wholesale market prices. There is so much solar entering the grid during the day that wholesale spot prices are often falling into the negative. The administrative costs of setting a minimum feed-in tariff can no longer be justified due to the rate being effectively zero.

Ending the minimum feed-in tariff would reflect the success of Victoria’s Solar Homes program. By driving the take-up of solar the program has reduced the costs of solar installation and helped place downward pressure on wholesale prices for everybody. The free solar being generated during the day is great for all customers because it drives wholesale prices lower. It is one of the reasons that Victoria has the lowest wholesale and retail power prices in the country.

For households, the Victorian default offer for 2025–26 will be \$448.90 per year, or more than 21 per cent cheaper than the equivalent default offers in South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland.

For small businesses, the VDO for Victoria will be \$1582.80 per year, more than 30 per cent cheaper than the draft average default offers across the other states. Households and businesses can visit Victorian Energy Compare to shop around for a retailer who will offer them a better rate. However, Victorian retailers tend to default to the minimum rate. The overwhelming financial benefit of solar for customers is the savings to their own electricity bills gained by using the electricity their solar systems generate to avoid paying the retail rates for electricity. Solar Homes customers who maximise their solar are saving more than \$1000 a year. Solar Homes will help Victorians save more than an

estimated \$500 million a year on their electricity bills once the program reaches its completion. That means more money back into the pockets of hardworking Victorians.

I do want to say that those opposite have never supported this government's programs to help Victorians save money on their energy bills – not once. Through our \$1.3 billion Solar Homes program we are helping more Victorians access the benefits of solar. The program provides subsidies to reduce capital costs for solar systems. In fact 2024 was the biggest ever year for our program. More than 80,000 applications were approved, and more than 79,000 systems were installed in 2024 alone. Demand for rebates is already up 22 per cent this year. In February Victoria surpassed 360,000 solar battery and hot-water systems installed through the successful Solar Homes program, including 300,000 solar rooftop systems. The program is very accessible. More than 6800 renters have had rebate applications approved to install solar PV, 30 per cent of rebates are going to regional Victorians and 57 per cent of solar rebates have gone to households with incomes of less than \$100,000. We will always help Victorians save on their energy bills with our rebates and discounts to make their homes cheaper to run and more comfortable to live in. I commend the amendments to the house.

**James NEWBURY** (Brighton) (14:57): I rise to briefly speak on the amendments that the government has moved be agreed to, which effectively kill feed-in tariffs in Victoria. You might be surprised to hear about it, because there was no real announcement and there has been no ministers statement. In fact this is an amendment that has been snuck in on a bill in the Council quietly in the dead of night. There has been no associated announcement with it, which is the form of the government. In the upper house we made the point strongly, though we did not divide on the amendment, that what this amendment does is kill feed-in tariffs in Victoria.

A concern that we have as a coalition is that people made decisions based on information at the time, and the feed-in tariff was a significant part of many people in the community's decision-making factors when taking up solar. And why wouldn't it be? For the government to scrap it effectively without any notification, without any real consultation and certainly without any ministerial fanfare – I mean, on this side of the chamber we look forward to the minister doing a dance in her ministers statements and getting up and about. On this one we have heard nothing about scrapping the feed-in tariffs. What I found very interesting when the minister spoke about the scrapping of the feed-in tariffs earlier was that taking money away from people, in the minister's own words, was proof of success. Only Labor could possibly say taking money away from people is 'proof of success'.

I know that many of the colleagues I have spoken to about this have had the reduction in the rate of the feed-in tariff raised with them over time. I certainly have. When people have made decisions about solar, it was certainly in their minds. The minister said something about what the coalition had previously done, and of course it was all wrong – I mean, clearly, there would be no other way.

At the last election, some three and a bit years ago, we made a significant policy announcement around solar and batteries. We leaned in on batteries because we knew we were not having anywhere near the uptake on batteries that we needed as a state, so we proposed extending the rebate scheme. At the time, people could seek a rebate for either solar or battery. We sought to change that, because we knew that it was important. I do note the government has worked out what a battery is more recently and they tried to come up with policy to do something about that, some several years after we made our policy announcement, which I would have loved to implement had we won the election.

The minister also spoke about people who rent and live in apartments, and it is a big challenge. We talked about it when we made that huge announcement at the last election on policy. We talked a lot about renters and people who live in apartments and the need to provide them with an option. It is a very difficult policy issue. When the minister talks about solar being rolled out, it is true, but what the minister does not talk about is the absolute disparity for people who do not own their home. It is something that, frankly, governments have failed on – to ensure that home owners who provide accommodation through rental have the policy levers they need to make sure that solar is available for those people too. I know in my own community in places like Elwood people who rent would love to

have that choice on their property. We spoke about that as a coalition and the need to incentivise home owners to take up that choice for their tenants where their tenant is requesting it and, frankly, remove the financial hurdle to make that happen. When it comes to providing for renters, this government has not yet fixed that policy space that absolutely requires addressing. When it comes to batteries, the government has worked out what a battery is, so they should be acknowledged for that. But in terms of the actual policy response, it should be noted that several years ago we had a very forward leaning policy at the last election, which the government has obviously read in terms of recognising some of the things we raised. It should be noted that at the same time we did announce legislating climate targets, which the former Premier had opposed. Post the election, the government again obviously read our policy and recognised the need – after the Premier had left. The Premier changed and was on the way out, so they recognised again the need to legislate. I remember having an argument in this chamber with him about it where he said, ‘Absolutely,’ I think he said, ‘when hell freezes over,’ to me on legislating targets.

**A member** interjected.

**James NEWBURY:** It is in *Hansard*, Minister.

I would say this amendment, when it comes to feed-in tariffs, has been snuck in. No-one outside this chamber, and I am pretty sure most people even in the chamber right now who are not listening, would even know feed-in tariffs are being scrapped. People do not know, and it is shocking that taking away that financial incentive, which people leaned on when making a decision, has been described by the minister as proof of success.

As I said before, only a Labor government could take money away from people and say that is proof of success. There are people who will find out about these changes and who, having not been aware of them, will say, ‘When did this happen? How did this happen? Why did no-one tell us?’ Those are very fair and reasonable questions. Although we will not be dividing, we would certainly put it to the government and say that the least the government could do is advise people of the sneaky change they have made.

**Nathan LAMBERT** (Preston) (15:05): I am surprised, to be honest, to be standing up and following the member for Brighton, having heard him manage in a great creative way to yet again, as the Liberal Party has always done, oppose our program and the energy transformation that we have been driving in this state. For those who have a long memory of this debate it is particularly remarkable that the Liberal Party, who opposed the introduction of feed-in tariffs for solar when they were introduced by the then Bracks–Brumby government in, I recall, 2009, are now here in 2025 opposing us as we seek to wind them up. The minister has already touched on this, but I will certainly go into some detail about exactly why it is that the Liberal Party were wrong in their decision in 2009 and are wrong again now in 2025. The principal reason for that is that between 2009 and 2025, in that 16-year period, we have seen a remarkable transformation of our energy system, led almost entirely by Labor governments.

But it is a pleasure to rise more generally in support of the amendments we have in front of us to the Energy and Land Legislation Amendment (Energy Safety) Bill 2025, which as we know has come back from the Council with additional changes to the Electricity Industry Act 2000 through the introduction of new part 7A and those other changes. More broadly, as I said, it is a pleasure to be speaking on this government’s energy agenda. I did have the opportunity in a previous sitting week this year to speak to the Victorian Energy Efficiency Target Amendment (Energy Upgrades for the Future) Bill 2025, which the Minister for Energy and Resources also introduced. As we know, that bill was debated cognately with this bill in the Council yesterday afternoon, because of course they are both part of the minister’s broader agenda for our energy transformation. I will say I am grateful to the member for Eureka, who is here, and also the member for Footscray, who have allowed me to speak a little earlier today on this matter than otherwise might have happened. I know that our energy

transformation and the growth of renewables is very important to them and their communities, and I look forward to their further contributions on that topic.

The question in front of us does relate to the amendments, as the minister has addressed, regarding the winding up of the minimum feed-in tariff setting arrangements of the Essential Services Commission. As I say, it is important to understand that work and, particularly with the remarks of the member for Brighton, these amendments, which seek to wind up those feed-in tariffs. Certainly if you had introduced these amendments on their own in 2010, when we were just introducing feed-in tariffs, they would have been a disastrous idea. But now, in 2025, they are a good idea. As I have touched on, that is because of the transformation that has happened in the 16 years since. If we think back to 2009, it was remarkable back then the extent to which our energy system was entirely dependent on large-scale fossil fuel generators – of course at Hazelwood, Loy Yang and Yallourn – and the pipelines coming in from Bass Strait.

Many people here will of course remember the tragic circumstances of the Longford plant explosion, which from memory killed two workers and injured others. It is an event that reminds us of the critical importance of workplace safety but also an event that I suppose illustrated to everyone in Victoria at the time our dependence on that particular processing facility. From memory, Melburnians were without gas for days and possibly weeks after that particular event. But under this government, that set of circumstances where we relied entirely on these four key fossil fuel processors or generators, has now changed, and renewable energy is a much bigger part of the picture. I had the pleasure to work with the minister in an earlier role on the Victorian renewable energy auction scheme, which was a key part in getting I think now over 1000 megawatts of installed capacity of large-scale renewable energy into our system. Also, of course, this government has led the introduction of what we now refer to as distributed renewable energy. I cannot remember the exact figures, but that is a very significant contributor – certainly of the same magnitude, really, as large-scale renewable energy – in helping to move us away from fossil fuel dependency.

We have met through those two broad sets of initiatives our target to have 25 per cent renewables by 2020. That is done. I think it was 40 per cent in 2025, which we are going to achieve. Then most importantly we are on our way to 95 per cent renewables in 2035, and that will have completed what is an absolutely remarkable transformation from that starting point in 2009 that I alluded to. And as the minister knows well, that change to that more distributed system, which is so important, does change the nature of our energy industry. Any of us who have been involved in upgrading our own homes knows that those jobs are quite large and quite complex. They are very different to some of the jobs that might have been done in earlier work under the Victorian energy upgrades (VEU) and our other initiatives, so we have seen bills, including the one in front of us, that are about ensuring that we have the right regulatory framework in place to support that very important work.

Turning then to the specifics of the bill – and I will come to the specific amendments that we are debating – those of us who followed the debate in the Council saw there was a significant debate about the Electric Line Clearance Consultative Committee, which this bill does wrap up. I do just want to touch on the very important work the member for Northcote has been doing with the minister on the way in which electricity lines interact with trees and particularly urban trees in her part of the world. That is also an issue up in Preston, and I am grateful for the way she is thinking through ways in which local councils, instead of lopping down trees unnecessarily, can apply conductor covers, install aerial bundled cables or indeed put lines underground to avoid the need to remove mature urban trees that she, I and many Labor members value. I will observe just briefly on the debate that occurred on that committee and the Victorian Electrolysis Committee that we as a government absolutely support the important technical and independent advice that people like the members of those committees can provide to us. I am lucky enough to be a person who has an engineering background. I know there are some other people in the house who have an engineering background, and we would never disparage the importance of that advice. But we do know that, in getting that advice, these days there are a lot of different ways you can do it. As Minister Stitt said in the other place, the changes here are not in any

way to stop us getting that advice. They are just to give the minister and indeed to give Energy Safe Victoria a little bit more flexibility in terms of how they do so.

I will come back, then, to the very amendments that we have in front of us following that debate in the Council. As the minister said in her remarks, the key point is that these amendments will remove the process by which the ESC was setting a minimum feed-in tariff rate. It follows similar moves by Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia. She has made it very clear we will never charge consumers for solar, so there will be a minimum. That minimum will simply be zero, and we will be saving ourselves the administrative costs of going through that exercise. Exactly as the minister said, that reflects the success of our program, where we now have the position that wholesale prices are in fact often negative because there is so much abundant solar in our system, and that is a great point for us to have gotten to. Those who introduced those feed-in tariffs in 2009 would be thrilled to hear we have finally got to the point where they are no longer needed. Of course, as the minister has also touched on, we are by no means stepping away from our very solid incentives for continuing energy transformation. It is just that those incentives are now taking a different form. And we have the VEU incentives that we spoke about in the previous debate and Solar Homes. I had the pleasure actually of joining the minister when we launched the Solar for Apartments program with Henry, I think it was, in Fitzroy North. We had a fantastic morning hearing from Henry, and we heard just earlier that Henry has now been joined by 6800 other renters who have taken up that particular program.

We were very happy to see a federal Labor government re-elected recently, and they have made a further range of commitments, notably their cheaper home batteries program, which many of us are looking forward to taking up and continuing to work closely with them as we worked closely with them on that Solar for Apartments program that we launched with the minister. Of course, as the minister said, unfortunately the Liberal Party have a different view, and I believe it was not that long ago the member for Murray Plains was going around saying that sustainable energy is light-years away from being a viable solution to the state's energy needs. Unfortunately, I still see this stuff circulating myself, where people say because of nickel prices or lithium prices that our transformation is not feasible. I am going to ask those people to look around this state; look around at how we are generating our energy right now. They will see the work that we have done since 2009 to bring us to the place where we are right here today able to support these amendments that remove those tariffs because of all that work that has been done. And they will see it is not impossible but in fact has to a large degree happened. It is continuing to happen, and this government has met every one of its targets for renewable energy and will continue to do so.

This is a bill that does a lot of very important work in terms of safety, but I particularly commend the amendments that we are debating here today. As I say, they are an important part of our energy transformation to move off fossil fuels and onto renewable energy.

**Danny O'BRIEN** (Gippsland South) (15:15): I am just going to say a few words on this, but I will just take up the last comments made by the member for Preston about how the transition is going, because it is very easy these days to quickly have a look at what is currently happening with electricity supply. If I look on the National Electricity Market app, currently and pretty much for the last 24 hours around about 80 per cent is coming from brown coal, so good luck when that goes. I am very happy to support renewables – very happy to support renewables, Minister – but 100 per cent renewables is not going to work to keep the lights on.

**Lily D'Ambrosio** interjected.

**Danny O'BRIEN**: Who said 100 per cent, Minister? You are the one that is opposed to gas. You do not even want gas, let alone coal.

**Lily D'Ambrosio**: You don't know what you're talking about.

**Danny O'BRIEN**: I don't know what I'm talking about? Well, Minister, this is how well it is going for your renewables at the moment: 80 per cent brown coal powering Victoria for the last 24 hours –

and it has been sunny, I might add. It has been a beautiful, sunny couple of days. Anyway, on the on the amendment, because it would be wrong of me to digress away from the amendment –

**Lily D’Ambrosio:** He opposes energy efficiency. He said so on Sky News last week.

**Danny O’BRIEN:** I have not done Sky News for a long time, Minister. I think you have got your members confused, Minister.

This is a continuation of the sort of energy policy that we are having a debate about – that the government is bringing in an amendment like this literally under cover of darkness in the upper house last night. This is a significant issue, to remove the feed-in tariff for solar on homes. Every MP, I am sure, is aware of this issue because we have all had the complaints over the last few years about the solar feed-in tariff dropping. I understand the market realities. We have got so much solar on rooftops, and in the major market large-scale solar, that in the middle of the day there is just not any demand for it because it is oversupplied. Particularly when people are at work power usage is not as high as at the shoulders of the day, and as a result the feed-in tariff has had to keep coming down.

But this is news for all those people that the government has encouraged to go and get solar over the last few years. The people will be very angry about this, quite frankly, that the government has messed up its policy on energy so badly that it has to sneak an amendment like this into another bill at the last minute, and it is a considerable amendment. The solar feed-in tariff has been a feature of solar on rooftops of households for around about 20 years. There were those lucky few that got in early and got locked in at 60 cents a megawatt hour and the like. Those days are long gone; we understand that. To be frank, for people coming to me over the last 10 years, if anyone has asked me, I have said, ‘If you can use the solar yourself, by all means go ahead and do it, but please do not make an investment decision based on the feed-in tariff, because it is going to continue to come down’, and as we are seeing now, the government is abandoning it all together. I had complaints considerably last year when it did drop to 3.4 cents. The fact is that the Essential Services Commission mandated figure is now down to 0.4 cents – as the minister herself said, that is effectively zero – so it becomes pointless.

I think this situation highlights the policy melange that the government is involved in when it comes to energy, that this has been just snuck into a different bill at the last minute to finally abolish the solar feed-in tariff. It highlights the government’s ineptness on electricity generally and energy more broadly, and I think Victorians, particularly those who have invested in the last couple of years, will be very upset about this decision.

**Michaela SETTLE (Eureka) (15:20):** I too rise to speak on the house amendments to the Energy and Land Legislation Amendment (Energy Safety) Bill 2025. First of all, I would really like to start my contribution by thanking the Minister for Energy and Resources for the incredible work that she has done in this space. I guess the point I really want to make is it is not just a thankyou from me, it is a thankyou from all of our children. This is going to impact many, many generations to come, and the work that she has done in this renewable space will make my children’s lives better now and into the future.

If I may paraphrase the member for Gippsland South, who spoke of a policy melange, I would point him to the opposition’s position on energy. We have the wonderful nuclear offering coming out of the feds, and we have seen how the public reacted to that proposition. Indeed their then leader, Peter Dutton, did not visit any of the electorates that he was proposing to put nuclear in, so I am not even sure if he supported that policy.

**A member** interjected.

**Michaela SETTLE:** He was indeed.

What I would also point to is this opposition and their opposition to the Solar Homes program. This is a program that has benefited thousands upon thousands of Victorians. I know I had solar panels on the house I have just moved out of, and it was an absolute delight to get my electricity bill every two

months. It was tiny; it was absolutely tiny. We know that the Solar Homes program is saving Victorians thousands and thousands of dollars a year, but of course those on the other side decided to oppose and criticise this very program. The member for Caulfield claimed that solar rebates were a disruption to the market and unnecessary. On the one hand, they did not support the rebates back in 2016, but then when we come to discuss the reality of those rebates, they flip yet again.

I would like to remind people of what happened to energy prices the last time the coalition were in government. They absolutely crushed renewable energy investment, and the big energy companies just ran riot. I know that Gina Rinehart is a good friend to Peter Dutton, and certainly they spent a lot of time together. While you have got friends like that, who needs enemies? But the result of the policy from those on the other side when they were last in government is that we saw retail electricity prices increase by 34.1 per cent in the four years that they were in power. Since we have been in government we have seen the lowest default offer in the country, and we have supported consumers in many, many ways, not least of which was the power bill support program and of course the very many wonderful programs to which this bill speaks. The Victorian energy upgrades program has been an absolute success story, and it has really made such a difference to so many people.

The amendments here should indeed be a celebration for everybody in the house, because what they speak to is the absolute success of the solar program. It makes complete sense that with so many solar cells on people's houses, not only are they saving money but of course that generation of electricity impacts the wholesale price. So, this amendment speaks to the success of the program, and I think that in fact it should be something that those on the other side would celebrate rather than speak against. But as I say, none of us is entirely clear what those on the other side believe we should be doing to keep the lights on. We have such wonderful proposals as the nuclear option, which Australians and Victorians have absolutely made clear their feelings on. But of course at every step those on the other side have opposed the programs that we have brought in, like the Solar Homes program and of course now these amendments.

I started by saying I thank the Minister for Energy and Resources for what she is doing for my children's future and their children's future. I would ask that those on the other side stop playing political games and ask themselves: what is the best path forward for Australia and Victoria's future? That is under renewables, and I would ask them to support this house amendment.

**Tim READ** (Brunswick) (15:25): The Greens will support this house amendment. The Greens were strong supporters of feed-in tariffs when they were first introduced as an incentive years ago to encourage the uptake of rooftop solar. But now, with so much household solar coverage and often negative wholesale power prices in the middle of the day, they have served their purpose and are no longer required. In fact probably the up-front installation cost of solar was more of a barrier to people installing solar, and still is, compared to how much money people might make over time subsequently. While we are supporting this amendment before us today, at this stage of the transition we do urge the government to concentrate their efforts towards increasing the capacity of our renewable grid. I know that they are working on this, but we are pushing them to go as fast as they can.

Now, for example, would be a good time to introduce initiatives such as flexible solar exports, which South Australia has, which give greater flexibility for households looking to export excess power to the grid. A lot of people may not be aware that people with larger systems on their roof generally may not export more than 5 kilowatts to the grid. But in South Australia, if the grid can cope with it, that cap is temporarily lifted. That allows for a greater proportion of the energy generated in that state to come from solar energy. If South Australia can do it, I think we can too.

There is also a lot more we can do to improve storage capacity by both investing in big batteries and subsidising household batteries. I know the government is doing both of these things. I would encourage the government to invest more in this and in encouraging bidirectional EV charging, and I note that the other place is considering an inquiry into this very topic. Most importantly, the government should be working to remove barriers for the more than half of Victorians who still have

trouble accessing solar for their own homes – primarily renters, people living in social housing and people who cannot afford the installation cost even with the existing subsidies, as well as those who live in apartments with uncooperative owners corporations.

I just want to comment briefly on the amendment from the Liberals to prevent the abolition of the Electric Line Clearance Consultative Committee, which was also in this bill. We thought long and hard about this, because obviously we support the intention to retain as much tree canopy as possible. However, we are taking the government at their word that removing the committee and having a regulatory impact statement to update the regulations may well actually help to improve the regulations and keep more trees where possible. For example, they may not go down to the 300-millimetre clearance, but they might achieve 500 millimetres, which would definitely be a step forward and retain a lot more canopy across Melbourne. Obviously the Greens would support going to the 300-millimetre clearance where that is possible. However, we understand the arguments from the minister's office, and we do appreciate they are engaging with us and answering our questions about this bill. I am going to conclude my comments there.

#### **Motion agreed to.**

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Kim O'Keefe):** A message will now be sent to the Legislative Council informing them of the house's decision.

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

##### *Second reading*

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

That this bill be now read a second time.

**John PESUTTO (Hawthorn) (15:30):** I am very pleased to rise this afternoon to speak on the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025. I want to begin with some reflections on why some of these measures have been made necessary. We have to go back to 2020 when the then Andrews government, now the Allan Labor government, commissioned a review by Finity Consulting into the viability of the WorkCover scheme. What Finity found was that the scheme, as it was then being managed, was totally unsustainable, to the point where claims had exploded, the cost of those claims had exploded and recovery times – return-to-work times – had blown out. We were getting to the point where if left unchecked, by 2030 the insurance funding ratio would drop to under 50. To put that in context, you need an insurance funding ratio of between 105 and 120 to be viable. That has been addressed earlier in the debate. It was a serious problem, yet what did the government do in 2020 when it had that report? It sat on it. You have to wonder what was worse: sitting on it or having overseen the mismanagement of the WorkCover scheme, noting that by that time the government had been in office for some six years.

What is more egregious about this is that the government went to the 2022 election not revealing the contents and implications of the Finity report. The government withheld it from workers, the government withheld it from unions and the government withheld it from employers, stakeholder groups and the broader community. It only released details when the jig was up in early 2023, it seems. Then we were told about how serious the predicament of the WorkCover scheme was at that time.

What did the government do? Amongst other things, it imposed on employers premium increases that many of them have struggled to withstand. The government says that it only increased premiums for the 2023 year by 42 per cent, from 1.2 to 1.8 per cent. Let us put that in context. For most employers the average was brought down by the public sector component. Many employers in the private sector were getting increases of upwards of 100 per cent in their premiums. If you were a small to medium-sized business, particularly as many of them were, with a very good claims experience, you had to wonder why all of a sudden you were getting hit with premium increases of 100 per cent or thereabouts. Many of them already struggled under the weight of payroll tax increases and other levies

– many of them are paying land tax as well and all the fees and charges that they have to pay – and on top of that there was a doubling of their WorkCover bills.

The government just does not understand how tough it is out there to employ people and to be able to sustain them in their jobs. Most of the employers I have dealt with over the years, and I have dealt with many in previous iterations of my career, have been people who have wanted to look after the most important resource in their business, which is their people. In order to do that they need to be able to make sure their businesses are viable and sustainable, and they need a government that does not continually make life harder for them. We had a situation where the government sat on the Finity report. It finally had to admit to the problems. It wanted to make a virtue out of the fact that the system was broken – broken under them and broken by them. It is hard to believe that the government wants to claim credit for its own mess.

It is something that does need to be called out, but hiding the truth from the public is something this government has form on. You have to marvel at just how similar the concealment over the Finity report was to what happened with the Commonwealth Games. Remember the infamous cabinet meeting on 20 April 2023 when the government increased the funding for the Commonwealth Games in circumstances where even by that stage it was well known that the games were not going to be able to be held because of the costs blowing out.

But they withheld that from the Victorian people, and it was only through the efforts of the opposition that the Victorian Auditor-General was asked, and thankfully the Auditor-General acceded to our request to look into the blowouts on the Commonwealth Games. But it was not because the government finally saw the light – it had to fess up. So that is exhibit A in support of the charge of concealment on the Finity report, but then just this week we had another example of deceit, utter deceit and breach of faith, by the Victorian government over school funding under the Gonski scheme.

Back in 2024, the government was spruiking –

**Luba Grigorovitch:** On a point of order, Acting Speaker, on relevance, could we please stick to the bill?

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Kim O’Keeffe):** I ask the member to come back to the bill.

**John PESUTTO:** Certainly, Acting Speaker, the relevance of references to the breach by the Allan Labor government of its funding commitments to government schools in this state is relevant, because there is a pattern of behaviour which underlies the reason for this bill. The concealment over Finity is not dissimilar to the concealment over the government’s breach of faith by walking back its commitment to school funding for government schools in this state. This is a government that has poor form on these matters. That is why we are here today with a bill, which is one we will not oppose. The measures in the bill itself have been prompted by many of the shortcomings and failures by this government to manage the premium pool and the scheme more generally. Despite those issues we will not stand in the way of these changes, but I do want to offer some reflections on some of the changes in the bill.

The Code of Claimants’ Rights is something that we will certainly not oppose. I wonder how much more it will add to the operation of the scheme, given that there are already, as there should be, strict obligations on authorised agents and authorised insurers and those licensed to manage claims under the WorkCover scheme to actually be very mindful of the rights, interests and welfare of claimants who rely on compensation and also their dependants and their families, who are often dependent on them as well. I am interested to see what the Code of Claimants’ Rights will add to what is already there, but if it does add something positive, then that is a good thing. But again, you have to wonder why, after so many years in office, authorised agents are not being pressured to act well, given the number of Ombudsman’s reports into the management of claims, particularly complex claims.

Similarly, with the advisory committees for the occupational health and safety and WorkCover committees, offering lived experience on that – yes, obviously it is something that is to be welcomed, but again, I wonder: isn't that something that is already done? If it is not, and this adds to that, then that will be a good thing, and let me place that on record.

The return-to-work measures here – I do have to wonder whether the government gets it on return to work. I can understand the imposition of obligations on employers to designate an officer to provide mandatory training, and one of the members from the opposite side talked about it being only one day. Well, all well and good, you will train these people, but it is more about the resources and supports that come from the insurer side and the government side of claims management that is going to matter more here for return to work. As I said, I have had some experience in this field, where I practised in the area of occupational health and safety and WorkCover for a number of years, and I can tell you, most employers – in fact all of the employers I ever dealt with – wanted their workers to get back to work. They did that for a number of reasons: one, because they got how important their staff was to the success of their business. But equally, there is also a very clear and conspicuous financial benefit in getting your people back to work, because it is good for them and it is good for the business as well, so everybody wins by having that. But the government seems to be mute when it comes to what it is actually going to do on the claims management side to promote return to work, and that was the whole idea of the set of negotiations we had last year over the legislation that came in at that time to address the financial crisis confronting WorkCover due to the government's mismanagement.

Finally, when it comes to the enhanced entitlements, particularly for families and loved ones who have lost people in terrible circumstances where workers have lost their lives, obviously that is to be welcomed, and again, we will not be standing in opposition to those measures. So we will not oppose the measures in this bill, but I do hope the government takes on board the comments I have made, because you are not going to avoid the need to come back to these issues and revisit them unless you address those matters I have spoken about in my remarks.

**Luba GRIGOROVITCH** (Kororoit) (15:40): It gives me great pleasure to rise to speak about the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025. From the outset can I say that no-one goes to work to be in harm's way. As a former union secretary and official I have seen too many members dealing with workplace injury, and it is not something that any of us wants. No-one wants their loved ones or people they care about to be in harm's way, and that is what goes to the heart of this bill. I also want to thank the members of the Workplace Incidents Consultative Committee who were in the gallery this morning. They did a ton of work and from what I have been told by the various people involved in the committee there were a lot of robust discussions, so to those who were here in the gallery this morning, thank you. To Brett Struhs, David Brownlee and Ralph Snider, all the work that you did towards this bill was very much appreciated, as was the fact that you came along today to listen to the debate.

The bill before us this afternoon delivers on the Victorian Labor government's commitment to implementing the recommendations provided in two separate reports: the independent review of complex workers compensation claims management provided to the government in April 2021 – the Rozen report – and the review of the adequacy of compensation and supports for family members of workers whose deaths are work related. Today's bill acquiesces to the recommendations requiring legislative change that were accepted by the Victorian government following those reports. This bill makes amendments to the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013, the Accident Compensation Act 1985 and the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 to improve the experience of injured workers who access the WorkCover scheme; to improve the support that the scheme provides to family members and dependants of workers whose deaths are work related; to refine the operation of the Workplace Injury Commission and of administrative arrangements for members of WorkSafe's boards, WorkSafe's chief executive officer and hearing loss assessors; and to correct technical oversights in other relevant legislation.

Recommendations 19 and 20 of the 2021 Rozen report recommended that the objectives of the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act, otherwise known as the WIRC act, and of WorkSafe be amended to expressly provide for the fair, respectful and dignified treatment of injured workers and their dependants by WorkSafe and the provision of high-quality services. Adding new objectives to the WIRC act and the Accident Compensation Act will ensure that users of the WorkCover scheme receive high-quality services and are treated fairly, respectfully and with dignity.

Recommendation 14 of the Rozen report recommended that WorkSafe develop a code of injured workers' rights that should (1) identify the rights of workers and the corresponding responsibilities of WorkSafe and (2) identify the process by which rights may be enforced and developed in consideration of codes in other jurisdictions, such as the New Zealand Code of ACC Claimants' Rights. The bill delivers on this through the creation of a Code of Claimants' Rights, which will be developed in consultation with stakeholders if the bill is passed. The bill requires that the code include specific rights of claimants under the code; obligations to ensure services provided by WorkSafe, its agents and self-insurers are provided in a manner that promotes and upholds those rights; a procedure for lodging and dealing with complaints about noncompliance with the code by WorkSafe, its agents and self-insurers; and remedies that apply if any complaints are substantiated. The code will have the ability to provide rights to all persons who have entitlements under the WIRC act and the Accident Compensation Act, such as injured workers, dependants, deceased workers and family members of deceased or injured workers.

We know that the longer a person is away from work the less likely they are to ever return to work. Being on workers compensation indefinitely is not the answer. Recommendation 17 of the Rozen report recommended the effectiveness of return-to-work coordinators, who should be enhanced by requiring employers to ensure return-to-work coordinators have training and the assistance and facilities reasonably necessary to perform their functions under the WIRC act. The bill will implement this recommendation by introducing a requirement for employers to ensure that their appointed return-to-work coordinator completes approved training within the required timeframe unless the employer has a reasonable excuse for not doing so.

This amendment aims to build the capability of workplaces to more effectively support their injured workers to recover and return to work, which is better for workers, businesses, families and the scheme. The minister for WorkSafe may determine the training required to be completed, including initial or refresher training, any qualifications to be held by the return-to-work coordinator and the time period within which a return-to-work coordinator must complete the approved training. WorkSafe will approve the training providers that are able to deliver the approved training. In making its recommendation to the minister, WorkSafe will consult with key stakeholders to ensure that the training requirements are practical, accessible, flexible and aligned with policy intent. WorkSafe will explore and develop a range of training approaches, including a shorter online module that could be suitable for different employee contexts.

Oversight of the scheme will also be strengthened by requiring that a statutory review of the scheme is undertaken at least every five years. The first review must be completed by 31 December 2030. If the minister for WorkSafe forms the view that a review is required earlier than the five-year period, then they can call for a review at any time. The amendments require a review at least once in each period of five years after 31 December 2030. This amendment recognises that regular, proactive reviews of the Victorian workers compensation scheme will enable trends and issues to be identified as they emerge rather than when they are already significant issues. A statutory requirement for regular reviews also aligns the Victorian workers compensation scheme with the schemes in most other Australian states.

We know that the longer a person is away from work, the less likely they are to ever return to work. That is why we have established Return to Work Victoria, to provide tailored support to injured workers to help them get back to work. WorkSafe supported more than 26,000 injured workers to return to safe workplaces in 2023–24. WorkSafe, through Return to Work Victoria and its agents, is

committed to ensuring that any worker no longer eligible to receive weekly payments has the best support to be able to transition to suitable employment where possible.

WorkSafe has a range of tailored supports in place for workers with long-term injuries or complex needs, including those no longer eligible for weekly payments. This can include ongoing medical treatment and occupational rehabilitation and access to transition support programs that connect workers with appropriate services, such as psychological supports, community support services, training programs and suitable employment opportunities. Return to Work Victoria will deliver the government's commitment to creating and trialling new programs and initiatives to improve return-to-work outcomes, with an initial program budget of \$50 million for its first three years. An annual review will evaluate pilot programs to ensure they are delivering outcomes for workers and value for money. The pilot programs include a worker support hotline where workers can access mental health support for work-related stress and burnout and an initiative that will provide small and medium-sized businesses with tailored support to build mentally healthy workplaces.

The Victorian Labor government also proudly established the Workplace Incidents Consultative Committee in June 2021 to strengthen the voice of Victorians who have been affected by a serious workplace incident. It was my honour to recognise them earlier in my speech. The WICC currently comprises 13 members with direct lived experiences. All members are appointed by the minister for WorkSafe.

The Allan Labor government has made vital changes to the WorkCover scheme to ensure that it remains financially sustainable and can continue to support injured workers into the future. The government's priority is to ensure the scheme continues to be contemporary and fit for purpose and supports workers. While the current financial results are improving, more work is needed to stabilise Victoria's WorkCover scheme given the considerable pressure it will continue to face in coming years from an increase in claims – far beyond what was ever envisaged when this scheme was first established.

Labor built our state's WorkCover scheme to support workers, unlike those opposite, who abolished common-law rights for seriously injured workers. Only Labor stands with our workers to support them when they most need it. We will always prioritise the safety and wellbeing of all workers. No-one plans to get injured at work, any more than they plan to die at work. The Allan Labor government is standing with injured workers and their families, ensuring they are treated with the respect, the care and the dignity that they deserve in their toughest times. Our main focus is and always will be to ensure that injured workers have the support to return to work safely with dignity and as soon as possible. That is why I am pleased to commend this bill to the house.

**Annabelle CLEELAND** (Euroa) (15:50): I rise today to speak on the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025, a bill that brings forward a range of amendments aimed at reforming WorkCover. As we have heard throughout the day, this is a scheme that we can all agree is fundamentally broken. This is primarily done by amending existing legislation such as the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013 and the Accident Compensation Act 1985. These amendments propose several changes that are designed to improve the claims process for injured workers, enhance compensation for families of deceased workers and create better systems for workplace rehabilitation. Despite there being merit to many of these amendments, there are still some concerns that have not been addressed throughout the legislation. My concern is about the broad implications of these changes, particularly the impact they will have on small businesses and those operating in regional Victoria.

One of the most striking proposals is the introduction of a Code of Claimants' Rights, which is set to define the service standards that must be met by WorkSafe and self-insurers when assessing workers claims. While this sounds well intentioned, there is still a lot of uncertainty around how this will impact businesses in practice. If the code requires additional compliance or administrative costs, these will inevitably be passed down to businesses, many of which are already struggling. The bill also mandates

mandatory training for return-to-work coordinators, which will undoubtedly come at a cost. There are also concerns about how much this bill will burden employers, especially those who have few claims and will be required to pay for training and provide facilities to return-to-work coordinators. Given the already strained business environment, these additional costs could prove too much for some businesses to bear.

We also cannot discuss WorkCover without talking about the higher premiums businesses have faced in recent years, something that is continuously putting pressure on employers and driving up the cost of doing business in our state. Employers were forced to accept a massive 42 per cent increase in their premiums in 2023, making Victoria home to the most expensive WorkCover scheme in the entire country. Within my region the rise in WorkCover premiums can best be viewed through its impact on our local equine and breeding industry. In Euroa the equine industry is a cornerstone of our local economy. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of jobs are dependent on a successful equine industry. Breeders, equine service providers and farmers are some of the major employers in our region, providing thousands of jobs and driving our economy forward. But this sector has faced ridiculously high increases to WorkCover premiums in recent years. While this is somewhat understandable for jockeys and track riders, the risk faced by others in the equine industry does not merit the same premium cost.

The lack of understanding from WorkCover and the current government about how industries like this actually operate is so frustrating. The equine industry in Euroa is not just about horse racing. It includes the breeding sector, agriculture and tourism. These sectors are a major economic driver, contributing significantly to jobs, tourism and our entire economy. When businesses in this industry are burdened with excessive WorkCover premiums, it does not just hurt them, it hurts our entire community. The problem does not end there. As it stands, these premiums are pushing businesses to the brink. Farmers, breeders and service providers are paying the same WorkCover premiums as high-risk workers, despite having such different risk profiles. If the government continues to ignore this nuance, it will harm industries that are critical to the prosperity of regional Victoria.

While the impact to our region's equine industry has been discussed, it is not the only one that is doing it incredibly tough. Take Kylie – and I want to thank Kylie for speaking with me today – who operates a concreting business out of Seymour, and in the past three years they have seen premiums go from \$6000 to nearly \$13,000 per year – and this is just in recent years. This is despite them never filling out a claim, never having any incidents and operating with the same number of staff as they did previously. There is no reason for these increases other than a broken system. They were just simply told one day they would now have to pay more than double what they had previously paid. And this is a small business that employs so many people in our community.

The increases are seriously having an impact on the viability of so many of our businesses. Kylie and her family's business used to be able to pay quarterly, but with the new increase they have to move to a payment plan. It is so cruel, but this comes with an additional \$1000 cost on top of what they have already paid. Business is doing it tough in our regions, in particular for building and construction, which has seen major cuts and a lack of work coming out of usual locations such as Puckapunyal. There are simply no viable alternatives for many of our small businesses, and these premiums are making it too hard for them to survive.

We need to make it easier for businesses to operate in Victoria, especially in regional areas where we already grapple with business closures and a lack of investment. We need policies that attract businesses and investment and make it easier to stay in regional Victoria, not policies that drive them away with unfair premiums and unmanageable compliance costs. A recent report from the Business Council of Australia ranked Victoria last for business settings, citing high property taxes, payroll costs and burdensome licensing requirements. We have all heard it. All of our businesses are screaming out for some help. This is reiterated by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, which painted an equally grim picture, showing Victoria lost nearly 23,000 businesses between 2021 and 2023, the highest drop of any state in Australia. This is being reflected right across the region in my electorate, with Heathcote,

Benalla, Seymour, Kilmore and Broadford all reporting fewer businesses operating than the year before.

In Benalla alone 36 businesses closed their doors in the past year, and when I met with business owners in Heathcote to hear firsthand about the challenges they are facing, WorkCover premiums were the number one issue of concern. Half of the businesses I spoke to were either shutting down or moving interstate because doing business in Victoria is just too damn hard. Skyrocketing WorkCover premiums, along with rising taxes and crime, are crushing our local businesses. To make matters worse, these businesses owners feel like the government is not listening. I am sure many of these people will still feel the same if this bill is passed.

I understand the intention behind many of the provisions in the bill, and it is crucial, but we must pay attention to the real-world impacts of businesses, especially in our regional communities. For my region and several other rural areas the bill could create more uncertainty and costs, making it harder for them to continue operating and contributing to our economy. They are the backbone of our regional economy. This bill does bring forward necessary changes that will benefit families of those who suffer workplace incidents, and that should not be ignored, but these changes can also be legislated in a way that does not harm small businesses at a time when they are already doing it tough.

I thank the member for Evelyn for putting forward a reasoned amendment that would freeze any further increases to WorkCover premiums and ensure this legislation is more suitable going forward.

**Paul EDBROOKE** (Frankston) (15:58): It is absolutely a great time to be on this side of the chamber and to get up and speak on this bill today. I have heard many people on this side of the chamber talk about their experiences with this bill, but I do see a lot of note reading on that side of the chamber, which would lead me to think that they do not know much about this WorkCover bill, this workplace injury bill.

*Members interjecting.*

**The SPEAKER:** Order! Member for Euroa! Member for Lowan!

**Emma Kealy:** On a point of order, Speaker, I ask you to bring the member back to the bill.

**The SPEAKER:** Member for Frankston.

**Paul EDBROOKE:** In my lived experience this kind of bill is something that affects people's lives profoundly. As an emergency service worker responding to – some people say accidents; I do not believe accidents happen. I do not believe there is anything that is just an accident, there is a reason it happened. But responding to industrial incidents was never a pleasant experience, and in the wash-up, in the debate afterwards with employees, with staff, with bosses, with other emergency services and in debriefs there was always the question of 'How did we get here?', 'How did this happen?' Whether or not you choose to look at the Swiss cheese model, which I know is very popular in this area, the conclusion we always came to is that this could have been avoided. It is very, very important that we continue to strengthen the bills in this place to support workers.

**Business interrupted under sessional orders.**

### *Matters of public importance*

#### **Housing**

**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 condemns the opposition for failing to support reforms that deliver more homes for Victorians close to transport, jobs, schools and parks.

**Nina TAYLOR** (Albert Park) (16:01): I am very pleased to rise to speak to a very serious matter of public importance, and that is one that condemns the opposition for failing to support reforms that

deliver more homes for Victorians close to transport, jobs, schools and parks. It is extraordinary the lengths to which the opposition will go in order to block housing any which way they can and maintain status quo. A long-term, and even a shorter-term impact of this status quo – and it is not even status quo, because it would mean going backwards if we did not to take these historic reforms forward – is that everyday Victorians and particularly younger generations will suffer if we do not make the decisions that we are having to make and that we want to make in the best interests of current and future generations of Victorians getting into homes and being able to afford to live a reasonable existence in our wonderful state of Victoria.

I will back in my contention regarding the lengths to which they will go to block housing for Victorians – to the extent that there was a rushed committee that was seeking to examine three planning scheme amendments, and fundamentally it was about stymieing plans to build more homes for Victorians. You really have to ask, ‘Well, what are they going to achieve by doing that?’ Absolutely nothing. In fact it would send the state retrograde, and it would penalise younger and future generations in a way that is simply unfair. I should say, it also belies the underlying purpose for which these reforms are being brought about.

The other thing that is really disturbing is the persistent misinformation and embellishment in an attempt to frighten people not to undertake and not to be part of these planning reforms or to go forward and to see the value in these planning reforms. It belies the why; it belies the how. It is also destructive when we want to present what is actually the truth about the amenity, which is fundamental and intrinsic to the nature of the reforms that are being brought about, because it is not only about increasing supply. But we know that fundamentally that is the solution. Increasing the supply is absolutely fundamental if we are going to resolve options for Victorians, both when it comes to rental properties but also when it comes to being able to buy into homes.

This idea that, ‘Oh, well, I don’t want some multistorey properties in my area because my area should always be guarded’ – it is like a secret fortress that no-one is allowed to be in, when in fact we can see that the reforms, and I am speaking very broadly before I do the deep dive, have been developed in a very strategic and consultative way.

In fact there has been extraordinary consultation across the state. I participated when the Minister for Planning came out to my electorate and very openly put the questions to Victorians. It was at the South Melbourne Market, but there were many other places across the state where the questions were asked – many, many questions which pertained to these very important reforms that have led to the decisions that we are making as a government, because it is the right thing to do and because housing Victorians cannot be facilitated by sitting on our hands and saying, ‘Not in my suburb.’

On that note, we know that for many Victorians, particularly young Victorians – and I have emphasised that because for those who are already in homes, it is obvious they are already in the market, and getting into the market is often the hardest step – it is harder than perhaps for the generations before them, whether it is renting or whether it is buying a home. Applying for a rental property, even back when I was renting, which was not so long ago, I remember was a fight; it was very competitive. I should say this is not exclusive to Victoria – this is actually Australia-wide – but the difference is that here in Victoria we are really doing something about it.

Our activity centre work, planning for more homes around transport, jobs and services – what is wrong with that? Why do they want to fight against this? On the one hand, you are not going to be able to tackle congestion unless you facilitate mechanisms for people to work closer to where they live and/or to be close to accessible public transport. It is just common sense, is it not, to be able to plan for activity centres that are in close proximity to transport, jobs and services? Hence if we are looking at the 10 pilot centre locations gazetted through – and I will just give the numbers for precision – VC257 and GC252 earlier this year, these were on the back of huge community engagement. This is what Victorians broadly are seeking, because the last thing – can I say, and I will speak very, very broadly – any parent wants is for their child not to have the opportunity to get, at a minimum, into a rental or

into a home, and I would have thought those opposite would want the same for their children and grandchildren, as well for their neighbours, nephews, nieces and otherwise. We all want them to have a reasonable opportunity to have a good home over their head.

I did mention from the outset the issue of amenity, which I think gets grossly distorted, or perhaps not even vaguely covered by those opposite, but it is actually a really important issue. Hence our townhouse and low-rise code gazetted through VC267 is for the first time creating consistent deemed-to-comply standards across the state for townhouses and multi-residential developments of three storeys or less. Why is this important? I would have thought those opposite would have reflected on this particular issue, bearing in mind who they say they are as opposed to what they actually, can we say, do not deliver on. Giving certainty to industry while improving liveability, sustainability and amenity for residents and neighbours – what is wrong with that? Well, nothing, and clearly Victorians have spoken. With the extent of the engagement, we know this is what they are looking for.

Of course Australia's largest housing project, the Suburban Rail Loop, has the tools to deliver more than 70,000 homes at the heart of the six stations. This significant investment in the city's infrastructure is implemented through VC274. On their own we know that these plans that we are putting in place are not the whole solution when we are talking about housing affordability, but they are absolutely a key element in driving important change in this space. We cannot just sit on our hands and say, 'Oh, it's all too hard. We're not going to do it because it can be uncomfortable.' Change can be uncomfortable, yes, but working through it together and being very up-front about it, as we are with the extensive community consultation, no-one is resiling from this. No-one is hiding from it. The Premier has many times stood up to speak to these issues, as has the planning minister. On the contrary, we are actually providing solutions to questions and to assertions raised by fellow Victorians and people in our various electorates.

When we were looking at some of the reforms that were considered by, I have to say, the rushed inquiry last year, it was all about blocking housing. Let us take away the gloss from this. It certainly was not helpful when we were thinking about getting people into homes. VC257 and the subsequent GC252 will deliver capacity for 60,000 homes across 10 pilot centres. These amendments provide certainty for industry, which is what I was saying before, and enable that step change in approach to enable more homes in established suburbs close to transport, jobs and services.

So I think it is really about an attitude, and it is really about considering not only the people who have their homes proper, but what about their children – and their children? What about their neighbours' children? And not only children, but the society in which you live, of which you are a part – isn't this a time to be considered and to be thoughtful and to think about the fact that we are better off when we make sure we provide the reasonable and fair opportunities for our fellow Victorians to get into good homes?

These same tools will be utilised for the expanded program, which is creating capacity for more than 300,000 homes across another 50 centres. So we are getting to real numbers in terms of actually tackling and challenging this very significant issue that is right in front of us. I mean, there is no concealing it, and as I was saying from the outset, the actual problem of housing supply is not exclusive to Victoria. On the contrary, it is Australia wide, and there are global issues in the Western world. However, in Victoria we are not sitting on our hands and saying it is all too hard and just waiting and pushing it off into the ether because it is uncomfortable and difficult to challenge some of the premises upon which people have accepted their suburbs. On the other hand, isn't it wonderful? We are going to get more lovely neighbours. But there is a lot of thinking behind it in terms of making sure that amenity not only is preserved but is improved as a result of these developments.

VC267 created the townhouse and low-rise code, which turns on, as I was saying before, the deemed to comply for multihome developments up to three storeys, which can actually reduce costs for industry and councils, create certainty for those wanting to build homes and fast-track approvals for housing developments. VC274 has the planning tools that will enable more than 70,000 homes across

six stations, delivering more diverse housing right next to significant investment in transport, as well as industrial and commercial hubs for jobs and services. There are a couple of key threads which emanate from those planning tools, and one of them is: who wants to sit in a car for hours every day to and from work if they do not have to? If there are choices made, if there are governments brave enough, as we are, with Victorians alongside to make strategic, positive decisions about where these activity centres are built – and I know that increasingly there are a lot of younger people, and I will not speak for all, who do not necessarily want to be reliant on a car and actually prefer to take public transport and to take active transport, because it is much cheaper to take public transport or to use active transport. It reduces congestion and it reduces time commuting, which means more time doing the things that you enjoy outside your job, whether it be with sporting clubs or whether it is with your family. These are things that I think we will find many people actually value. It is good for their health and wellbeing and it is good for their quality of life.

Thinking about the improvements to amenity, because I think we need to be really up-front about this and dispel some of the myths, when we are looking at how the townhouse code improves the quality of homes, this code will make better design outcomes and make these buildings really nice places to live with better ventilation, better sustainability outcomes and better daylight, creating more space for trees. I do not know about you, but I have to say, speaking personally and I think others will share in this, in our electorates people want more trees. Generally they want better canopy cover. It keeps the areas cooler, but it is also aesthetically very pleasing, and being around nature is certainly good for our health and oxygen levels. Coming back to the amenity in terms of the aesthetic, neighbourhood character standards include street setback, side and rear setbacks, 10 to 20 per cent tree canopy site coverage and walls on boundaries. Internal amenity standards include space for backyards and balconies, minimum sizes for bedrooms, adequate sunlight to living rooms and bedrooms, natural ventilation and storage and accessibility guidelines. These have been guided by what Victorians want, but they are also the contemporary standards to which we are actually entitled to build.

These are reasonable standards I guess is the point I am coming to. This is the direction that Victoria should be going towards. Very importantly, and close to my heart, there will be new environmentally sustainable development standards, including overshadowing protection for rooftop solar panels – it is really good to have that issue addressed; I know it has been raised with me in my electorate a number of times – providing shading devices for north-facing windows; making sure homes have enough roof space to allow for solar panels if residents choose to install them – that is a good futureproofing mechanism but also allows residents to save money on energy costs – and requiring developers to achieve best practice stormwater management outcomes.

These improvements sit alongside other changes our government has made to build more homes and to improve the quality of homes in Victoria. You can see on every level we are thinking about current and future generations. We are looking at strategically sensible mechanisms to build supply close to public transport, jobs and hubs where you have services, reducing commute time and increasing the time that people have whether it be for recreation, the arts or spending time with family as people see fit for a better quality of life. It goes without saying this is the right thing to do, and we would really appreciate the opposition resiling from blocking housing for Victorians.

**Richard RIORDAN** (Polwarth) (16:16): I rise today to agree with the government that this house absolutely condemns the shambolic attempt by this government to solve what has now become a critical housing crisis here in the state of Victoria. The efforts by this government have almost been laughable. Not only that but people that actually understand housing – the real estate industry, the construction industry, the building industry and the development industry – all think what this government is doing is completely going in the wrong direction. The municipalities that have to oversee this, that have to provide the amenity and the communities and the public spaces and the services, are all up in arms at the way this government is attempting to solve this housing crisis. Then there are the community groups. There are those that live in the streets and the suburbs and the new activity zones that this government has talked about, all condemning the approach of this government.

What are they condemning? First of all, they are condemning the fact that this government has not consulted with anybody. That is not just the opposition saying that. That is the Municipal Association of Victoria and the local cities throughout Melbourne's suburbs that attended the recent select committee inquiry into the planning and building changes that this government has put forward. None of them had anything good to say about what this government has done in terms of its desire to solve the housing crisis.

What is it that is causing this housing crisis? It is a matter of affordability. It is not supply. The supply will get solved when you can produce a house that the average Victorian can afford to live in. What are the figures that the government is dealing with? The median house price in Melbourne is now just a tick over a million dollars. The market is telling the community that to buy any sort of family-oriented apartment or townhouse in suburbs around Melbourne is going to be in excess of a million dollars under current costs. What has this government done to work on affordability so that people on average wages can become home owners? Average young people; people who are in the wage bracket of between \$60,000 and \$120,000 a year, which is the median wage range that households are dealing with in Victoria; people on those incomes, young millennials, young people looking to get into the housing market, just plain and simple working families here in Victoria – how are they going to get their first home in a market that is designed around creating a housing stock that people simply cannot afford?

This government talks about the need and has been selling largely a false promise to millennials, to working Victorians, to families and to people who want their own home to go to each night. They have been selling them a false promise that if they destroy the fabric of Melbourne and create a one-size-fits-all planning approach – which would go against everything generations of Melburnians have fought for – if they go down that track, suddenly people will be able to have homes.

That is simply a lie; it is not true and it cannot be delivered by this government, because the cost of development and producing a home in Victoria is simply not attainable under current circumstances. What are some of those circumstances? Some of those circumstances are that builders and developers and those wanting to provide homes for Victorians – good quality homes and environmentally friendly homes – are under enormous cost pressures, not because of what they are doing but because of the influence this government's reckless spend on the Big Build, on government projects, is having on the downstream and upstream provision of labour and services in the construction industry. Without exception, developers and builders and those tasked with the important job of providing homes for Victorians simply cannot bring to market a housing product that Victorians can afford.

This government now has overseen this calamitous state for coming up to 12 years next year, and in each and every one of those years this housing crisis has gotten worse. Its ability to provide homes for the most needy Victorians through our social and public housing system has gotten worse by the quarter – not only by the year but by the quarter. We have seen in the last 12 months, every single quarter, more than 2000 families added to the waiting lists here in Victoria, because not only is this government not helping the private sector build homes for the private market and for investors, it cannot even get the housing stock right through Homes Victoria and for the mechanism of providing sustainable, valuable homes for those who just simply cannot afford a home at all, Victoria's most vulnerable.

We have seen terrible statistics. We are now at 64,000 families, some 120,000 people – 120,000 people every night do not have somewhere to call home. They do not have somewhere to go as a home. They are living in desperate circumstances. This government has made much of domestic violence, and yet singularly on an issue that this government has told the community it cares about, we now find that particularly women escaping domestic violence with children will be waiting just under two years – 23 months – before this government can even find and allocate them a home. Where are those people in the interim? They are living in caravans, in cheap motels and in their cars. They are living under extraordinary hardship, and sometimes that hardship forces them back into abusive

circumstances. That is what this housing policy under this Labor government has delivered for Victorians.

Why shouldn't Victorians trust this government to deliver on its promise of making affordable houses where people want to live and close to their work, which is an aspiration of all Victorians? Clearly the housing minister and the planning minister have gone and visited Redbridge and they have done the research and have decided that people want to hear the words 'affordable housing close to where they live and work'. And why wouldn't they? That makes sense. But what this government is delivering is not making sense.

I will point to three very good examples of real action this government could have taken in the last 12 years that would have made a difference. I point first of all to Fishermans Bend. Fishermans Bend, started by the previous government –

*Members interjecting.*

**Richard RIORDAN:** And what do we know about Fishermans Bend? It is nearly twice the size of the Melbourne CBD. What has this government delivered in that space? It is a space that could be housing 80,000. Eighty thousand people could be being housed down there in a wonderful new precinct, close to jobs, close to communities, close to where people want to be and within cooe of the city – a few football kicks from the MCG – and yet what has this government done in its 12 years? Not a thing. It has not released anything down there. So this government say, 'Our solution's going to go and change the fabric and the nature of the whole rest of Melbourne', but it is an area that has been identified now for a good 12 years and they have not delivered one project on it.

They have not delivered a thing – none of the promised public transport, none of the promised access and none of the promised amenity improvement. They have done nothing; they have stayed away from it. Victorians would rightly be suspicious of this government's ability to deliver anything affordable, anything new or anything that Victorians actually want and need, when something like that they have not been able to move on at all.

Then of course there is the Maribyrnong defence site. I have been in this place for 10 years on this side, and you guys have been talking about it and thinking about it –

**The SPEAKER:** Order! Member for Polwarth, through the Chair.

**Richard RIORDAN:** and you have not taken any real action. It is not that difficult.

**The SPEAKER:** Through the Chair, member for Polwarth.

**Roma Britnell** interjected.

**The SPEAKER:** Order! Member for South-West Coast!

**Richard RIORDAN:** This government has claimed it has a wonderful working relationship with the federal government. What approaches has this government made to its colleagues in Canberra to actually move that important parcel of land that could be housing 20,000 people and 34,000 jobs. It is an important precinct close to jobs, close to opportunity and close to public transport, and this government has done nothing to advance that cause.

Then of course there is the Arden precinct. For heaven's sake, you have even built a train station to it.

**The SPEAKER:** Member for Polwarth, through the Chair.

**Richard RIORDAN:** For heaven's sake, this government has actually built a multimillion-dollar train station to this precinct and has singularly failed to move the dial on it. It is an extraordinary waste of ambition from this government, to have actually put the transport in place but not facilitated any accommodation. It is a massive fail. Just within a short stroll of our beautiful CBD there are literally tens of thousands of housing opportunities, job opportunities and lifestyle opportunities and

opportunities for young Victorians, for millennials, to find somewhere affordable to live, and yet this government has not delivered on it at all. Instead they have gone to a marketing agency and have dreamed up a concept whereby if they demolish the parts of Melbourne that generations, through their local councils and municipalities, have worked to preserve for future generations, somehow that will make a difference. It is simply not going to make a difference. Why isn't it going to make a difference? Because the local municipalities have already been doing the hard work. They have already been doing the work on providing growth and opportunities in those communities, and this government have blatantly ignored them in their quest for cheap politics to solve what is and will always be a very serious problem and dilemma in this state.

All Victorians should have the right to have a home that they can call home, a home that they can live in with security and most importantly a home that they can afford to live in. Currently in Victoria the median house price has pushed owning a home, in whatever part of Melbourne you talk about, beyond the realm of so many people – and an increasing amount of people. It is a common cry from all generations, not just young people but older people as well. Getting into a home that you can afford to live in is becoming more and more difficult.

One of the other things that this government points to is the idea that if we make these big changes in the inner suburbs of Melbourne, we will suddenly have this onslaught of supply. But can I point out that at the same time that the government has made much of how this will bring on more affordable housing for people, it is worth noting that currently in many of these 50 precincts that the state government has identified up to 50 per cent of the new apartment stock sits unsold. Now, a little economics lesson here for some of those opposite in the government: if the market creates and builds new product and they cannot sell it, new entrants do not come into the marketplace to provide more housing. The industry and the market are saying, 'What we're building now is too expensive and it's not moving.' That is a problem, and that problem will not be solved by the planning regulations and changes that this government has implemented.

Another shocking statistic just here in the CBD is that 17 per cent of apartments – that is 8000 units within the CBD area here in Melbourne – that have been built in the last four or five years currently sit unsold. That just points to the fact that there is an affordability crisis in Victoria, not an availability crisis. The MAV – and this is the shocking one, as we finish up – gave evidence recently at a select committee inquiry into the planning changes this government wants to make that some 86,619 housing approvals in Melbourne within the precincts that we are talking about have not gone ahead over the last five years. Can you imagine that? We talk about this government's ambition, set only in 2023, to create 80,000 homes a year, and we know that last year only 60,000 were achieved, so there is a huge shortfall. We know where that shortfall is coming from. It is coming when approvals are being given, but developers, builders and home owners cannot afford to go on with the projects.

This government is absolutely out of touch when it comes to how to solve the housing crisis. It is a tired government. It is a government that is full of trickery. It is a government that does not have the wherewithal or the understanding of how to get homes to market that Victorians can afford and that they can live in.

**Josh BULL** (Sunbury) (16:31): I am pleased to have the opportunity this afternoon to support the fantastic member for Albert Park in relation to this matter of public importance (MPI). I had to make some reflections about being transported to some sort of mythical alternate universe in a greatest hits roadshow from the previous speaker around some of the stunning planning decisions that were taken when a previous lot sat on this side of the chamber. There were references, member for Footscray, to Fishermans Bend, which, if I recall the history correctly, was found to have a massive shortfall in planning for transport and perhaps schools, some education land –

**Katie Hall** interjected.

**Josh BULL:** Huge windfalls for developers as well. There were references to the Maribyrnong defence site, which I understand has significant issues when it comes to contamination and perhaps a more than \$500 million clean-up bill. But let us not let that get in the road of whatever journey those opposite want to take us on when it comes to planning and good decision-making in this state. This side of the house is focused on more opportunities and more housing to market to address a critically important issue right across our community. What we just saw from those opposite is a failure to learn the lessons when it comes to ideology over science, ideology over listening to the experts and those that are involved within the industry and within markets and yet again a failure to consult the people of Victoria and, one must say – not to draw too heavily on the result that we saw just a couple of Saturdays ago – a comprehensive rejection of the policies that were taken forward by those opposite. But do not let that get in the way, member for Footscray and other members. They come in here and pretend that they have all the answers over on that side, while we on this side are focused on delivering practical outcomes that deliver more homes and more opportunities.

Why would we on this side of the house support those comprehensive reforms and those announcements that were made on 20 October last year for a couple of weeks that go to all of the provisions around planning for additional homes within our activity centres, within our greenfield sites and right across the state, making sure that we have got the transport options and opportunities for local communities to get a chance to live in an area at an affordable price? Members should remember last year those comprehensive and large-scale reforms that were announced by the Premier over that two-week period, making sure that we backed those in, whilst what we see from those opposite is just a consistent pattern of blocking and of coming into this place and making up all sorts of facts and figures, whilst we know the most important thing we can do is put a safe roof over individuals and families no matter where they live or where they come from, and we will continue to do that.

This government has a clear and comprehensive plan for housing in our state, and we know that those opposite want to block it. We have listened, we have acted and we are delivering, and we stand with those thousands of Victorians wanting to get a rental or wanting to buy their own home, each and every day.

As I mentioned, there is always an opportunity to be able to provide for local communities and to be able to listen and understand. As was referenced in the announcements made by the Premier last year, the status quo was simply not enough, and not enough was being done to provide those opportunities – no matter where people might live – for every single Victorian and their families. More homes closer to transport, more homes closer to services and more homes right across our community – that is what we stand for. We will leave it to those opposite to come in here and make all sorts of wild claims about matters that they want to reference in this place.

When it comes to delivery, we know that this year is an incredibly exciting year as we get on and deliver and open the Metro Tunnel – those five new stations – and deliver key projects like the North East Link, removing dangerous and congested level crossings and delivering the West Gate Tunnel and the Suburban Rail Loop, great projects indeed. Delivering those projects to make sure that we have the transport opportunities to deliver more homes is something that we remain focused on.

Just this morning, we have yet again seen another announcement around stamp duty cuts extended to build more homes. We know that this investment of \$61 million to slash stamp duty for off-the-plan apartments, units and townhouses for another 12 months – cutting up-front costs, speeding up building and saving homebuyers an average of \$25,000 – is another very important part of the puzzle in ensuring that we are making those commitments each and every day. We know and understand that those announcements that were made, which of course relate to this MPI, go to the arguably the largest suite of housing reforms ever announced in our state: the delivery of the 50 new train and tram zone activity centres; off-the-plan stamp duty concessions, which I referenced earlier; funding for more infrastructure where homes are getting built; unlocking greenfield areas in areas such as mine; providing for a regional housing plan; reforms for renters; and the list goes on. Making sure that we are delivering these is important to each and every one of us, and making sure that we are delivering

those right across the community is something that we remain focused on in communities from Bendigo to Bundoora – I see the member for Bundoora has just wandered into the chamber – making sure that we are providing all of that support each and every day.

Whether it is local communities such as mine and the great people within my electorate, or those broader conversations, particularly with young people, making sure that we are providing additional options and opportunities is something that we are very much focused on. Support for new homes and making sure that we are providing for those opportunities through many agencies that each and every day do outstanding work is something that is very important to our communities. We are speaking with people, no matter what point they are at in their life but particularly those who are vulnerable and those who have been through distressing and tough situations, including family violence. I am certainly aware of the commitments that were made up north from me, possibly in your electorate, Speaker, for homes for those who are fleeing family violence: eight new homes built in Kangaroo Flat, a partnership with Haven Home Safe, making sure that we are providing those opportunities all the way through to the large-scale reforms that I mentioned earlier.

This is what this government remains focused on. The work is not done, and we will remain committed through the budget process, through all ministers and all levels of government, to ensuring that we are supporting those within our community to get into the rental market, to be able to buy a home and to be able to have those options and opportunities and the transport options as well to be able to do that. This is what we are focused on.

It is hard often to work out, particularly from listening to the previous contribution, what those opposite are focused on. Particularly over the past couple of weeks, we have seen the very deepest of divisions, which are just rattling along in what is a very shabby outfit over there. But that is okay, because we remain focused, we remain united and we remain determined. We remain committed to making sure that we are focused on supporting every single Victorian to be their best and to have the best opportunity in life and on supporting those individuals and their families, and we will do that each and every day.

**Tim BULL** (Gippsland East) (16:41): It is a pleasure to rise and make some comments on the matter of public importance submitted by the member for Albert Park. I could have easily rewritten this MPI with just a couple of little word changes to read: that this house condemns the government for failing to provide homes, transport and jobs in not only Gippsland East but also rural and regional Victoria.

Let us start with housing in my electorate, which is also the electorate, I might add, of the Minister for Housing, Ms Shing, in the other place. Here is the reality of government funded public housing in my electorate. The government's own figures state that in East Gippsland and Wellington shires in 2015, 10 years ago, we had 1612 public housing residences. In 2023, the most recent figures available, it was down to 1610 – two less public homes in 10 years, when the government spruiks a Big Housing Build. If we want to go a little bit further, into the Latrobe Valley – and I see the member for Morwell just coming into the chamber – it gets worse. Latrobe has 19 less public housing homes now than it had in 2015, in the housing minister's own electorate – what a disgrace. The big build is a joke.

Ms Shing talks about new homes in her media releases, but they are not additional homes. There might be some new ones, but they are not additional. What is the reason for this? Why have we got some new homes but public housing that is lesser in number? The reason is the government is selling off and demolishing homes at a faster rate than they are building them in our electorates in Gippsland. We see it all the time. We see the auctions coming up. We see the sites where public housing was located with homes now demolished. The so-called big build is not delivering in my electorate. It is a housing renewal program in some areas, but it is also overseeing a reduction in others.

In addition to all this, and we are talking about housing and housing availability, this government continues to slug mum-and-dad investors with a whole range of taxes, forcing them to invest either in

other areas like the stock market or maybe to take their housing investments interstate. When they do sell up their homes, their second residences, these mum-and-dad investors, they are not being bought by people on the public housing waiting list, because they cannot afford to buy into the market. So you are not actually rectifying the problem that you are setting out to try and resolve. This government could not make a bigger mess of housing if they tried, and then they try and sell us the big build. It is just a joke.

On top of this we have got the rebranded fire services levy and we have got the increases to land tax. All of these cost-of-living pressures are falling on renters who cannot afford to stay. There would not be a week go past when my electorate officers are not dealing with people who have been in rental properties who have been forced out of their rental property due to the rental increases and the cost of living, because government policy has reduced the pool of rental properties that are available.

They have policy in place that reduces the pool. Families who once had very stable private rentals are now finding themselves either homeless or pushed into crisis accommodation – if they are lucky. Others are still looking down the barrel of eviction, as I stand here now. It is just a joke.

Housing has been a disaster in my patch. It has been an absolute disaster. And the minister, when asked about this, simply says, ‘We’ve built 34 new homes in this electorate or that electorate.’ She will not go into the detail that they have demolished or sold off 40. That does not come into the argument – do not want to talk about that, do not want to know about that – ‘We’ve just built new ones,’ but there is no net gain. We will just tell the community half the fluffy story that we want to tell them.

The MPI talks about jobs. Let us talk about jobs in my electorate and many other areas of rural and regional Victoria, and I will start on the timber industry. We have the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. They are the world-leading authority on this. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change tells us in its papers in several different documents that it has released that we should be building everything with wood as a climate change mitigation measure, and they say that because it is the only renewable carbon-storing building product that we have, and we have got a few builders on our side of the chamber who will tell you that – it is the only carbon-storing renewable building product that we have. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says we should be using a mixture of plantation timber and native forest timber harvested on a sustainable basis. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says that. So, what do we do in response to that? We close our native timber industry. We close it down – and not only do we close it down. The hypocrisy is incredible from this government, because they are happy to have government MPs standing at the new Altona Pier and government MPs standing on the new St Kilda Pier built with hardwood imported from other states because you have closed down our native timber industry here in Victoria.

**The SPEAKER:** Through the Chair.

**Tim BULL:** You have – the government, this Labor government, has closed down our native timber industry, and poses for photos with Darwin stringybark coming from Queensland because it has shut down our native timber industry. It is hypocrisy at its greatest level, and it is a disgrace. Half the problem is they would not know. They would not know where the timber came from. They would not understand the ramifications of the decisions that they make in relation to the timber industry, because we just want to try and out-green the Greens and hold on to half a dozen inner-city seats. That is what it comes down to, nothing more than that. There is no consideration to communities like Orbost, where that town has been decimated by the loss of the timber industry.

**Tim McCurdy** interjected.

**The SPEAKER:** Member for Ovens Valley!

**Tim BULL:** And what do we have when we decimate towns like Orbost? We have the government saying, ‘Don’t worry, we’re going to provide you with some replacement industries.’ Where are they?

Since the timber industry closed down and all those harvest and haulage contractors lost their jobs in Orbost, all those VicForests staff lost their jobs in Orbost and replacement industries were promised, where are they? They are not there, because it is a media release full of absolute garbage that never comes to fruition. The nursery that Ms Shing in the other place promised for Nowa Nowa did not eventuate. When Hazelwood closed down, we had an electric car manufacturing plant promised. It did not eventuate. All of these things do not eventuate. They are media releases where nothing happens.

**Anthony Cianflone** interjected.

**Tim BULL:** You will get your chance to speak later, and you can read from your notes again like you always do.

**The SPEAKER:** Member for Pascoe Vale!

**Tim BULL:** The MPI also covered off on –

**John Lister** interjected.

**The SPEAKER:** Member for Werribee!

**Tim BULL:** Thank you for your protection, Speaker, I appreciate it. The MPI also –

**Danny O'Brien** interjected.

**The SPEAKER:** Leader of the Nationals!

**Tim BULL:** The MPI also covered off on transport. Let us talk about transport as well. The duplication of the Gippsland line has been needed for some time. It was earmarked three years ago, I believe, to allow more services to get to Sale and Bairnsdale to service the people of Gippsland South and the people of Gippsland East.

It has not happened. It sits idle, but yet we have an MPI where the government wants to pat itself on the back for the work it does in transport. It has been hopeless. You are literally hopeless in that area. All the areas mentioned in the MPI have been hopeless.

We are talking about transport – roads. Goodness gracious me, Bullumwaal Road just out of Bairnsdale has had a ‘traffic hazard ahead’ sign on it for five years. The Monaro Highway is an absolute disgrace as soon as you drive over the border. You write to the minister about it and she says, ‘We’re fixing up 1 kilometre of it. Give us a pat on the back; we’re going to invest there.’ Do not worry about the other 35 kilometres that look like the Somme battlefield. The potholes are that big it is a matter of time before we have a serious accident that claims a life.

In summing up on this MPI, the government has given us less public housing than we had 10 years ago in East Gippsland. It has ripped the jobs out of our communities, as it has done not only in my area but across rural and regional Victoria. Its transport is a disgrace. The investment has not been there in rail. The investment is not there in roads. We have got a budget next week and God only hopes that we can get some decent investment in roads from our Minister for Roads and Road Safety to fix our roads properly. This MPI is basically a Dorothy Dixier. These are areas where the government have failed, and I will conclude my remarks by saying they need to lift their game and deliver a good budget.

**Michaela SETTLE** (Eureka) (16:51): I rise to speak on this matter of public importance (MPI):

That this house condemns the opposition for failing to support reforms that deliver more homes for Victorians close to transport, jobs, schools and parks.

Listening to the recent contribution, of course they continue to focus on everything other than homes for Victoria. I am left to ask myself why those on the other side hate housing so much. Their absolute history of blocking and opposing housing is extraordinary. With their friends the Greens they have blocked social housing –

*Members interjecting.*

**Michaela SETTLE:** You are the ones who got them elected on your preferences.

**The SPEAKER:** Order! Members are not in their allocated seats.

**Michaela SETTLE:** They just continue to block housing, whether it be social housing, whether it be affordable housing or whether it be an opportunity –

**Richard Riordan:** How many houses have been blocked? You just have not even built them.

**Michaela SETTLE:** I am getting to that. You just buckle on in.

**The SPEAKER:** Member for Polwarth, you had your turn.

**Michaela SETTLE:** We have basically seen from those on the other side an absolute opposition to this government's desire to build more houses for Victorians. I wonder why they are like this, and it will always be summed up for me by the statements from Wendy Lovell in the other place. Let no-one in this room ever, ever forget that she said that there was no point in having social housing in wealthy areas where the children cannot mix with others. Ms Lovell pointed out that children from low-income families cannot afford the latest sneakers and phones and they would never fit in. That is at the heart of the objections we get from the other side. They do not want people in their electorates, and so they continue to block housing every time. They do not want people there that they do not know, that do not have the same white colour of their skin and cannot afford sneakers.

Let us look at some of the things that they have done. The member for Hawthorn in 2021 climbed on the back of a ute in Hawthorn to oppose a public housing project that the government is delivering in Bills Street. Again they have got the wrong sneakers. They do not want people in Hawthorn, kids with the wrong sneakers. The Markham estate in Ashburton is public housing that the Liberals opposed. It went through the entire planning process only for the Liberals again to team up with their mates the Greens to revoke it in Parliament. The government did not give up. We got on and got it done, and public housing tenants are now in state-of-the-art homes that the Liberals opposed. In 2017 the member for Brighton opposed a development in Hampton building 207 new apartments.

In 2018 he supported the former member for Brighton's opposition to a new public housing development delivering 300 new homes. In 2021 the member for Sandringham opposed a proposal to build 1048 apartments in Highett. In 2018 he opposed another development, the former gas and fuel site in Highett. Why? Why do those on the other side hate housing so much? I can only imagine that the answer to that lies in those abhorrent statements from members of theirs in the other place. They would suggest that some people have no right to live in their suburbs, because they have got the wrong sneakers and the wrong phones. They need to ask themselves about the communities that they pretend to care about and that those people out there that need housing have been blocked again and again and again.

In March 2021 the Liberal opposition made an eleventh hour attempt to stop social and affordable housing projects. They tried to revoke a planning scheme amendment that would have streamlined the delivery of new homes through the Big Housing Build, so as recently as 2021 they were playing those games. At that stage they tried to revoke the amendments in the upper house, and they lost, 25 to 12. There are an endless stream of things that they will do to oppose housing – whether it be, as I say, social and affordable housing or, in the case of the discussion on this MPI, around housing that is close to transport and shops. I want my kids to have the opportunity to live in those leafy suburbs that they all live in, that have all of the amenities and enjoy those same amenities, regardless of what sorts of shoes they wear and what Apple iPhone they have that day. They have a right to live amongst you because all Victorians should have a right to a safe home.

I was being interjected with questions about what housing had been built. In my electorate we have put in social housing totalling 146 houses. I was really delighted a few weeks ago to stand with Haven

Home Safe as they opened three new social houses. They are across the road from the Mount Clear shopping centre and also on the bus route that goes into central Ballarat. We stood there and thought what a wonderful opportunity it was for people in need to live in these places but also to have access to all of those amenities. This government has worked so hard in its planning provisions to make sure that more Victorians get to experience those amenities and get to live where they all exist.

We condemn the opposition today for further attempts to block housing. I would like to bring to light the select committee that was brought forward. One can only see this as yet another stunt. It might not have been on the back of a ute, but it was a stunt nonetheless. When you run a committee for just six weeks, that is a stunt, on the back of a ute or not. The whole process ran for six weeks. Submissions opened over Easter, with Victorians having just six business days to prepare a submission. We hear an endless lament from those on the other side about offering enough time for consultation with the community. If they would like to tell me that six days is enough time to consult the community, I would love to hear their arguments.

They put up another stunt, and of course Mr Davis in the other place bound himself with a willing ally in the Greens. There was a bit of interjection before when I called them their friends, but let us have a look at some of their voting records. Let us see how often they work hand in glove to push away housing for people that need it the most.

My advice to the Greens is not to follow in the footsteps of their federal colleagues – indeed we should call them their former federal colleagues – who paid the price for blocking the Albanese government’s housing reform. They should think about that on the other side, that the people of Australia voted resoundingly for policies that provide more homes to people. At this election we saw more gen Zs and millennials than boomers. If I were to give any advice to those on the other side, I would suggest that they look to that cohort and what that cohort is calling out for. They are calling out for homes to call their own. Everyone in this place owns their own home. My children and your children deserve that right as well. While you continue to block housing through stunts like the select committee, you continue to deny people the opportunity to live near shops and near trains and to enjoy the amenities that you all do.

I will forever wonder what the thinking is on the other side when they think representing their constituents means blocking housing for thousands and thousands of people. I would counsel them to think, before we go into 2026, about what the electorate is asking for. They are asking for more houses, and I would not want to be on their side, standing there with a record of blocking housing again and again. But as I say, I must repeat once more that I can only imagine that their ideological position, which would support Jenny Lovell in the other place telling us that kids are not allowed to live in their suburbs –

**A member** interjected.

**Michaela SETTLE:** It is Wendy Lovell in the other place – one of yours.

**Matthew GUY (Bulleen) (17:01):** This is an interesting matter of public importance because it begs the question: if we are talking about a housing crisis in Victoria, how did we get here? How did we get to a stage where there is a self-confessed housing crisis from the Labor government in Victoria, saying, ‘We need more homes. We’ve got to bring in all these big policies and big builds because we do not have enough homes’? It is not new that Victoria’s population has been growing at record rates; this is not new. It is not new that housing affordability has been a problem in this state. In fact it has been a conversation from when Justin Madden was the planning minister. For a long time we have, as a Parliament, been talking about housing affordability and population growth. So why then, after a full decade in government, does the Labor Party now run around and say, ‘My god, there’s a housing crisis. We need something, a big response to do something about it’? The simple point is: what the hell has the government been doing for the last decade that this crisis has developed?

As I said, it is not new that Melbourne's population has grown. Let me talk about the metropolitan area of Melbourne, which last week population statistics showed is growing at 143,000 people per annum, compared to Sydney at 100,000. We are now right on 200,000 people fewer than Sydney in the metropolitan area, which means that sometime in the next Parliament Melbourne will overtake Sydney as the largest greater statistical area in the country. And the government is still talking – not acting, talking – about fixing housing or housing affordability. Look, as I said, this matter is just gratuitous and ridiculous, because if the government wanted to do something about it, they would have. They have had all the armoury and ability, with three planning ministers, to do something about fixing housing affordability.

Previous speakers have run in here and said, 'Liberals or Nationals, you don't want things in your seat.' I think this is the fifth time that I will say again: the minister should intervene and remove mandatory height restrictions in my seat, in the activities area in my seat, in Doncaster – take off the 18-floor height limit so we can get more people in central Doncaster. But the minister kind of scoffs. She did not think of it as an idea and therefore it is not up. She does not want to consider it because she did not think of it – you know, the part-time minister – so of course it goes nowhere. Here is an activities area which can manage more people in central Manningham, taking pressure off existing low-density neighbourhood residential zones which abut that activities area, and the minister does not do anything about it.

Then there are Labor MPs who run around and say, 'Oh, you don't want people in your seats.' More people have come into central Doncaster – in fact about 13,000 over the last 10 years, which, in numerical growth, is more than most regional cities in the state. In fact it is comparable to the previous speaker's electorate in the last decade, and I have had it in one suburb. I have not opposed it. As a Liberal, I have come in here and said there should be more, because you can manage it in that location.

But this is the trick: you cannot manage it in every location, and you cannot have a one-size-fits-all policy. That is the point: a one-size-fits-all planning policy does not work. You turn your city into a bland nothing of a metropolitan area that loses its neighbourhood character. Why would central Doncaster be the same as Templestowe? It is not, and they are only 5 kilometres away. I would not advocate for the same schedules and zoning in one suburb as the next, but the current Labor government is saying in similar examples in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne that they should be the same. Well, that is just stupid. Why would they do something so dumb? Why would a government who says we need more housing and more apartments in areas where people could walk to work, walk to school, walk to the park and walk to public transport then restrict growth in downtown Melbourne? This Labor government has put in more restrictions on growth in the downtown area of Melbourne than any government in the last 40 years. And I give credit to the Brumby government; they took a lot of them off. I took more off because we knew, both Minister Madden and I, that the downtown area of Melbourne is a place which can accommodate growth – so you put it there. People can walk to the largest railway station in Australia – Flinders Street. They can walk to the largest jobs precinct in Australia – the Hoddle grid, which is the CBD of Melbourne. They can go to the botanic gardens, which is one of the biggest parks in Australia. They can walk to the shops down the road; they do not need to own a car. And that is the place where the Labor government is restricting growth.

Then you have the Minister for Planning intervening on three-storey developments in her own seat and then running into the Parliament saying we have got to have more housing. Yes, of course we do. Maybe we offer up Carrum, like I am offering up my own seat in Doncaster. Find activity areas that can sustainably manage growth.

I just cannot believe that the government could then say, on one hand and with a straight face, that they want to increase housing supply in this state, yet they demonise urban renewal. At the one small urban renewal precinct in Arden there are more restrictions on building than there are on building in a national park. You can hardly build anything there. Developers are struggling to get anything off the ground. They bagged Fishermans Bend, they bagged developments in Southbank and they bagged developments in the CBD. This is the government that say they want to get more housing. Then they

have activity areas in their own seats, like Preston, where they bagged them and put height limits. The minister intervened in her seat in Carrum; the previous minister intervened in his seat in Richmond, so really, is this a government that wants to facilitate housing? To me it looks like a government of short-termism. They look like a government that just want to deal with another political problem, and it is a political problem that they created. This has been a problem that we have known about for the last decade, but the government has done nothing about it except whinge and whine and blame everyone else. They are still rolling into this chamber and blaming the Kennett government for housing affordability. I sometimes find it comical, and then I realise these people have been elected.

But seriously, as I said before, if you want to get growth in the Melbourne metropolitan area, which I am quite comfortable with – I mean, *Plan Melbourne* was in incarnation when I was a minister, and it was all about growing activity areas sustainably. It was always about making sure that activity areas kept their personality –

*Members interjecting.*

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Members on my right!

**Matthew GUY:** because Doncaster ain't the same as Elsternwick, and it ain't the same as St Albans, so why would you have a planning scheme that says one is the same as the other? That is what the current government want to do.

*Members interjecting.*

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Order! Members will be removed without warning.

**Matthew GUY:** And to do that on the planning scheme is stupid. It says that you do not understand the city that you are trying to urban plan, because you should not have the same schedules or zonings in activity areas that have nothing in common. One might be on the water, if you go down to Frankston, compared to one that might be inland on flat topographical land like Preston – so one in terms of shadow, one in terms of beach, one in terms of native veg that might be near the riverfront or be bayside.

You can manage things very differently, so why would you have the same schedules? This government is lazy when it comes to this issue. They are very lazy because they are out of ideas after 10 years. They are reacting to a political problem, not trying to actually fix it. If they were trying to actually fix housing affordability, as I know from people in the industry who told me when I was minister, it would be about supply, and the minister has got to be the one to flush the supply through the market. There are different parts of the market. There is the central city market, which this government has crippled. There is an urban renewal market, which this government does not support. There are activity areas, which this government wants a one-size-fits-all approach for. There are growth areas markets, which this government has done very, very little with, despite having the ability for the planning minister to go into her scary cupboard and get some PSPs, some precinct structure plans, and approve them.

But there is another part of this equation which has never been considered by this government, and that is our regions. Why are we not planning in the Premier's electorate of Bendigo East, like when I was minister, to build higher density around the central city area of Bendigo? Because the government does not want to play politics in the Premier's electorate. She wants to play politics everywhere else. Areas like Bendigo, the Latrobe Valley, Geelong and Ballarat can manage population growth, as can Melbourne, in a sustainable and sensible way without a one-size-fits-all policy. But instead all we have got is the government of the day seeking to fix a political problem because it has failed over 10 years.

**Gary MAAS** (Narre Warren South) (17:12): I too rise to make a contribution to this matter of public importance (MPI) that has been put forward by the member for Albert Park:

That this house condemns the opposition for failing to support reforms that deliver more homes for Victorians close to transport, jobs, schools and parks.

There is one thing I have noticed from the 3 May result, and that is that if you stick to your values, generally you will get through. But if you keep blaming, if you keep this notion of grievance and if you keep this notion of shouting at clouds going without any solutions, then you are probably going to get what you came for. Speaking of which, I just happened to check the electoral results in the seat of Goldstein, and I noticed that Zoe Daniel is now 500 votes from nabbing that seat.

*Members interjecting.*

**Gary MAAS:** I have obviously hit a raw nerve.

**James Newbury:** No, you haven't.

**Gary MAAS:** I have indeed – 500 votes, and what a sting in the tail that would be if Zoe Daniel did get there. I will concede she is running out of days and she is running out of votes. But my, oh my, is she getting closer and closer each and every day of that count. The candidate for Goldstein has already gone out there and taken the prize. He has already said it is his. He has already taken it, but it is 508 votes at the end of today's counting. Let us see if the Liberals can in fact get a seat in Victoria. Whilst we are on the election, because it has been raised in this debate, I do note that Labor was able to hold its 23 seats. It has picked up the seat of Melbourne from the Greens, and out in that eastern corridor, where I think the Suburban Rail Loop will be and where the biggest housing project that this state will see will be, it has picked up the seats of Menzies and Deakin.

There has been some talk about the seat of Bendigo. Let me talk to you about the seat of Bendigo, because the seat of Bendigo seems as though it has been cannibalised by the Liberals' coalition partner, the Nationals. The Nationals ran a candidate for the first time in a couple of elections and took 16 per cent off their Liberal coalition partners.

There has only been an 8 per cent swing from the sitting Labor member, who continues to be the sitting Labor member. Do you know what, these are the sorts of results you get in the state of Victoria if you stick to your values, and Labor has always had fantastic values when it comes to creating transport, creating job opportunities and building schools – of which 100 will have been built by next year, since this government has been in place in 2014 – and parks as well.

Let us delve more into our key housing reforms that the government have been putting together. We are talking about key housing reforms – some of the boldest in the country – from the expanded train and tram zone activity centres to the new townhouse code that will help reduce approval and planning permit assessment times to get on with building the townhouses and low-rise apartments that are needed. We have also introduced housing targets for every local government in Victoria, which give certainty about where homes will be built and put councils on notice to be enablers and not blockers. This will deliver more housing in established areas and suburbs to help take the pressure off Melbourne's outer fringe. My electorate of Narre Warren South is within the great corridor of the City of Casey, an area that has seen significant pressures due to major population growth. These housing targets ensure that councils in those inner-suburban and middle-ring suburbs are also building more housing to help more young people and families to own and to rent. If you increase supply, you increase housing affordability for more members of our community.

This is building on top of the work that we announced in October 2024, which includes more homes near train stations by delivering 50 new activity centres; off-the-plan stamp duty savings to build more homes to rent or to buy; more local infrastructure funding where more homes are built; a 10-year pipeline of land for family homes and backyards; a tough new building watchdog, for buyer peace of mind; more townhouses in suburbs, thanks to easier subdivisions; more social homes in the regions, in a boost for regional councils; more fast-tracking the buildings that are great designs and built the best; \$30 million for more parks and upgrades, and you tell us where they go; and more rights for renters to make the system fairer.

I do note that the member for Bulleen is still in the house. He keeps saying that we like to refer back to the Kennett era. Maybe we should refer back to the era when he was planning minister. Again, Fishermans Bend was noted before. The member for Bulleen rezoned some 250 hectares of industrial inner Melbourne to create that development precinct, which he is very proud of, but it effectively doubled the size of the Melbourne CBD, without a master plan, height limits or a mechanism to capture infrastructure, services or any of the hundreds of millions of dollars in increased land values that the decision triggered. That unilateral rezoning was later slammed by an expert committee. Who was on that committee? It included the former Liberal leader Robert Doyle. In his quote, not mine, it was ‘unprecedented in the developed world in the 21st century’. It delivered huge overnight paper profits to property owners and developers, including senior Liberal Party figures, donors and supporters, and it has made purchasing power incredibly difficult when it has come to building new schools in those areas.

The member for Bulleen in that time expanded Melbourne’s urban growth boundary, the green wedge, again delivering overnight windfalls to many Liberal Party mates, to farmer Peter Carpenter, to developer Watsons – you might remember that was John Woodman’s company – and to lobbyist and former Liberal MP Geoff Leigh.

**James Newbury** interjected.

**Gary MAAS:** Yes, I am very happy to go down that path, because he is a mate of yours. He was never a mate of ours.

*Members interjecting.*

**Gary MAAS:** Mr Carpenter had attended two Liberal Party fundraisers with Guy before the 2004 –

*Members interjecting.*

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Order! Member for Bulleen! Through the Chair, member for Narre Warren South.

**Gary MAAS:** I object to the member for Bulleen using the language that he just used, and I ask him to withdraw.

**Matthew Guy:** I withdraw.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** The member to continue, without assistance.

**Gary MAAS:** Mr Carpenter had attended Liberal fundraisers with the member for Bulleen before the 2010 state election. The member for Bulleen’s changes to the green wedge were even criticised by Warwick Leeson of the Liberals for Green Wedges group. ‘There is enormous local community resentment,’ he said, ‘and people are getting really scared about what this could mean.’ Also attending was Julia Hamer – there is a name I recognise – the daughter of Sir Rupert Hamer, who founded the green wedges.

In wrapping up my contribution to this MPI, I would like to take the chance to speak to the terrific work that the Allan Labor government has done in advocating and fighting for more housing in this state. Whether it has been fully or partially revoking planning scheme amendments, this will only keep serving the status quo. Doing that, being blockers, will continue to create uncertainty. All it does is delay projects. It will block the delivery of more homes and it will block the opportunities of future generations in this great state to own their own home.

**James NEWBURY** (Brighton) (17:21): I rise to speak on the government’s matter of public importance, effectively on major activity centres, and I will start by asking: so far the mover of this motion, the member for Albert Park, how many activity centres are in her electorate? Zero. The next speaker, Sunbury? Zero. The next speaker, Eureka? Zero. The next speaker, Narre Warren South? Zero. Each of the four members is getting up and telling the communities that have an activity centre

the advice they would like to give them – the free advice they would like to give those communities – about what they think about towers in their communities. What a pack of hypocrites. We have not even had one speaker who has an activity centre in their electorate. Not one government speaker who has got up has an activity centre, which just goes to show what a sham this matter of public importance is.

Now, who has got activity centres from the government side – because most of the activity centres are in Liberal electorates. Of course they are, because it is all politics. It is all politics with this Premier, and that is how she has decided where the activity centres go. But where do the activity centres go in the small number of Labor seats? When you look at the list, it is interesting. It is in the Deputy Premier's seat – leadership rival; Minister Williams's seat – rival; Ros Spence; Paul Edbrooke; Minister Carbines, the Deputy Premier's numbers man; Kat Theophanous – family challenge –

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Member, correct titles.

**James NEWBURY:** I mean, seriously, when you look at this list, you can see exactly what the Premier is doing. These are factional hits. Not only is it in Liberal seats, but there are factional hits across where these activity centres are based. If you look at the names, it is just true. That is what the Premier has done – I forgot member Halfpenny; I do not know which seat she has got. When you look at the list, you can see what the government is doing.

The other thing that the government members who have spoken today – all of whom do not have an activity centre, every single one of them; we are waiting for one with an activity centre to speak – have all spoken about is consultation. Consultation – how good has consultation been? Well, firstly, how would they know, because they do not live in any of the areas affected? How could they possibly know? Well, guess what has happened in the shadow of the federal election? No-one has picked up on this yet.

Consultation has started on what the government intends to do in 25 of the areas that are getting an activity centre. Did you know? No-one knew that consultation had commenced in the 25 areas. Why? Because the government did not tell anybody. They have told no-one that consultation has commenced. Have we heard a minister talk about it in this chamber? No. Have we seen a press release? No. Has the Premier come to Brighton to announce it? No. Has the Premier said anything about it? No, and neither has the minister. Why? Because it is a sham.

And it gets worse – this sham consultation gets worse. Number one, you cannot find the consultation – I went onto the website – by searching for your own suburb affected on the Engage Victoria website. You cannot find the consultation session on Engage's website. You have to click backwards, effectively, through another link to find it. I have got four activity centres in my community. The fact that you cannot search by the suburbs affected to find the consultation tells you how hard they are trying to find it. But it gets worse again. Within an hour of the consultation sessions opening in my community, they were filled. Within 1 hour our consultations were filled. And guess what? There are no more, so my office is being inundated with people who cannot register to attend a consultation session, which is online. Why do they need to cap an online session? They have capped it at a thousand, and we filled it in an hour. The government is denying the community access to their sham consultations, and no additional consultation has been announced.

I am waiting to hear the government members get up and talk about that one. How can you block thousands of people who want to attend a consultation session from attending? And what is worse is that the consultation sessions are not for each area. It is not like the Middle Brighton community has a right to attend a Middle Brighton consultation session about what the Premier plans to build in our area in Middle Brighton. They have packaged six activity centres into one consultation session and capped it, so we know it is a scam. And what is worse – I have not even got to the worst part – the community is being asked in these consultation sessions to have a view on what the government is proposing to do in the areas and is refused a release of any mapping. If you can get a spot in a

consultation session – which you cannot, because you are all being blocked – you turn up, and you will not even be given a map for the six areas you are supposedly there to ask questions about. This is a total scam, and the community knows it.

What this government is doing is wrecking suburbs, and we know why: because the Premier does not live here. The Premier does not understand Melbourne. The Premier does not understand Melbourne – you can see it across multiple policies – whether it comes to wrecking suburbs, whether it comes to crime. The only time the Premier caught on there was a crime problem was when there was a protest in Bendigo. Before there was a protest in Bendigo the Premier did not even think there was a crime problem. No wonder the swing in her seat was so dramatic. It was because the community knows she does not get it. Anyone who comes in and says they are going to wreck the uniqueness of the communities in Melbourne should stand condemned.

What is so bad about the activity centre plan – set aside the outrageous addiction of Labor to taxes and set aside everything else – is that it wrecks the character of Melbourne. Every council has already come up with a plan to suit their community and enhance and encourage growth. Councils have done the hard work, and when you look at the numbers the councils have proposed to enable growth in their communities and you add them up by municipality, there is no difference to what the government is doing in the very small number of communities it is about to trash. What does that tell you? What it tells you is it is just stupid policy. But we know what it is about; it is about politics, and it is about attacking certain communities. You can see it. I mean, 10 activity centres in Malvern – how could you possibly think that is going to keep the character of Malvern? – and four in Brighton. As I said before, when you look at the hit list of Labor MPs you see leadership rival, leadership rival, disgruntled factional opponent, factional opponent, minister on the outer. This is what the list is. There is no great supporter of the Premier on that list. There is no Minister for Planning. I mean, the Minister for Planning opposed three storeys in her own seat. What a captain hypocrite. I mean, it is just outrageous to think this government is trying to pretend it has a fair plan. It is a plan of politics. It is a disgrace. Victorians will see it. They absolutely will see it, and the polling, for what that is worth, shows that before anything has been built, they have seen it. The community will turn on this government, and rightly so, because this Premier does not live in Melbourne, and she does not understand it.

**Sarah CONNOLLY** (Laverton) (17:32): It is always a bit dangerous following the member for Brighton, and I have said this on previous occasions.

**James Newbury**: It is a joy.

**Sarah CONNOLLY**: It is a joy. It is always a bit dangerous, because I tend to get the giggles listening to him thump out these majestic dystopian-type speeches about God knows what. I get the giggles and I cannot stop, and I would love to. Member for Brighton, I will come up and ask you later on about what label you would put on me, because there is an activity centre happening right outside my boundary, in Tottenham there, with the member for Footscray. I am not sure what label you gave her, but I would love to know what label you give me. But we can talk about that a little bit later on. I need to compose myself, because I get the giggles with the member for Brighton. I never take anything he says seriously, and it is really hard to stop laughing once he stops.

I too rise to speak about this matter of public importance, and it is just so relevant not just to folks here in Victoria at the moment but indeed across the nation. It was something that dominated our political discussions recently right across this country. When we have the debate about housing in this place, I think it all comes down to a fundamental question that we are trying to answer, and that question is about what the future of our city, our suburbs and our state looks like and what it is going to be like to live in. We are asking questions like: are we a city that is going to be unliveable, where young people, our kids, our grandkids and the next generation that we talk about all the time in this place cannot afford to buy a home? That is happening right now; when they are exiled to the fringes of the city or out to the regions away from their parents, cut off from services and employment and forced to spend hours commuting to the city for work. Are we a state where this housing crisis rocks even our own

regions, where young people are locked out of opportunities in places like Geelong, Ballarat or even Bendigo? Doing nothing to address the supply of housing will lead to a reality that looks just like this.

We on this side of the chamber believe that housing should be affordable to all and that Victorians should be able to afford a home, whatever that home looks like, or a place to rent in the suburbs, most importantly, that they want to live in. We know that this requires a radical overhaul of how we build our cities. I do not think there is any silver bullet that is going to solve everything about the housing crisis that is happening not just in this state but in this country. But the one thing we all know that we need to do is build more homes, and we need to build them in places where people want to live and where they want to work and where there are great transport connections to move folks around.

The answer does not just lie purely in low-density urban sprawl in the outer burbs. When I look at my electorate of Laverton, I see every single day the contrast between older, more developed suburbs like Sunshine, Albion and Braybrook and the outer western growth corridor in places like Truganina and Williams Landing, where we have built housing estate after housing estate.

The member for Bulleen – I think he last called himself the king of skyscrapers – has banged on and on about Melbourne and other places in Victoria. But I want to share what the four years that the member for Bulleen was the Minister for Planning meant for the Wyndham community and what he did to the Wyndham community. The member for Bulleen approved 11 PSPs, precinct structure plans, in Wyndham and he did not spend one cent. Not one cent.

**Matthew Guy** interjected.

**Sarah CONNOLLY:** You did not spend one cent on schools, on roads or on the train network. Cuts and closures are all that growth community received. The absolute pain and nightmare of commuting and getting around Wyndham is partly a result of the approval of 11 PSPs in four years and of never spending a cent on the services that the community in one of the largest growth corridors needed. He knew it would be one of the largest growth corridors and he spent not one single cent. For you to come in here and talk about how you know everything about growth in this state –

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Through the Chair, member for Laverton.

**Sarah CONNOLLY:** The member for Bulleen pretends to know about growth, and his commitment and investment to this state and the people of this state –

**Matthew Guy** interjected.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Member for Bulleen! You are warned.

**Sarah CONNOLLY:** The people in the outer suburbs here in Victoria know the ramifications of irresponsible, reckless members of Parliament and those in the Liberal Party and those like the member for Bulleen. That is the legacy the member for Bulleen has left in Wyndham, and it is something we are going to be shouting about until election time, member for Bulleen – you better believe it.

When we talk about the contrast between older and newer suburbs, this kind of development does have a role, but it cannot be the only solution. We cannot afford to keep pushing people out onto the urban fringes here in this state. We will not solve Victoria's housing crisis by making the outer burbs do all the heavy lifting – they cannot do all the heavy lifting. Whether it is the south-east, the north, the north-west or the outer west, these areas cannot be expected to do all the heavy lifting. You know what, that is something our government and our Premier understand. That is why we are creating a total of 50 activity centres across Melbourne to encourage greater density – apartments, units and townhouses in areas with great and tremendously well-used transport connections, local services and amenities.

Most of these precincts are not in Melbourne's west, where we have seen a lot of the growth. It means that in these well-established suburbs, we are creating opportunities for folks to either buy a house or rent a home in their own local community. But it quite often seems to me that we are the only party

that cares about getting more homes built and creating more opportunities to live in Melbourne and across our great regions, which is why I was not surprised but disappointed to hear about that sham inquiry in the other place that those opposite set up to try to stall our planning reforms that would lead to more homes being built. I am disappointed, but I have to say I am not surprised. For them it is all about preserving the status quo. It is about protecting their leafy blue-ribbon suburbs in the eastern suburbs from having more apartments, townhouses and units where folks may find a place to live. We see it time and time again when those opposite rally and protest against housing developments in their own electorates. No-one exemplifies this more than the Shadow Minister for Housing, the member for – sorry, I was going to say the blocker from Brighton, but it is the member for Brighton. That ‘blocker from Brighton’ is just burnt into my brain.

I think a better title for the member for Brighton would be either ‘the blocker for Brighton’ or ‘the shadow minister for NIMBYs’.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Correct titles would be appreciated.

**Sarah CONNOLLY:** I will never forget the footage of those protests he led outside the Premier’s press conference when she announced the 50 activity centres they are now trying to block. And of course it is not just limited to Brighton. The member for Hawthorn, the former leader, stood on the back of a ute with Mr Davis and Ms Crozier from the other place opposing the former Melbourne Uni campus being rezoned and rebuilt as 350 new homes and an adjacent site where we have just added 206 social and affordable homes. I can go on and on – we have got the member for Malvern right next door.

Sites like this are perfect to build more homes on. They are where people want to live. They are already well serviced, and the infrastructure, most importantly, is already there. But it is telling that it is suburbs like these – Hawthorn, Kew, Malvern, Glen Iris and Brighton – that bring out the inner NIMBYs in those opposite. You would never see them out opposing housing in the outer burbs, where their membership wants to send to everyone to live. They are on record as saying, I think it was at the Brighton protest, ‘Send them to the outer burbs.’ Well, that went down like a ton of bricks, I can tell you, in Wyndham. It is something that will be remembered at the election next year.

We need to build more homes. It is one of the key ways in which we are going to solve the housing crisis, to get more people into homes, to ensure that folks who want to rent can find an affordable rental. It requires a tremendous amount of reform. It requires a tremendous amount of maturity, which those opposite have never been able to show when it comes to this debate. I wholeheartedly commend the member for Albert Park for putting forward this MPI. It is such an important topic. It is something that is talked about in my local community time and time again, and I commend it to the house.

**Jade BENHAM (Mildura) (17:42):** It has been very interesting to sit here and listen to members on both sides talk about transport and about housing and, as the member for Laverton said, approach this in a mature way, which I hope to do this evening. It is a little hard to do when I hear a lot of preposterous statements, though, and talk of activity centres. A quick survey of my Nationals colleagues: have you got an activity centre in your neck of the woods? Have you? No, because you need access to adequate health care and public transport.

In fact Mildura is the largest regional city in Australia without a passenger train, and this has been going on for a long time. The member for Mornington was the CEO of Mildura Regional Development back in 2015. When the Labor government talks about transport and investment into public transport, they have had over 10 years to invest in public transport to Mildura. Maybe then we could decentralise some of these activity centres. The member for Mornington has been fighting this for a long time, as have I – the lack of passenger rail – so activity centres are kind of irrelevant.

I will tell you what is relevant to us though: adequate housing. Let us talk about the housing issues. The housing crisis that we are seeing now, after over 10 years of a Labor government, is one that they have created. In regional areas this is not just about supply and how decimated the rental market is

because of poor policy decisions by the Labor government; it is also a planning issue, because one size does not fit all, particularly when it comes to regional planning. I have spoken to the member for Polwarth about this even just today, because there is not a week that goes by when my office does not get inquiries and complaints and conversations that need to be had. I had two community groups come to me just last week with some planning issues and provisions that might work in the city but they are so inflexible they just do not work in regional towns like Red Cliffs and Merbein. There is no flexibility to be able to move at all.

Take, for example, worker accommodation. This again might sound great on paper, but it is not practical for communities in small towns like Red Cliffs and Merbein. We have heard a lot of talk about hypocrisy as well. The childcare centre that is desperately needed in Red Cliffs and has been announced is across the road from a workers accommodation facility – let us call it that – that houses a lot of Pacific Australia labour mobility scheme workers. Again, the agriculture industry needs this in Mildura because everything is connected to the agriculture sector.

We need those workers. But that facility, which has now got a planning permit application in for 109 beds, is right across the road from the new childcare centre and near the early childhood learning centre, which is 50 metres away. There have been complaints, crime has already occurred in another facility in the next block, including sexual assault, and there has been a murder. And a childcare centre is planned for that very same vicinity. Is that good planning policy? I would argue that it is not good planning policy at all, not good planning in any aspect.

We were talking also about informal worker accommodation. Let us talk about the illegal rooming houses and illegal building modifications that happen all over. This is not because people are trying to do the wrong thing; it is because the system has failed. It is because the Labor government has failed to provide adequate housing where people need it in the regions. We can talk about activity centres near health care, near public transport, near public amenity and near services, but when you have not got that because of lack of investment in regional Victorians, what are we supposed to do? Those workers, who we need in our ag sector in particular, are needed on the ground.

The provisions have been changed. In the past property owners would be able to order dongas, if they had their planning permits approved, to house their workers on farm, which was difficult in the first place, and they would be able to be built, prefab, offsite and transported. Now the provisions mean that those bedrooms and rooms have to be bigger. They do not fit on the back of a truck. The solutions that might look good on paper are completely impractical on the ground. So we have got illegal extensions happening. I know this because CFA captains and members come and talk to me and show me what they look like after a fire has occurred, after switchboards have melted, because they were overcrowded and they were unsafe. There is a housing crisis, but people are having to do whatever they can do to put a roof over their head, even if that is housing people in their sheds, under tarps and under coolroom panels, in completely unsafe and unregulated accommodation, causing all sorts of social issues and community cohesion issues in these centres.

It is absolutely preposterous to say that we on this side are blocking housing. It has not even been thought of. We are not even an afterthought in regional Victoria for things like that. We do not even register. So you can imagine the angst of us sitting on this side when we hear all the talk about activity centres and levels. We cannot get planning approvals or flexible-enough planning provisions to build adequate, safe houses to house people safely. This will cost lives. When CFA volunteers are coming to me on a weekly basis saying, 'This house is unsafe, and this house. We got called out to another one because of the overcrowding and the overload on the power supply.' I am not sure if you know this, but correct roofing, infrastructure and building codes are not being met. They are not putting solar panels on their roof; they are drawing out of the grid. Often they are tapping into that illegally or they are tapping into the plumbing supply illegally. There are open sewage pits in backyards. Councils are struggling to enforce any of these rules because there are no building surveyors to do it.

Here is the other thing: if someone was to make a complaint that someone is living in a shopfront or that there is an illegal rooming house, how much notice does the council have to give to the property owner before they can go and inspect it? They can only do it during business hours. Do you know how long? Forty-eight hours, which is enough time to pull all of those people out of that place and put them somewhere else so that when the council inspectors walk in everything looks fine, with no-one living in it. It is like playing whack-a-mole. After it has been inspected and ticked off, they all go back in there, and we can see it.

I was talking to some community members. I went and visited Red Cliffs over the weekend. They were astounded that this has been going on for many years, and I was the first one that they have spoken to in local government – and in state government, previously, before my time – that actually understood what they were talking about, and I understand because I live it every day because we are integrated in our communities. I do understand.

So there is not just a housing problem. It turns into a workforce problem, because there is no adequate housing for workers. It is a safety problem, a community cohesion problem, like I said, and it is infrastructure – not to mention the rental market that has been decimated. And if we have a look at some of the figures and talk about how much the rental market has dropped, I mean, I can tell you that trying to get a rental in the city of Mildura – just the city of Mildura – is almost impossible. You have got people camping down on the river, you have got people living in cars, you have got people living in caravans in backyards, and that is not unique to Mildura. That is everywhere.

And how can we attract? How can Mildura grow without adequate public transport out into our smaller periphery towns as well, like Merbein and Red Cliffs, where an alcohol and other drugs centre is about to go and a new early childcare centre is about to go? There is no adequate public transport, no passenger train and no housing. We have not even been an afterthought. Think about the largest regional city in Australia without a passenger train growing – we have the space, we have the land and we have the people wanting to invest and build housing, but because the planning scheme and all of the ideas come out of the city, it is city-centric policy that is failing regional Victorians every single day. It is regional Victorians that are paying the price because Labor cannot manage housing.

**John LISTER** (Werribee) (17:52): I thank the member for Mildura for her contribution. I just did want to pause and reflect on one thing you said at the end there, where this is city-centric policy. I think you might be in a little bit of disagreement –

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Through the Chair.

**John LISTER:** Sorry. The member for Mildura might be in a little bit of disagreement with the member for Brighton, who accused this side and the leaders of this side, the Treasurer and the Premier, of not being from the city and not understanding city problems. What is it? Are we worried about the city? Are we worried about the country? Well, this side is worried about both, but I do want to focus on my electorate in particular.

Werribee, Manor Lakes, Mambourin and Wyndham Vale are great places to live. For generations we have welcomed people from across the country and the world. People in my community have helped build our state, whether it was working on the West Gate Bridge or the main trunk sewer project in the 1970s and 80s, building CityLink in the 90s, or working on the West Gate and Metro tunnels in this decade. Governments in turn have built infrastructure in our community, like the regional rail link, our western roads upgrade or the level-crossing removals. I have grown up in my electorate and I have seen how it has grown. I know we need more, which is why we are building those key infrastructure projects like the Wyndham ring-road and upgrading key intersections in our community.

I did want to reflect on what the member for Laverton said earlier about what it means to plan for growth and deliver infrastructure for growth. It was something that we were looking into a little bit earlier, those 11 precinct structure plans approved in the twilight hours of the previous government by the member for Bulleen as planning minister. There are 11 precinct structure plans for places like

Manor Lakes, Truganina and Rockbank, all places that we have now had to go into and make sure that we build the infrastructure to meet the demand that is there from those precincts. It is pretty disappointing that he signed off on that literally in November of the election year, knowing full well that they were on the rocks and would not have to be responsible for that growth in my community.

This motion reflects on the character of the political parties opposite. It condemns them for failing to support reforms that deliver more homes for Victorians close to transport, jobs, schools and parks. And why would the member for Werribee be so worried about the inner city? Well, I think it goes to what our government is trying to do, which is a balanced approach to planning, supporting growth in outer suburbs like mine, but also making sure that that growth is supported in our inner suburbs.

Those opposite pretend to care about my community, conveniently showing up at election time to shrill about neglect yet for two elections in the past six months have offered no commitments to infrastructure, no commitments to community facilities in my electorate, and worst of all, stood by while federal Liberals vowed to cut funding from the western suburbs and send it to roads in the outer east. The member for Berwick shows up during those elections to take selfies and ask people, ‘Do you know who I am?’ – the resounding answer was no – and then removes all evidence of this sojourn to the suburbs on social media after a resounding election defeat for the Liberals in the west. Our community are a practical lot and see right through this. While the member for Berwick pretends to care about us in the outer suburbs, he has his colleagues in Brighton and other inner suburbs leading protests against more housing near existing infrastructure.

Let me turn to the policy those opposite have so vehemently opposed. Those Liberals, the once free market champions, would understand Smith’s principles of supply and demand. The issue we have in housing is one of supply. We need more houses to meet demand and make the market more affordable. The issue we have is also geographic. Melbourne has had decades of greenfield development to meet this demand and left us with what is a housing doughnut, with its hole in the inner east and south-east. Some housing activists have also referred to this as the missing middle. We can see this in the number of housing approvals in Wyndham City Council when compared to municipalities like Bayside, where our Brighton suburbs are located. In Wyndham in the financial year to date, in 2024–25, 3133 dwellings were approved, while in Bayside only 897 approvals were made. While Wyndham may have the benefit of greenfield space for many of these dwellings, we need to look at the imbalance. After all, when you build in paddocks, you need to upgrade roads and build public transport, health facilities, emergency services and schools – all things we have been good at in Wyndham, and I have been to many of those projects in the last couple of months.

This government’s work around the activity centre pilot looks at unlocking potential space for development in places with access to existing public infrastructure. Many people on this side have gone through the specifics of those VC257, VC267 and GC252 planning changes, but I did want to reflect on what that means for younger people. As one of the youngest members in this place and perhaps one of the few renters I want to reflect on what these planning changes mean for people looking to enter the market – and do not worry, as a renter I do not have any sneaky investment properties in London, like some of their mates opposite. Having the potential of 60,000 homes in these activity areas gives so many opportunities to people renting to purchase decent townhouses or apartments close to existing services. Many young people and my friends from my electorate leave home to study in the city. Having housing options close to the city means they will have better access to those professional jobs they aspire to. Having set apartment designs means homes can be built and constructed for a lot less money, meaning savings for those first home buyers.

This brings me now to an area of planning policy that is close to my heart and the community I represent: our greenfields planning policy and the horizons we have set for new precinct development. As I mentioned earlier, the people in Wyndham have supported the growth we have seen in housing, welcoming in new communities to our existing townships. Werribee and Wyndham Vale have this small-town feeling with a big heart towards people who want to be a part of our community. However, I have heard loud and clear that we need that break from housing estates while this government

continues to build the infrastructure we need to meet increased demand caused by those opposite. That is why I welcome the government's 10-year greenfields plan to help meet the housing and infrastructure demand in the outer suburbs. This plan sets out future precincts, and I note there are no new precincts in the Werribee electorate due to start planning until 2029–30. This gives me and the government time to continue to build the infrastructure we need, like our game-changing Wyndham ring-road to connect Tarneit to Wyndham Vale and provide an alternative connection to the freeway, getting people off Ballan Road and Heaths Road.

This brings me to my campaign message to the Liberals and Nationals, who frankly need all the help they can get when it comes to campaigning. Give Werribee the break we need and build it in Brighton. I echo the message from the Minister for Planning. We need to make sure that we have a balanced approach where our greenfield sites are supported with the infrastructure they need but at the same time we are encouraging more intense development in those inner rings of Melbourne.

I want to put on the record some of the attitudes that those opposite are supporting through the random protests that they have in Brighton and other places. We have heard the comment 'Send them to the outer burbs'. The people who want to live in those beautiful communities like Brighton, send them out to the outer burbs. I do not know who they are insulting more, the people of Brighton who love that place and would welcome new people coming in, or our community, saying there is something wrong with them and they need to go out there instead.

Look, the member for Brighton perhaps needs to do a little bit of work on their Facebook monitoring, because there are a lot of comments on the posts about development that I think are pretty abhorrent – things like, 'How about Melton or Tarneit for the new housing? Send them out there,' or in reference to the height limits, 'Fill those high-rise buildings with immigrants, resulting in another slum.' It is pretty disgusting the kinds of attitudes that side has dug up. We will still see houses going up in our community, and we will welcome people with open arms in Wyndham, but it is a kick in the guts, given the hard work we do in the outer suburbs, to see protests in leafy suburbs against reasonable development. It goes to show, no matter who the member for Berwick appoints as a quasi-shadow minister for the western suburbs or special envoy or whatever it is, no matter what noise they screech about neglect, no matter how many times they have approved precinct structure plans that we have met the growth or infrastructure demands for, they only truly care about NIMBYs in the leafy inner suburbs and the eastern suburbs.

### *Bills*

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

### *Second reading*

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

That this bill be now read a second time.

**David SOUTHWICK** (Caulfield) (18:01): I rise to make a contribution on the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025. There have been a number of speakers that have provided contributions on this bill, and I think it is fair to say that the importance of a scheme that protects workers is fundamental. It is key to any workplace, and the WorkCover scheme that we must provide needs to be one that is robust, provides support for the workers and, importantly, provides the opportunity to get workers back to work as quickly as possible to ensure that they can continue the contributions that they make to work but also deal with some of the mental health and the stress associated with the injury that has occurred.

It would be unbelievable if we had a situation where we did not have these kinds of injuries, but we do have them and they continue to happen. We need to ensure that our workplaces are safe, but when injuries do happen, we need to ensure that we have a scheme that works. We have known for many, many years that the WorkCover scheme in Victoria is broken. And we have heard that from the

previous Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC, the member for Essendon, who has said that the WorkCover scheme has been broken in Victoria. He unfortunately laid it fairly and squarely at the feet of the government, because this government has been in power for 10 years and it has presided over a WorkCover scheme that fundamentally has been broken. We have seen that with two Ombudsman reports – an Ombudsman report in 2016 and another one in 2019 – that talk about how broken the system is and what needs to be done to fix it.

When you have situations where the provider has to go into administration because they cannot run the scheme properly even though in many instances it is a program, or it should be a program, getting money in and getting money out – it should be a program that fundamentally should work but just has not. This government has had to prop up WorkCover a number of times to the total amount of \$1.3 billion just to keep it afloat. We saw that in the 2022–23 year, with \$300 million to WorkCover just to ensure it could keep its head above water; in 2021–22, \$450 million; and in 2020–21, \$550 million, a total of \$1.3 billion. Aside from all of that, it still has not managed to be able to do what is intended. We have seen – it is not just about the money and not just about the payouts – the return-to-work figure reduce each and every year, and that to me says it is a failed system.

It is a system that has not been able to work economically but also has not been able to achieve its targets. We see that in each and every year. In 2016–17 we had an 80.2 per cent return to work for those who had a physical injury; the year after, 2018–19, 77 per cent; 2021–22, 74 per cent; 2022–23, 73 per cent; and in 2023–24, only a slight increase, at 75 per cent, but down from 80 per cent back in 2016. So we are getting less people back to work within a six-month period. That is physical injury. When it comes to a mental health injury, we have seen in 2021–22, 45 per cent; 2022–23 and 2023–24, both at 42 per cent. That has also reduced over six months for getting people back to work.

What does that mean? It means a number of things. In an economic crisis where you have difficulty in being able to manage the books and ultimately a system that has not been managed properly by the government and that is fundamentally flawed, taxpayers end up topping it up. The money that I was talking about, which is \$1.3 billion, does not magically appear. The \$1.3 billion comes from the taxpayer. That has topped up this scheme. Now, not only has it been topped up, but that means that in order to ultimately have the scheme run, someone has got to pay. We know that the biggest employer of workers is small business, and it is small business that pays. This is where this system has been absolutely flawed, because we have seen an increase in many people's premiums on what they were meant to be. Although 40 per cent is huge, we have seen situations where premiums have gone up 50 per cent, and in some cases 300 or 400 per cent. I do not know how anyone could sustain that kind of increase in premiums. It is, quite frankly, something that nobody can sustain, and small businesses have not been able to sustain it.

Many small businesses have written to us, including into my electorate office in Caulfield, just saying that those premium increases are just not sustainable. That is one of the issues. With parts of this hopefully we will see a change, but unfortunately this is not something that we have seen. It is really, really important, for that matter, when looking at this bill today, as the member for Evelyn has said, that we start to look at freezing some of these charges and some of these rates. Because as they escalate to the volumes that they will do in terms of any insurance policy, it means that the small businesses are limited in how they can pass that on. They cannot in many instances just charge customers more. They cannot employ less, because they have still got to do what they have got to do. So ultimately they go out of business because their revenue does not meet the costs, and WorkCover premiums are a big part of cost – employment and employment costs are probably the largest for most businesses in terms of how they run. So if their employment and employment costs, be it WorkCover, are prohibitive for them to be able to ultimately make ends meet, they do not survive. One of the key things in getting small business back on track is to ensure that we look at a freeze on some of these premiums to get this system working again like it used to prior to the 10 years that the Labor government has been in power.

If I could just spend the last few minutes talking about some of the other sectors that also are covered by WorkCover, and particularly around Victoria Police and our emergency services. We know, particularly in an overworked workforce and in a very stressed workforce, there are a lot of issues around mental health. Police see a lot of things that many of us would really struggle with, to be quite frank. In many instances that ends with issues around PTSD and many of those people not being able to continue in the job. Just as an example of that, I had a constituent write to me recently, only last month actually, saying:

[QUOTE AWAITING VERIFICATION]

I am 40 years old and beyond my own belief, have just been PTSD pensioned out of Victoria Police after 14 years service. But this outcome was totally preventable. If only our Workcover system had any tools for mental health repatriation, which sadly it does not.

Victoria Police currently has over 700 members off work –

700 members –

specifically on mental health Workcover. This equates to almost 5% of Victoria Police's operational workforce, and does not include physical injuries which I excluded from this statement.

And it is huge.

My statement is this: The current system where Victoria Police is insured for WorkCover by Gallagher Basset is a failed system, in which Victoria Police is actually paying for its members to receive further harm, under the purview of an insurance company that has no facilities in accordance with the Victorian Occupational Health and Safety Act, to do anything tangible to repatriate police members that have injuries of the mind.

This person is desperately calling for help so they can get back to work, which is not what the insurer can do, and this has been the flaw in the system.

... it is even worse than this, because when you enter Workcover insured ... Victoria Police hands over all your management to an insurance company, but unfortunately you get no help when the insurance company manages it. The current system of Victoria Police is perpetuated in the vicinity of \$250 million per annum and increasing massively each year, so instead of paying to prevent further injuries it is causing more problems.

This is somebody that is calling out for help, and they are one of many Victoria Police members that are doing the same. Seven hundred police are 700 too many police that are off work because of stress and because of mental health and a failed WorkCover system, and that is why we have got to fix it and get this right.

**Sarah CONNOLLY** (Laverton) (18:11): I too rise to speak on the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025. The aim of this bill is to deliver on key recommendations from the Rozen review on how WorkSafe Victoria manages complex compensation claims. Over the past six-odd years that I have been here in this place I have spoken to many, many locals who have been on WorkCover and had accidents at work. Some of them were quite serious and some of them were not so serious and they were able to go back to work after a period of time. But it is really great to have the bill here in this place this week because we do need to do things to manage the complex compensation claims that we know too many Victorians are, sadly, being covered by.

This review was conducted on the recommendation of the Victorian Ombudsman back in 2019, and in turn this review made 22 recommendations for reform, of which 19 were accepted in full, including five that require legislative change. That is what is covered in this bill here today. That is what we are talking about before the house this evening. In addition to this there was a separate review that looked at the adequacy of compensation and support arrangements for families impacted by workplace-related deaths. This review, importantly, made 10 recommendations, of which the government has accepted eight. These recommendations also form part of this bill.

We on this side of the house believe that WorkSafe Victoria and our WorkCover system should work for the Victorians that need it. Nobody ever plans to get injured at work, and when they do get seriously

injured on the job it is absolutely critical that these workers get the support they need to recover and, more importantly, to return to work. When you have the worst happen and you lose a loved one in a workplace accident, you should be entitled to the support you and your family need, including grief entitlements, child pensions, counselling and other supports. The WorkCover scheme is a proud Labor accomplishment. It is something that we are really, really proud of and that we on this side of the chamber accept needs constant improvement and modernisation to best deliver support to injured workers. I have said time and time again here in this place that evidence of being a really good government – a long-term Labor government – is that we are always seeking ways to improve, reform and modernise policy and legislation here in this state. We must constantly be looking at how to do things better, and this bill before the house and these reviews are evidence of that.

What we do know is that sometimes the experiences that people have in navigating and engaging with the WorkCover system, including interacting with WorkSafe agents, are more challenging than the injuries they sustained that led them to the system in the first place. It is a really vicious cycle when you are in a situation of trying to manage claims and in some cases stop people from accessing the scheme and WorkSafe and its agents end up causing more harm to the claimant, which leaves them off work longer. Nobody wants to see that happen, and that is something that we must ensure does not happen. It needs to be stamped out.

These workers have the right to have their claims assessed, triaged and managed appropriately and in a timely manner. What we know, thanks to the Rozen report, is that this issue has been systemic in WorkSafe for years, and that is why our government went ahead and commissioned the report. What we also know is that since this report was published WorkSafe has already taken positive steps to address some of these issues in their organisation. In 2021 they established the claims and recovery support team, who specialise in directly managing long-term injured workers' claims, based on a recommendation to establish a complex claims unit within WorkSafe itself. In fact this team, it is really good to know, was expanded a year later to manage even more complex work claims.

We have also seen a recovery model office be piloted by WorkSafe, which looked at using sophisticated data and claims management technologies to identify workers with complex needs so that they can be allocated to receive higher and more tailored levels of support. Like I said earlier, most people really want to return to work, but they need to be well to do so and fit to be able to be in the workplace and do the type of work they were previously doing. There is always more to do and laws that need to be changed to give effect to this change, and that is exactly what this bill is all about.

The way we do this is by amending the objectives of the acts that govern WorkSafe to place a person-centred approach at the heart of delivering services. What this will do is help guide WorkSafe employees and agents when administering the WorkCover scheme and place the people who the system is there for – injured workers and their families – at the forefront of the claims process. It means that agents who act outside of this framework and actively work to impede claims from being approved and compound the injury suffered by the claimant will be in direct violation of these objectives.

Workers deserve to be treated fairly. They deserve to have their claims taken seriously and to have their claims processed. Whether that results in approvals or rejections from the WorkCover scheme, this should happen without shame, without frustration and without humiliation. That is why this bill also allows the minister – who in this case is the Deputy Premier – to create and establish a Code of Claimants' Rights. This was another key recommendation from the report and will make it very clear for both WorkCover claimants and WorkSafe agents what their rights and responsibilities are under this scheme. Most importantly, these rights will be extended to all persons who have entitlements under the act, including dependants of deceased workers and their families. But even better, the bill is going to extend the maximum duration for provisional payments to a worker's dependent partner from 12 weeks to 26 weeks, giving them more support while their claims are being assessed. The bill also provides for an increase in the pension paid to dependent children, applied retrospectively for up to five years prior to commencement.

These are all really positive amendments, and I know they will make an absolute world of difference for the families who rely on this scheme. At the end of the day, behind every worker there is a family – there are dependants, there are children, there are partners. No-one who has lost a family member at work or has lost a spouse or a parent should ever have to fight against WorkSafe to get the support that is rightfully theirs, and that is something folks here in this place should remind themselves of time and time again.

Another really important part of this bill relates to our government's new return-to-work program. The goal of our WorkCover scheme is to support workers in recovering from their injuries and also support them in returning safely to the workplace. We know that the longer a person is away from work, the less likely they are to ever return, and that is especially the case for older workers who may find themselves on WorkCover basically until they reach retirement age. Everyone deserves the dignity and the fulfilment of work, and these changes will ensure that injured workers are better supported in getting back into the workplace.

Labor built our WorkCover scheme. Labor is committed to ensuring that it works best for everyone, for every party. Whether you are an injured worker or a family member of someone who has died at work, you should be able to access the scheme and have your claim assessed fairly without having the trauma and injury compounded by the claims process or by WorkSafe and its agents. We commissioned the Rozen report to identify what we need to do to improve the system, and this bill before the house this evening makes good on those recommendations. We are also ensuring, on the other end, that Return to Work Victoria can be set up and that their employers and workplaces have the required training and the skills needed to support their employees to return to work safely. That is how the scheme should work, and that is why we are making it happen. That is what this bill is about.

The contributions on this side of the house have been tremendous about the importance of providing these rights and these entitlements to injured workers and their families. Too many times – and we still see it – folks are injured at work, and some of them do, sadly, pass away. It truly is a tragedy. We know that every workplace accident is absolutely preventable and should have never happened in the first place. It is so important that this bill is before the house this week. It is so important to make these reforms and do the right thing and give workers the dignity that they deserve, and that is exactly why I commend it to the house.

**Kim O'KEEFFE** (Shepparton) (18:21): I rise to make a contribution on the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025. The bill seeks to make a number of amendments to the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013, Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 and Accident Compensation Act 1985. Largely the amendments in the bill seek to improve the experiences of injured workers and other claimants during their time on the WorkCover scheme and to improve the existing support provided to families and dependants of deceased workers. The bill makes amendments to the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013 and the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 to require that the Occupational Health and Safety Advisory Committee and the WorkCover Advisory Committee consist of persons who have been affected, either directly or indirectly, by incidents that have occurred at a workplace involving death, serious injury or serious illness.

Everyone deserves to have a safe workplace and to return home after a hard day's work. We have heard quite a lot of stories in the chamber today, and it is so important that we continue to do all that we can to make work a safe space and put provisions in place so that they are supported if something was to go wrong. We do have some concerns with this bill. As we know, WorkSafe has been a broken system and workplaces have struggled with the costs associated, which I will speak a bit more to in my contribution.

It was pleasing to hear the minister in his contribution this morning admit to the failings of WorkSafe in the past. It has taken a long time to get to this stage, and I am hoping that we can work with this government on this important bill and that the sensible reasoned amendment put forward by the

member for Evelyn are supported. On this side of the house we do support WorkSafe improvements and financial and counselling support to family members who are impacted by the work-related death of a loved one or someone that has been injured. We also support businesses who are trying to support their workers. When an accident occurs, it can have an immediate and devastating impact on the lives of many.

When I received this bill I straightaway thought of a very close friend of mine, Katrina Mooney, who lost her son in a tragic workplace accident back in 1997. Adam Mooney was only 25 years old when he died and Katrina's only child. Katrina was out the front of Adam's workplace waiting to pick him up for lunch. She was taken into an office onsite and told of the tragic fatal accident – just the most heart-wrenching, tragic circumstances of a life lost way too young. Katrina's life was changed forever that day. In the community I live in the impact of Adam's tragic accident was felt broadly.

I spoke to Katrina just last week in relation to this bill and the need to ensure families that do suffer such a tragic loss do get the support they need. It is hard raising the accident with Katrina, and I was really interested in what support she had been provided way back then. She was very keen to talk about her beautiful son Adam, but the sadness of that day never goes away. It was sad to hear that Katrina was provided with no avenues of support back then – no counselling, no compensation, literally nothing. She said she sought her own counselling, something she knew she needed to do. Katrina was pleased to hear that we are discussing WorkSafe and family support, and it should be a priority, but as she said, the loss and love of your loved ones never go away, and she has been a passionate advocate for workplace safety.

The bill contains several amendments that will improve support for families who have been impacted by serious workplace injuries and deaths to help them deal with their trauma and alleviate financial hardship. We need to have immediate financial assistance and systems in place to take away the stress of worrying about loss of income and financial hardship directly related to an incident. The family of those affected are going through enough. Families also need counselling support. Behind every claim under WorkCover is a Victorian who has been injured, is suffering and is trying to navigate a complex and at times confusing system, or a family confronted with the most tragic circumstances of losing a loved one, just like my friend Katrina.

Workers who sustain injuries while performing their jobs are entitled to timely and appropriate compensation, rehabilitation and support, and the claimants and users of the scheme must be treated fairly, respectfully and with dignity and receive high-quality service. The families of these workers are also deeply affected, as loved ones often struggle to cope with not just the physical pain and trauma of the loss or injuries of their loved one but also the emotional and financial uncertainty of its impact on their future and on their wider family. Workplaces are also significantly impacted when fellow workers are injured or tragically killed onsite. We have to ensure that both the employer and the employees are supported and that we have legislation that is fit for purpose and managed by a workplace. Currently workers across the state are faced with long delays in claims being processed, inadequate compensation and far too often a lack of transparency when it comes to their rights. This government has been failing injured workers for far too long. Whether it is a farm worker who sustains an injury lifting heavy equipment, a tradie who falls from a ladder or a factory worker exposed to hazardous chemicals over years of work, these Victorians deserve a system that treats them with dignity, respects their rights and provides the care and support they need to recover and hopefully return to their workplace when possible.

Labor has been overseeing this scheme for over 10 years now, and they have had every opportunity since taking office to address the systemic issues that have led to delays, inefficiencies and financial mismanagement. While the bill does propose some welcome changes to improve the efficiency of the claim process, it does little to tackle the root causes of the ongoing problems within the system. The bill presents several challenges concerning provisions that will have a financial impact on businesses and employees across the state. I do want to touch on the requirement to provide mandatory approved training for a return-to-work coordinator at a cost to the employer. We all agree in this place that we

need to get people back to work when they have been injured. There needs to be a really clear pathway, but we also need to make sure that a business can manage what this might look like. The Hanks review found that mandatory training of return-to-work coordinators might impose an unreasonable cost, and while we have some figures suggested in this bill, there is still no in-depth detail. I note the member for Tarneit mentioned that workers already employed will take on the responsibility of training, and he made it sound like just another job and another expectation in their day of work, which in itself raises alarm bells, and there will be another cost imposed on these businesses.

As I said, we absolutely want to get people back to work. Businesses are already doing it tough, are on their knees trying to survive and have been faced with increased premiums and ongoing taxes. The impact of increased premiums has been significant. As the member for Narracan shared in his contribution this morning, he had heard of significant workplace premiums going from, in one example, \$30,000 to \$60,000, and we have heard of even higher WorkSafe premiums. Businesses have also mentioned across the board in my electorate that they are struggling, and they are concerned about WorkSafe costs. They want to do the right thing, and they want to make sure that they can afford to do that. The member for Euroa also talked to a business that contacted her which had to go on a payment plan for their WorkSafe premium and for their costs, which had increased significantly.

We want to keep businesses. We have to give them more support, not keep increasing the cost of doing business that leads to them shutting or leaving the state to do business elsewhere. Yes, we need this training in place. We need to make sure we can offer these improvements, but we have to make sure it is viable for businesses to do so. The government's approach to managing the scheme has been characterised by financial mismanagement and lack of transparency. As I have mentioned, I support the sensible reasoned amendment that has been moved by the member for Evelyn, which is that:

... 'this house refuses to read this bill a second time until the government:

- (1) agrees to freeze the average premium rate at 1.8 per cent for 2025–26 to provide certainty to Victorian employers;
- (2) consults with interested stakeholders and the public on proposed changes recommended by a WorkSafe review into family supports;
- (3) makes available all modelling prepared for the legislative impact assessment for this bill in relation to the additional costs and financial impact the bill will have on employers and the WorkCover scheme;
- (4) consults with industry to minimise fees for training for return-to-work coordinators; and
- (5) implements measures to prohibit entities responsible for corruption on Big Build and Victorian construction sites from becoming an approved training provider.'

The reasoned amendment is consistent with the publicly stated policy position of the government to impose a freeze on any increases to workplace premiums. These are sensible, common sense amendments that I hope are supported from those on the other side as we need the proper reforms in place to move this bill in the right direction.

**Kat THEOPHANOUS** (Northcote) (18:30): It is with deep respect that I rise to speak in support of the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025, because this bill is not just about legislative amendments, it is about people. It is about how we treat people when their world is turned upside down, when their lives change in an instant. No-one expects that an ordinary work day will change everything. No-one plans to get injured at work. You wake up maybe a little tired or maybe thinking ahead to the school pick-up or what is on for dinner, but you make your morning coffee, kiss your kids, partner or pet goodbye and head out the door. You are not thinking about whether you will come home safely, because as governments and workplaces we have rightly put in place measures to prevent accidents or negligence occurring in the first place. We actively work to create safe workplaces, and we have put worker safety at the core of our laws. But sometimes things do go horribly wrong, and when they do, the impact can be immediate and can echo for a lifetime. When that happens, the question we must ask is: what happens next? The answer to that is that we stand with those workers, we stand with their families and we back a system that puts people, not

paperwork and not profit, at its heart. That is what Labor governments do. We do not walk past injustice. We do not look away from hard truths. We stop, we listen and we act.

Labor has always stood with workers. It was the Cain Labor government in 1985 that laid the foundations of the modern safety and compensation scheme. That reform was more than just a policy shift; it was a statement of principle. It was a recognition that safety at work is a fundamental right. We have built on that legacy ever since. In 2019 we introduced landmark workplace manslaughter laws to ensure that employers who put profit over lives are held to account.

At that time and in debating that remarkable piece of legislation I spoke in this Parliament about my uncle George Fasolis who died on the Kingfish B oil rig in Bass Strait and the devastating impact that had on our whole family but especially on my Auntie Koula and their young sons Alex and Charlie. I spoke about how in the aftermath of that tragedy there was virtually no support for my auntie and cousins and how my father had the solemn task of driving to Glenroy High to take Alex out of year 7 and to Jacana Primary to take Charlie out of class and to tell them that they had lost their dad. This was in 1982. There was no inquiry. There were no social workers. No-one from the company extended any empathy or support. There was never any healing from that irrevocable loss. Even though I was not yet born, that tragedy and that impact have been a part of my consciousness for as long as I can remember, woven through the experiences of my dad, my auntie and my cousins. We do not always talk about that toll, the invisible weight of a workplace death or injury, and how it can utterly shatter families and how that pain lingers.

I am proud our Labor government have consistently brought these issues into the forefront of our reform agenda. In 2020 we made provisional mental health payments a reality, because we knew that mental injury is just as real and just as painful as physical harm. In 2021 we strengthened protections for workers exposed to deadly silica dust, and we strengthened access to compensation for firefighters and their families. Now in 2025 we take the next step forward, refining a system shaped by the stories of those who have lived through it, backing in the voices of workers and their families.

I would like to particularly acknowledge the members of the Workplace Incidents Consultative Committee, some of which joined us in the gallery earlier today to listen to the debate. This committee has been instrumental in contributing to these reforms to support injured workers and families who have lost a loved one from a workplace death. These are people with lived experiences – people who have somehow in their strength and resolve turned their grief into action to try to improve what happens when the worst happens. Because when someone is hurt at work, they should not have to fight to be believed. They should not feel like a number in a pile of files. They deserve to be met with a system that wraps around them with care, with dignity and with real support.

This bill responds to the findings of the Rozen review, a review that did not mince words. It found systemic failures in how complex claims were mishandled, stories ignored, medical evidence cherry-picked, people harmed not just by the original injury but by the very system meant to help them heal. But perhaps even more devastating was it showed how families and injured workers often felt shut out. People in crisis, grieving, injured, afraid were not just left in pain, they were left in silence, and in that silence uncertainty becomes unbearable. In my electorate of Northcote from time to time we have the opportunity to speak with and try to assist residents who have experienced workplace injuries. One man we met, Terry, told us about his experience with hand-arm vibration syndrome, a condition from years of heavy, repetitive tool use. His hands constantly tingle and go numb. It means he can barely sleep. He finds it hard to play with his grandchildren, to write birthday cards, to steady the cup of coffee he holds each morning. But worse still, he had to battle for years to have the cause of his injury recognised. He told us that the pain was not just in his arms but in how invisible he felt. This bill says very clearly: your experience matters. Your voice matters. You are seen, you are heard, and we will build a system that reflects that.

One of the most important reforms in this bill is the Code of Claimants' Rights. It outlines the basic expectations of how injured workers and their families should be treated – with clarity, with

compassion, with respect – because dignity should be built into every step of the process. We are ensuring that return-to-work coordinators, so often the bridge between injury and recovery, are properly trained and resourced and supported by their employers. This matters because the role of a coordinator can be make-or-break for someone trying to rebuild their life after an injury. We know that the longer a person is off work, the harder it is to return, and too often employers have treated this role as a box tick. That ends here. We are embedding lived experience into the very structure of WorkSafe itself. WorkCover and OH&S advisory committees will now include people who have been directly impacted by workplace injury and death, because people closest to the pain have the clearest insight into how to make things better, and we are requiring statutory five-year reviews of the scheme to ensure this system never falls into complacency, because reform should not be reactive, it should be proactive, continuous and transparent.

The bill also delivers significant improvements to the way we support families after a workplace fatality, because no family should ever feel abandoned in their grief. We are increasing the weekly pension for dependent children, something that would have meant a great deal to my cousins back in 1982 when they lost their father. We are ensuring that children with disabilities are supported not just to 16 but through to 25. We are introducing grief and loss payments for close family members, not because grief has a price but because it deserves recognition for families experiencing the unimaginable. Support will now include extended counselling services and doubling provisional pension payments for partners from 12 to 26 weeks. We are also closing longstanding gaps. Families who previously were not recognised under the law – siblings, parents, carers who depended on a worker's income – will now be eligible for lump-sum economic loss payments. We are also building systems that help people rebuild their lives. Return to Work Victoria is a dedicated agency focused on healing, support and pathways forward, whether that is connecting someone with mental health care, training or new employment opportunities. It is about recognising that dignity does not stop with compensation. It includes the right to rebuild your life.

These are not small changes – they are real, human reforms that shift the culture of a system towards care, compassion and practical support. Let us be clear: this side of the house is proud to lead that work and proud to stand with workers, with families and with those who have fought for a better way.

Before I close I want to again acknowledge the extraordinary work of the Workplace Incidents Consultative Committee – their insight, their heartbreak and their clarity have helped shape this reform. This bill carries their fingerprints. Dignity is not a luxury – it is a right, and those on this side of the house will always uphold that right. This is our commitment, this is what we believe in and this is why I commend the bill to the house.

**Jade BENHAM** (Mildura) (18:40): I am very happy to rise to speak on the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025 and acknowledge the experiences the member for Northcote referred to in her contribution. I like to take a couple of minutes to give my practical point of view on the legislation that is passed in this place and the practical implications that it has on the ground in communities. WorkSafe is something that is dealt with every single day on our family farms and in businesses that we have run and that locals run. This bill speaks to WorkSafe Victoria and compensation systems. We have heard lots of points of view across today – and I know that at this time of the evening everyone is terribly engaged and not at all ready for this to be over – but we have heard many people, particularly on this side, say that the system is broken, and that is absolutely true. We need a fair and sustainable system that supports injured workers without continuing to impose unsustainable costs on Victorian employers. Without those employers we do not have employees. It is as simple as that.

In communities like mine, all businesses and business owners are doing it really tough. We have heard this week in particular about the implications that the drought is having, and we are in drought. You can paint it any way you want, but when we have not had rain, the ground is like concrete, dams are dry and we are having to truck in fodder, feed and hay, we are in drought. And it is going to get worse, particularly if we do not get rain very, very soon. They are doing it tough, and they are the backbone

of our region. I have made reference to this already this evening. Our growers, our tradies, our hospitality venues – we are very spoilt for choice with restaurants, bars and clubs, particularly in Mildura – and also our transport operators are doing it really tough. They work long hours, they employ locals and they invest in their communities – all of these businesses do. But many have reached absolute breaking point with their WorkSafe premiums, and they are continuing to climb year after year. We heard the member for Shepparton talk about constituents of hers that have had to go on payment plans. This is not unique to one electorate or another; it is happening everywhere. I have spoken to business owners in Mildura whose premiums have gone up 20, 30, 40 or 50 per cent in some cases, or even more. These are businesses that have never made any major claims, so imagine the cost shock that happens when they open that premium account and it is double what it was the year before. It is absolutely insane.

That money is not just a line on a spreadsheet. It is not just a line on a profit and loss statement. That is the ability to put on another apprentice. That is the ability to give money to local schools, local charities or local sporting clubs, to support other communities. We have to remember that that money that is taken out with the cost shifting that goes on with this state government is money that is taken out of our regional communities that should be part of a circular, self-sustaining community. Those business operators employ locals, they invest and give money to, like I said, sporting clubs and other local charities and they shop at local businesses. You take that money out of there and the entire community breaks. The WorkSafe system is broken, and the pressure on businesses is very, very real.

This bill does make changes – some of them necessary, some of them concerning – which is why we support the reasoned amendment by the member for Evelyn. When we talk about injured workers, in Mildura I think about injured workers on a packing line or a farmhand who develops a chronic back injury. In a previous life I was a myotherapist and a sports trainer, and we used to call it tractor back. It is a very real thing from twisting, turning, watching, reversing and spraying back in those days without reversing cameras and GPS when you actually had to drive a tractor. They are real people and their stories matter.

What we need is actually balance, a system that is financially responsible but still human and a scheme that reduces WorkSafe premiums for responsible businesses. We are not saying that there are not some dodgy operators – there are in every sector and in everything that we talk about – but the ones doing the right things should not be the ones that are paying the price. As an example, our harvest finished just before Easter and was completely incident free. There was not a single safety issue, not a single OH&S issue. Again, the WorkSafe premiums have gone up, but the liability that is then placed on my family member's farm managers is excruciating when they think about what could happen if something was to go wrong on farm. Thankfully the safe practices are there. We have had an incident-free harvest, but not always, and it does put unnecessary pressure on those that work on farm.

When we talk about the support for return-to-work plans as well, in regional areas like Mildura there are fewer job alternatives that exist. No-one is saying that people should not be trained in these areas – that is great. But again, there needs to be the flexibility, and we need to have a regional lens over this, because in electorates like Mildura we cannot just hop on a tram – we cannot even hop on a passenger train – and be back in a new role within a week or two or whatever it is. Our options are limited, so there needs to be flexibility within these schemes to be able to cater to real-world scenarios on the ground.

We also need to ensure that reforms do not discourage early reporting. This is something that we have seen in the past too, that early reporting has been discouraged, and there has been the masking of injury data, especially in industries where there is fear of being seen as high risk or being seen as a liability, because they know that ultimately, depending on the scenario, even if a farm manager was not there at the time, they could be liable – there is prison time on the table. For family members that are farming and just trying to raise a family and make a living, that is a real concern, so we need to ensure balance. Honestly, if the government is serious about sustainability in this program, it has also got to be serious about fairness and looking after the employers, because again, without employers you do not have

workers, you do not have employees. So let us get it right. It is why we are supporting the amendment from the member for Evelyn.

There have got to be ways to give small and medium-sized businesses in the regions some relief. They are desperately in need. I hear business owners and food producers saying all the time, ‘It’s like the government is trying to put us out of business’ – and they are, and I do not disagree with them at all, because that is what it feels like. Apart from everything else that they are trying to deal with – drought, overheads, cost of fertiliser, cost of labour, having to provide housing, all of this stuff – the pressure is real, and this does nothing to take any pressure off our employers that employ those employees.

**Anthony CIANFLONE** (Pascoe Vale) (18:49): I rise to support the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025. In doing so I just want to begin by acknowledging the Deputy Premier and Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC, his office and his team; the department; and all the stakeholders who have been involved in bringing this bill before the house, but particularly the Workplace Incidents Consultative Committee members – some of whom we had here earlier today – Brett Struhs, David Brownlee and Ralph Snider, amongst many others, for their dedicated work and commitment. I just want to also acknowledge the contribution earlier of the member for Northcote – that very heartfelt contribution around the impact of loss of life and workplace safety on her family and its continued impact, which we should all take note of.

It has always only been Labor governments and the Labor movement that have been absolutely, wholeheartedly dedicated to fighting for and protecting the rights of workers, the wages and conditions of workers and the safety of workers, because no worker, no matter the background, level of experience, culture or circumstance, should be mistreated, taken advantage of, injured or worse, killed at work.

As set out in the 1907 Harvester decision that first set a living or family wage, every worker, especially unskilled labour, deserves the right to support a partner and three children – to feed, house and clothe them. Today every worker still has that right to go to work, earn a decent living and come home safe to their parents, their partners, their families, their children or their fur friends. That is why it has always been Labor governments and the Labor movement that have continued the struggle to support working people and working families via advocating for wage increases; the social safety net; unemployment benefits for those who go through those difficult hardship times; Medicare; paid parental leave; superannuation; the national disability insurance scheme; the pharmaceutical benefits scheme; the right-to-disconnect legislation that was recently introduced federally; the right to work from home, which we know the federal opposition were opposed to; industrial manslaughter legislation; wage theft legislation; the recent workplace surveillance inquiry at a state level that we have just tabled this week in Parliament, to which the opposition made a dissenting report; the Transport Accident Commission, established under Labor; and of course, WorkSafe and WorkCover. These are all proudly Labor initiatives at a federal or state level that to this day we must continue fighting for, protecting and solidifying.

With respect to WorkSafe and WorkCover, this bill is all about those continued efforts to reform and modernise the WorkCover scheme to respond to those contemporary challenges, just like all those previous landmark reforms that I mentioned. The WorkCover scheme of course was designed and introduced by the Cain Labor government in 1985, the year that I was born, primarily to support workers with physical injuries. Since its inception and still to this day WorkCover is all about providing support to those Victorian workers when they become injured or require insurance, protection, support and compensation or need workplace claims, worker rehabilitation, return to work pathways and dispute resolution processes.

As set out in the annual report of WorkSafe for 2023–24, WorkSafe received 35,500 new claims, up from 27,600 in 2019–20. Eighteen per cent of those claims relate to mental health injury claims; that is up from 16 per cent in 2022–23. And they supported 26,300 injured workers to return to work over that year. They have provided \$3.4 billion in total scheme payments to support injured workers,

conducted 50,100 workplace visits – up 13 per cent from 2022–23 – and concluded OH&S prosecutions with an 89 per cent success rate.

However, after 40 years of operation the reality is that we need to continue modernising the scheme to meet contemporary standards and expectations, and this bill delivers on our government’s commitment to implement the recommendations from two separate reviews – the independent review of WorkSafe Victoria’s management of complex worker compensation claims, led by Peter Rozen KC, now Judge Rozen – the Rozen report; and the review of the adequacy of compensation and supports for family members of workers whose death is work related – that is the family support review. The bill acquits the recommendations requiring legislative change which we previously accepted.

Importantly, the bill fulfils and implements the advice – the strong advice, the real life advice – that was provided by our government’s Workplace Incidents Consultative Committee, which is co-chaired by the member for Narre Warren South and people with lived experience. I acknowledge and thank Brett Struhs, the non-government co-chair with lived experience; David Brownlee, another member with lived experience; and Ralph Snider, all of whom have experienced the impact of workplace trauma, death and loss of life in their respective families and have brought that experience here so we can improve things going forward for the future.

This bill contains quite a number of reforms across a number of acts. It will amend the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation Compensation Act 2013, the Accident Compensation Act 1985 and the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004, which will improve the experience of injured workers who access the WorkCover scheme; improve the support the scheme provides to family members and dependents of workers whose death is work related; improve operation of the Workplace Injury Commission; streamline administrative arrangements for members of WorkSafe’s board, WorkSafe’s CEO and hearing loss assessors; and correct technical oversights across a number of other bills. But also, in detail, it will introduce lived experience membership criteria for WorkSafe board advisory committees, being the occupational health and safety advisory committee and the WorkCover advisory committee; and improve return-to-work outcomes, requiring employers to provide return-to-work coordinators with the assistance and facilities reasonably necessary for the performance of their function under the act; and ensure they receive the appropriate training.

It will introduce new compensation entitlements and improve support for family members after a work-related death, allowing family members of a deceased worker to receive provisional payments after a death by suicide; increase weekly pension payable to dependent children of deceased workers; extend the duration of provisional person payments for dependent partners from 12 weeks to 26 weeks; and create an entitlement to lump sum payments for economic loss for dependants who are not the partner or a child of a deceased worker. The reforms will create an entitlement to lump sum payments for non-economic loss for close family members of deceased workers; provide access to a broader range of therapy and other support services for families, including counselling and other required supports to help families through such trauma; and introduce a new entitlement to compensation for forensic cleaning where a worker dies at home or at the home of a family member. The bill also improves the operation of the Workplace Injury Commission and streamlines, as I say, quite a number of other technical reforms. When combined, these reforms will help us make WorkSafe and WorkCover better, stronger and more resilient in helping support more injured workers and families now and into the future.

Locally, across my community of Pascoe Vale, Coburg and Brunswick West, we have had many people over the years dedicate their lives through the labour movement and the union movement to helping support and protect the rights of workers going back almost to the establishment of modern-day Melbourne. But we have also had many people more recently proudly represent hardworking injured local workers, including from Zaparas Lawyers. Peter and Lia Zaparas founded Zaparas Lawyers in 1981 with a genuine spirit of caring and collaboration. As their business grew, so did their family, with their three children, Yianni, Paul and Zoe also going on to eventually join the firm. Forty-

plus years later and now home to well over 200 members and workers, Zaparas Lawyers continues to very much support people from all backgrounds with their personal injury and workplace injury cases, including WorkSafe, WorkCover, TAC claims; superannuation and insurance matters; public liability matters; and occupational disease cases including asbestos, silicosis and hearing or sensory losses. And regardless of the circumstances, Zaparas and the team always bring a deep sense of expertise, compassion and commitment to supporting every one of their clients in need of help via a no-win no-fee approach, making legal support accessible for anyone, regardless of the background. It was a real pleasure to recently join Yianni Zaparas for the official opening of their new northern hub office at 57–59 Cooper Street in Epping. It was also a pleasure to be joined by my friend the member for Broadmeadows, Senator Jana Stewart and the member for Thomastown.

These reforms will also continue helping injured and impaired workers across my community of Merri-bek. Since being elected I have been approached by several constituents seeking assistance with their WorkSafe and WorkCover claims or concerns, and one of those is Glenn, a lifetime local resident. He is a previous small business owner who commenced more recently a new career and role across the transport and construction sectors. He approached me raising concern about his case after having experienced increased serious instances of workplace bullying, harassment and aggressive behaviour towards him. His health, his mental health and his wellbeing began to seriously deteriorate through severe stress and anxiety, which were seriously impairing his work capacity. Glenn was subsequently diagnosed with adjustment disorder with mixed anxiety and depressed mood resulting from workplace harassment, bullying and pressure – an extremely concerning diagnosis given his responsibility in driving heavy trucks in the transport and construction sector. Following his diagnosis and subsequent negative response from his employer, Glenn subsequently lodged a workplace claim through WorkCover, which was determined and approved. However, despite the approval Glenn contacted me to raise concerns as he was yet to receive any payment, back payment or support 10 weeks after his claim was approved via his employer as required. I was very pleased to have been able to assist Glenn to rectify that issue upon making representations to the relevant minister, but that is why we are moving this bill, to help improve the lives of injured workers.

**Meng Heang TAK** (Clarinda) (18:59): I am proud to follow the hardworking member for Pascoe Vale to speak on the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025. The amendments are aimed at improving the experience of injured workers who access the WorkCover scheme, as well as improving the experience and support for family members and dependants of –

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** Order! I am required by sessional orders to interrupt the member for Clarinda. He will have the call when the matter returns to the house.

**Business interrupted under sessional orders.**

### *Adjournment*

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** The question is:

That the house now adjourns.

### **Serpell Primary School**

**Matthew GUY** (Bulleen) (19:00): (1131) Tonight I raise an issue in relation to Serpell Primary School in Templestowe. Serpell Primary School is one of the larger primary schools in the City of Manningham – in fact I think the largest, at about 1250 students. As the name suggests, it is located partly on Serpells Road and Tuckers Road in Templestowe, and it has abutted a Catholic school called St Charles Borromeo for a number of years – Serpell was built first, then St Charles second. Unfortunately, St Charles's enrolments have been steadily declining, and at the start of this year, very sadly, that school closed. St Charles Borromeo ceased operation, and the handful of students – I think, from memory, it was about three or four – were transferred to St Gregory in Doncaster. It is very sad because it was a lovely school and had a great reputation, but the school has been closed. It abuts, as I said, Serpell Primary.

Serpell Primary is a school on a small land parcel with 1200-plus students. So what you have is St Charles Borromeo, now vacant, owned by the Catholic education office, abutting Serpell Primary – and St Charles has capacity for 200 to 300 kids – where you have this land, this facility, now vacant next door to an overcrowded primary school just because of the popularity in many ways of Serpell and the great work that principal Wilma Culton and the staff do up there. Just as a matter of comparison, Templestowe Park Primary has 593 students, Templestowe Valley 450, Milgate 827, Doncaster Gardens 722 and Templestowe Heights 537. As I said, Serpell has nearly 1240, so it is a big school, and you have got this great big problem of a lot of kids on a small land parcel. There is not much we can do about that, except that now next to Serpell Primary is St Charles Borromeo.

So I am asking the Minister for Education via my adjournment tonight to negotiate with the Catholic education office to see if there can be either a purchase or a land transfer that would see the former St Charles Borromeo site come to the ownership of the Victorian government and thus the state education office, which can then use that facility as part of Serpell Primary. That would help to alleviate the overcrowding of some of the facilities in Serpell Primary. It might be able to be a grades 5 and 6 campus, if you like. As I said, it is right next door to Serpell Primary. It would be really sensible. I understand there might be some difficulties in doing so, but my adjournment matter tonight seeks for the Minister for Education to begin those discussions with the Catholic education office.

#### **Broadmeadows electorate bus services**

**Kathleen MATTHEWS-WARD** (Broadmeadows) (19:03): (1132) My adjournment is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport, and the action I seek is for the minister to fund additional bus services in my electorate, particularly on route 536. Transport equity has always been a priority for me, and I have advocated tirelessly over many years for improvements to public transport and to pedestrian and cycling infrastructure. Bus services are particularly important for the many in my community who are not able to drive or afford a car. The electorate of Broadmeadows has the highest level of disability in the state, one of the lowest levels of car ownership and high levels of disadvantage. We also have lots of new arrivals, many shift workers, including those from female-dominated industries like health and aged care, and whenever I jump on a bus I always see lots of older people and of course children. So many local people rely on public transport to get around, to participate in community life, to access education and employment, to do their shopping and to access opportunities for social connection. I thank Andrea Bunting and community members who have contacted me about the need for more services on route 536, and I thank the minister for her strong advocacy for public and active transport.

#### **Protective services officers**

**Martin CAMERON** (Morwell) (19:04): (1133) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Police, and the action I seek is for a review to be done on the allocation of protective services officers across Victoria. For two years I have been campaigning for more PSO resources in the Latrobe Valley, and for two years this government has ignored these calls and denied regional Victorians the same resources as metropolitan Melbourne. PSOs have a dedicated presence in 216 train stations in Melbourne, yet just four stations in the whole of regional Victoria are patrolled by PSOs.

In my electorate of Morwell we have the highest rate of criminal incidents outside of Melbourne. During a recent operation in the Morwell CBD – and we thank the police for the operation – police arrested 12 people and seized seven knives. It was a stop-and-search operation. All this was in just two days. If these numbers do not cause alarm, they should. The short blitz has rid local streets of some concealed weapons and the increased police presence has deterred antisocial behaviour, but this operation was also conducted while one of our biggest trials in recent memory – the mushroom trial – was taking place in the Morwell CBD. Now, we do not want to be cynical down in Morwell, but we think this operation was only conducted because the spotlight was on Morwell. The very real and glaring threats to community safety that we face every day are unacceptable, and everyone knows it.

The state government has not seen fit to address this crisis, despite repeated and deafening pleas, until now. It is only now the eyes of the world's media are on Morwell that this government has acted. Was it out of sheer embarrassment?

Under the Control of Weapons Act 1990 PSOs as well as police have stop-and-search powers. It is great for those in metropolitan Melbourne, where all the stations are manned by PSOs, but cold comfort for those of us in regional Victoria, where just four stations have a PSO presence. There are more than 1100 vacancies for frontline officers in Victoria Police, so deploying PSOs across regional Victoria is a sensible action for this government to undertake.

The visible presence of uniformed officers has proved that the deployment of PSOs in and around the Morwell area would make a difference. When the police started the operation, the streets of Morwell were rid of those people who had been carrying knives and exhibiting unruly behaviour. We take from the fact that they have had this police operation that PSOs will work in regional Victoria and make us safe.

### **Altona Meadows road infrastructure**

**Mathew HILAKARI** (Point Cook) (19:07): (1134) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and the action that I seek is that the minister receive a petition from the community that I represent to see improvements at the Newland Street exit. The Newland Street exit is the freeway exit that is most used by the members of the Altona Meadows community. Too often members of the community that I represent raise that they are reluctant to invite people to their homes because they are embarrassed about the condition of the entrance and exit. I know that the safety barriers have been replaced. That is of course very important, and I appreciate that; it is an important thing to do.

I know that the build-up of rubbish and debris are the result of the funnel-like design of the exit. It causes the dust, debris and rubbish to build up, but we need support to see it improved. I would like to see the rubbish removed, the debris cleaned up and the gardens improved as well. I have a longer term ambition to see the sound barriers repainted and replaced.

I know that the minister knows this community well. She knows it very well; she is our neighbour. She knows this freeway well as well. I hope I can count on your support, Minister.

### **Police resources**

**David SOUTHWICK** (Caulfield) (19:08): (1135) My adjournment today is for the Minister for Police, and the action that I seek is that the minister provide the appropriate funding to employ the 1100 police that have been promised and the resources and funding to ensure police can do their job to keep the community safe.

I would like to particularly congratulate the new Chief Commissioner of Police Mike Bush on the job, but at the same time I say to the police minister we must make sure that the police commissioner is not set up to fail, and that will only happen if the police minister provides the funding for Mike Bush and the Victoria Police members.

Today mayors from seven councils – Glen Eira, Bayside, Port Phillip, Monash, Stonnington, Boroondara and Kingston – wrote to the Minister for Police demanding funding for community safety to tackle the crime crisis. These councils have said that they have seen a rise in aggravated burglary, especially youth crime; graffiti; public drug use; and antisocial behaviour. They have seen reports of antisemitic incidents, particularly in my area of Glen Eira and in Port Phillip. They have seen retail, hospitality and small businesses impacted by vandalism and theft, and they have seen homelessness and a lack of wraparound services for many of the vulnerable.

Social cohesion being under strain, particularly around public housing areas, has also impacted constituents, particularly when it comes to crime.

These councils are calling for an increase in frontline police, particularly in hotspots; expanded youth crime prevention programs, desperately needed; more support for Neighbourhood Watch – they do an unbelievable job; and more support around shopping precincts, especially where there are mental health and drug addiction issues. Councils have been pressured to respond to the crime crisis because the Allan Labor government have vacated the space. Councils employing security guards, which we are seeing with the Melbourne City Council for police work, is a second-rate solution for a first-rate problem. Our communities deserve police officers with police powers to ensure their safety and the government stepping up to provide the 1100 police. We cannot have security guards doing police work. We need police with the powers doing that police work in the councils, including Melbourne City Council. Residents should not have to pay for private security guards to patrol their streets like they do in my area of Caulfield. In light of the budget, the government must provide the funding for police to do their jobs and the resources needed so Victorians and our community can once again feel safe.

### City of Casey community awards

**Pauline RICHARDS** (Cranbourne) (19:11): (1136) My adjournment is to the Minister for Local Government, and the action I seek is an update on how we are supporting the City of Casey to be an inclusive and vibrant place for people to live, work and raise a family and a visit to hear how wonderful the people are in Cranbourne.

I had the pleasure of joining the member for Narre Warren North at the City of Casey awards evening in what was a night of nights. I am so pleased to represent and live in a community known for our altruism and optimism, and that was on full display at the awards night. I would like to acknowledge the recipients of the awards.

The Casey Citizen of the Year was a joint award with Anthony Hanna, whose generosity and dedication shone through in his volunteer work at Vinnies across three locations. His deep commitment to community safety and education is evident in his roles with Neighbourhood Watch Casey, Merinda Park Learning and Jen Community Housing. The other joint Citizen of the Year award goes to Antonia Arfaras, who has been a dedicated volunteer for over 30 years, making a profound impact on stroke awareness and advocacy. Her tireless efforts earned her the 2024 National Stroke Foundation Volunteer of the Year award, and she continues to inspire through leadership at the Friends of Wilson Botanic Park. The Senior of the Year Joseph Anthony Swindle is passionate about his community. Uncle Joe strives to make everyone feel happy, included and supported in their cultural journey, whether he is helping mob trace their bloodlines, lending an ear or helping at the Casey Aboriginal gathering place. He is always there with a warm smile. The Casey Young Citizen of the Year is Matthew Young. Matthew James Young has a dedication to sports and charity and has made a powerful impact, raising nearly \$20,000 for kids' cancer research. His commitment to giving back extends to blood donations and inspiring excellence in his workplace, and he is of course a great and very famous, well known and well-loved St Peter's alumnus. The Equity and Inclusion Award went to Ren Tumath, who has been an influential volunteer in Casey for over 30 years focusing on supporting the LGBTIQ+ community and founding Casey Cardinia Pride. Their advocacy work extends to disability rights, serving on the Casey Disability Advisory Group. The Woman of the Year is Chanchal Kumavat. She is a vibrant community leader whose work has uplifted thousands in Casey.

The Community Group of the Year is the Peninsula Community Legal Centre, led ably by Jackie Galloway, which has provided legal services since 1977. The Environment and Sustainability Champion Award goes to Fiona Smale, who has had an exceptional commitment to environmental conservation and the protection of koalas. The Lindsay King Art Award goes to Bridie Clark, whose BATS Theatre Company – I have experienced – has contributed to her expertise as a choreographer and as a director. And the Highly Commended community group was Transit Soup Kitchen and Food Support in Narre Warren. I am very much looking forward to hearing the minister's response, and I look forward to seeing the recipients face to face.

### Victoria Police

**Ellen SANDELL** (Melbourne) (19:14): (1137) My adjournment tonight is for the Premier. The action I am seeking from the Premier today is to finally introduce an independent police ombudsman to ensure police are no longer responsible for investigating themselves here in Victoria.

On Thursday 17 April two officers in Footscray shot and killed 35-year-old man Abdifatah Ahmed. Abdifatah was a beloved son and brother forced into rough sleeping, who was also experiencing mental health challenges.

The local community and especially the Australian Somali and Australian African community across Melbourne are shocked and angry and asking how this could have happened. Why was Abdifatah met with force in the first place instead of care? Just a week before Abdifatah's death the police announced an operation in Footscray titled 'Strong show of force in Footscray'. Interestingly, that media release has since been scrubbed from Victoria Police's website. But there is no ignoring its message that force comes first, and time and time again it is our black, brown and First Nations communities who bear the brunt of overpolicing.

Four years ago the mental health royal commission demanded recommended that mental health call-outs be led by paramedics, not police. It was meant to happen by 2023, two years ago, but now it is being delayed again until 2027. Last year Victoria Police's budget was \$4.5 billion, almost double what it was when this Labor government came to power in 2014, yet we cannot find the money to fully fund our mental health system and right now there is not a single drug and alcohol public rehab bed available in Victoria, because we do not have the funding for it. How is it that in a wealthy country like Australia, in a wealthy state like Victoria, we cannot fund care but we can find enough funding for police and prisons?

The Lawyer X royal commission also called for real police oversight. That has now been delayed almost into its fifth year, and there is no confidence that it will ever happen. While there is an investigation running into Abdifatah's death, in Victoria, police are still allowed to investigate themselves. The Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission investigates only 1 per cent of police misconduct complaints; the rest are just referred back to the chief commissioner to deal with in house in police. Victoria has an ombudsman for almost every other agency, including telecommunications, public transport, energy, water and all government agencies, to hold these public agencies to account, and it is well past time in Victoria we also had an ombudsman to hold the police to account and ensure that police are not investigating police.

### Wendouree electorate bus services

**Juliana ADDISON** (Wendouree) (19:17): (1138) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport, and the action that I seek is for the minister to come to my electorate of Wendouree to discuss how we can reform bus services across Ballarat with relevant stakeholders. With only two train stations in Ballarat and historic trams around the lake, my community relies on our bus service for public transport. Whether it is travelling to or from school, work, appointments, shopping or leisure activities, for those without access to a car or unable to drive, bus travel is the most affordable option. Recently we have seen an uplift of weekend bus services across the community that I represent, but we know that the work of good government is never complete. I recently attended a meeting with Down Syndrome Victoria in Alfredton where I heard from bus users and their families that the bus services currently offered did not meet the services they needed and that they relied on more expensive taxis as a result.

[NAMES AWAITING VERIFICATION]

I also attended the City of Ballarat Speak Up! youth ambassador event where secondary students and young people pitched for a better bus service for Ballarat. They raised issues of accessibility and safety as well as social justice and combating climate change. The pitch also identified the importance of

connection to address isolation and loneliness. Thank you to Corey, Amaya, Ruby, Saskia, Asha, Christiana, Mahima, Lisanth, Rakhav, Om, Hosendu and Elijah for your leadership and advocacy. I have also heard from the growing Winter Valley community about their need for bus services, as well as parents and school students without a local bus service to get their children to and from school. Bus services are an important issue for my community, and I look forward to welcoming the minister to Ballarat to discuss my community's concerns.

### **Bega Cheese**

**Kim O'KEEFFE** (Shepparton) (19:19): (1139) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Regional Development in the other place, and the action I seek is for the minister to meet with me and Moira Shire Council regarding the closure of Bega Cheese, Strathmerton. The announcement that Bega Cheese will close its Strathmerton site is devastating news for its 300 workers, their families, suppliers, contractors and the broader community across the Goulburn Valley. This is a huge loss of an iconic, long-term business and major employer of the town and region and a clear example of the financial pressure faced by businesses in regional Victoria. The closure of this business will not only have a significant impact on the workers and their families, who have relied on the stability of Bega's operations in Strathmerton since 2008, but will also have a significant economic impact across the region. Whilst Bega is planning a phased closure to be completed by mid next year we need to understand what this will mean for the affected workers, specifically what opportunities exist for redeployment or transition to other industries and what support will be required going forward. We are seeing time and time again the financial pressures that many businesses right across the state are facing, especially in regional Victoria. It is alarming that recent analysis conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed that close to 129,000 businesses closed in 2024.

When you think of this, broadly speaking, that is 350 businesses across the state a day. Out of this figure more than 3000 moved interstate. This is alarming and must change. Strathmerton is a town with 1200 residents, and Bega Cheese is a major employer. As the Minister for Regional Development, it is critical that you meet with me and council during this distressful time, and I look forward to your response.

### **St Leonards Pier**

**Alison MARCHANT** (Bellarine) (19:20): (1140) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Ports and Freight, and the action I seek is for the minister to visit the St Leonards community in my electorate of the Bellarine to discuss the latest upgrades and provide information regarding the St Leonards local port area plan project and the St Leonards Pier redevelopment. The St Leonards Pier is an iconic and much-loved part of our community. You will see many people walking along that pier and families fishing, walking and enjoying the environment there, and it is great spot for snorkelling and diving as well. Kids are often swimming and creating long memories along that pier. But the community is aware that this pier is due for a major rebuild to ensure that we can continue to use it for decades to come. Over the past few months there have been specialist divers at the pier conducting marine assessments and gathering further information about possible wrecks and heritage sites and environmental factors that will support Parks Victoria to do their design work and new plans for the new pier. We have undertaken some extensive consultation in the community, and Parks Victoria are now working through that large amount of feedback to assist their further designs. This project is really important to the Bellarine and the St Leonards community, and I look forward to having the minister there to discuss the latest.

### **Responses**

**Vicki WARD** (Eltham – Minister for Emergency Services, Minister for Natural Disaster Recovery, Minister for Equality) (19:22): The member for Bulleen had an adjournment matter for the Minister for Education to raise with Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools the opportunities that could arise from the unoccupied land they own, which is adjacent to Serpell Primary School, and how it could benefit the primary school. The member for Broadmeadows sought for the Minister for Public and

Active Transport to fund additional bus services in the electorate of Broadmeadows. The member for Morwell has asked the Minister for Police for a review of protective services officers in Victoria, particularly for the Latrobe Valley. The member for Point Cook had an adjournment matter for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, seeking to receive a petition that the member has generated regarding Newland Street exit improvements. The member for Caulfield sought for the Minister for Police to appropriate funding for 1100 officers.

The member for Cranbourne asked the Minister for Local Government to give an update on how the government is supporting the Casey LGA to be an inclusive community. I know the member values very highly and really appreciates that work on inclusivity. The member for Melbourne sought for the Premier to create a new police ombudsman so that police are not investigating themselves. The member for Wendouree had a matter for the Minister for Public and Active Transport, inviting her to come to Wendouree to see how bus services could be reformed and improved in her community. The member for Shepparton had a matter for the Minister for Regional Development, inviting her to a meeting with the member and local government regarding the closure of Bega in her community and the effects of that. The member for Bellarine had an adjournment matter for the Minister for Ports and Freight, inviting the minister to St Leonards to come and see and discuss plans for the St Leonards Pier and precinct redevelopment project. I will pass them all on to the relevant ministers.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** The house stands adjourned until tomorrow morning.

**House adjourned 7:24 pm.**