

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into Renewable and Affordable Energy for Apartments

Melbourne – Thursday 30 April 2026

#### MEMBERS

Juliana Addison – Chair

Martin Cameron – Deputy Chair

Jordan Crugnale

Daniela De Martino

Wayne Farnham

Martha Haylett

David Hodgett

**WITNESSES**

Kate Raymond, Chief Executive Officer (*via videoconference*), and  
Georgia Holmes, Lead, National Policy (*via videoconference*), Master Electricians Australia; and  
Kent Johns, Head, Government Relations and Regulatory Affairs,  
Neil Roberts, Technical Director, and  
Rob Selymes, Board Member, Victoria, National Electrical and Communications Association.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to this panel hearing for the Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Renewable and Affordable Energy for Apartments. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence given today is recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's website. While all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts and other documents provided to the committee during the hearing will be published on the committee's website.

We will run this session in a question-and-answer format. Committee members will ask some questions. If you wish to answer a question, please indicate and we will get to you. To make it easier for our Hansard reporters, please state your name before you start speaking. If there are any important points you do not have a chance to make during this session, you are welcome to provide additional information in writing.

My name is Juliana Addison. I am the Member for Wendouree and Chair, and I am joined by a fantastic panel of MPs from across Victoria.

We are going to start with Kent Johns. If you would like to introduce yourself and make a 2-minute opening statement, please.

**Kent JOHNS:** It is Kent Johns, National Electrical and Communications Association. I probably will not take the 2 minutes because we are far more interested in answering your questions. NECA represents over 6500 electrical contractors and subcontractors across Australia. In Victoria alone we employ 1500 electrical apprentices, putting them through the cert III and capstone and A levels. What we also do is represent the electrical contractors that will deliver the outcomes that the Victorian government has set in installing, maintaining and designing all of the renewable projects that are out there.

The points we would probably want to emphasise are our skills shortage and skills applications and that we need to address the challenges and the opportunities that are there through these programs; also, due to apartment buildings, looking at the retail renewable products that are there, subscription-based solar services and community batteries, which we believe by aggregating can also address some of the concerns that are here; and also the technical and regulatory impediments that we see around strata and multiunit dwellings. Our particular concern is retrofit and how we bring those up to the standards that are currently here.

We are more than happy to answer questions. We have made a substantial submission, so we are more interested in answering the questions that are important to you. I am here with my colleagues, who can introduce themselves.

**Neil ROBERTS:** Neil Roberts, Technical Director for the National Electrical and Communications Association.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome, Neil.

**Rob SELYMESI:** Rob Selymes, National Electrical and Communications Association, Board Member of Victoria, and I am a general manager of Stowe Australia here in Victoria, a tier 1 electrical contractor.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. Thank you very much for your submission. I know how much work goes into getting these submissions together, so thank you very much. A very warm welcome to the Master Electricians Australia. We have got Kate Raymond and Georgia Holmes. Would you like to introduce yourselves, starting with you, Kate?

**Kate RAYMOND:** Thank you very much, Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for having us here today. My name is Kate Raymond. I am the CEO of Master Electricians Australia, representing electrical contractors around Australia, including Victoria, with a focus on small- and medium-sized businesses, many of whom install consumer energy resources in our homes and apartment buildings across the country. Our members have raised with us a number of issues, which we have put in our submission, including with older apartment buildings – an opportunity to upgrade those apartment buildings, but it comes with challenges and barriers, which we would love to talk about today. Complex body corporate governance and decision-making processes; financial considerations and installation limitations, such as constrained switchboard capacity, outdated metering configurations and the issues associated with a mix of private and common electrical systems; all present challenges and opportunities around this country, including in Victoria. Thanks to recent NCC changes adopted in Victoria, newer apartments are generally built with electrification and future upgrades in mind, making the electrification process and adoption of consumer energy resources an easier process for those new buildings, but obviously presenting challenges for existing and older buildings. Renters, in addition, face additional challenges in accessing assets as they have limited influence over building decision-making and are affected by the classic split incentive problem, where landlords bear the capital cost while tenants can receive the benefits.

We support current initiatives, both at federal and state levels. Programs such as Victoria's Solar for Apartments scheme are to be congratulated, along with ARENA-supported trials expanding shared EV charging infrastructure in apartment complexes. These are important and positive steps towards improving access for apartment residents to consumer energy resources. We also highlight some broader regulatory and policy settings which, while not limited to apartment contexts, can contribute to increased costs, including the requirement in Victoria to upgrade inverters when adding to an existing solar system to comply with the CSIP-AUS communication protocol. In summary, while existing programs provide an important foundation, there is a clear need for additional support, be it financial, educational or regulatory, to enable those older apartment buildings to upgrade their infrastructure to support electrification.

I am joined today by my colleague Georgia Holmes, our National Policy Lead, who has done the hard yards in preparing the submission presented to Victoria on behalf of Master Electricians Australia, and we look forward to your questions. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Terrific. Thank you very much, Kate, and Georgia, thank you very much for the work that you put into the submission. Deputy Chair, would you like to lead us off?

**Martin CAMERON:** Thank you. We will go straight to it, Kent. You talked about being able to train apprentices up in numbers right across the board. As a former plumber and a former builder here, we know the numbers that we are struggling with. It is great to come up with an idea of electrification, but we then need the workforce to be able to move on and complete it. So at the bottom end with our apprentices coming in and then at the top end with our older experienced electricians coming to the end and getting ready to retire, how are we looking, for one, with our numbers, and what do you see is the issue that we need to fix to be able to achieve the electrification of Victoria?

**Kent JOHNS:** The Powering Skills Organisation has identified that up to 45,000 electricians will be required by 2035. That is a well-known figure. I think probably the best way to approach the challenge that we have in Victoria – I would probably call the Director Rob Selymes to give you a local context, both from a contractor view and also from a NECA training point of view.

**Rob SELYMESI:** Thanks, Kent. You are absolutely right – we are finding enormous issues across the industry from the feeder system in terms of headcount and availability. From a NECA perspective, we currently have a 500-headcount cap per calendar year on new apprentices coming onboard, which includes pre-apps. That really digs into the total number of people that can get through. We are working hard on the attraction and retention strategy for both men and women in the system. NECA Victoria currently has about 1500 apprentices in the system. Stowe is about to put on another 30 in our construction space. We have been advised by NECA

Education & Careers as of yesterday that they are about to hit their cap over the next four weeks, so that will be the total amount of apprentices that can come into the system in the first year and at pre-app entry level. From our perspective, if we have got about 135 apprentices on at the moment, I think we are going to need another 100 over the next 12 to 18 months. At the moment we are only going to be able to get about 30. So we have got a capping issue from the GTO/RTO perspective. NECA Education & Careers also has a fantastic record in the pass rate, so we are up around the high 80 percentile range, which is why it is a preference to work with NECA E&C from a Stowe perspective.

The issue is that we still have challenges around space and teachers and bringing teachers into the system. So we are doing a lot of work with industry across the space to encourage teachers to come off the tools as they retire and as they age and to look for a career change, and then we can bring them into the teaching sector and give them an alternative career path for an extended period of time – including women. I think NECA Education & Careers has just managed to get some additional female teachers on. It has made a massive difference to the culture in the classroom, so that is a huge positive. But we are really struggling on the headcount at the moment, and we are not getting enough apprentices through the feeder system. We are barely keeping up with the retirees coming out at the other end, so it is a real challenge for the trade.

**The CHAIR:** Rob, have you raised that with the new Minister for Skills and TAFE?

**Rob SELYMESI:** I believe the CEO of NECA E & C, Gideon, has raised that point.

**The CHAIR:** The new minister is an electrician.

**Kent JOHNS:** We drafted a letter to him last week.

**Rob SELYMESI:** To go back to Kent.

**Kent JOHNS:** To give you a national perspective as well, let us take the lowest figure, which is 32,000 electricians required, assuming no-one retires, and obviously some are – some are even joining Parliament. So if you look at that 32,000, with an average completion rate of 50 per cent, it means 64,000 apprentices have to start this week. They are not on the books. We can take on a lot more apprentices nationally and in Victoria tomorrow. There are enough applicants. The two challenges are host employers – and that biggest gap is the small to medium-sized enterprises, which we would like to see put them through group training organisations, because the completion rates are at 90, not 50, and promote that for the small and medium-sized enterprises because of the regulatory burden of a new apprentice. If we can achieve that, then we can get the kids out – well, not kids. We have electrical engineers that are 32 years of age applying for first-year apprenticeships because it is a great career. We have enough people that want to become electricians. We do not have enough training spaces in Victoria – we are capped – and we do not have the capacity with the employers. So we really need to focus there, especially with mature-age apprentices, who are brilliant apprentices as well – and stop Parliament taking all our sparkies and plumbers.

**The CHAIR:** I was at my local TAFE – see, I am not referring to Ballarat – with the Premier and Minister Brooks the other day. We met a whole lot of people doing the pre-apprenticeship course and some adult apprentices there, and they are raring to go. So let us hope that they can get a start.

**Wayne FARNHAM:** I will jump in next, Juliana.

**Martha HAYLETT:** Is the cap because of the spaces?

**Kent JOHNS:** No, it is a state government cap on places.

**David HODGETT:** On training.

**Kent JOHNS:** It revolves around – and correct me if I am wrong; I might take it on notice – there being a 75 per cent minimum for TAFE, and TAFE does not necessarily fill their cap, which leaves the residual cap for RTOs and GTOs. Ours is a registered charity – ours is not-for-profit, industry led. What we are requesting is probably a movement of that cap s006F we can take those apprentices on and release the stress that TAFE is having, because TAFE is central to training of all building trades. But we can release that stress through our training organisations because we are extremely successful on completion rates and female participation in

some states – and ACT is probably the best campus. We are getting close to 20 per cent female apprenticeships and close to 75 per cent female trainers, and I think the two are related.

**Martha HAYLETT:** It would be a travesty to say no to someone who wants to study to be an electrician as well.

**Kent JOHNS:** We are saying no to hundreds of kids.

**Martha HAYLETT:** That is horrible. Yes. Okay. This is helpful, though.

**Wayne FARNHAM:** I will just jump in here. We do know apprentice rates are down across industry, especially the construction industry. I will open this up to anyone in Master Electricians Australia and all those on the other side. What do you think the main reason is for the low completion rate, when we are hitting 50 per cent, and what is the main reason we cannot get apprentices through the system at the moment?

**Kate RAYMOND:** Member, if I could address that, unfortunately the 50 per cent rate is across the board. In electrical there are much, much higher completion rates amongst TAFE and RTOs, as well as GTOs, and the reason for that is that it is occupationally licensed. For occupationally licensed trades, the completion rates are much higher across the board. That is plumbing, electrical – and electrical in particular is high by comparison to other trades, which is great for us. Our issue is the employer space. Employers are not taking on enough apprentices in the small to medium end, and one of the big reasons for that is the enormous cost and compliance obligations on employers and doing so at a time when they are very, very stressed. Victoria has very few employer incentives. Nationally, there is \$10,000 cash that the apprentices get themselves, and employers are eligible for \$5000. The cost to employers is enormous. There are programs in WA and Queensland supporting employers in the construction sector in the small end to take on apprentices, but Victoria unfortunately does not have those incentives, which we do believe are needed. There are different models that suit different employers. A lot of employers might be prepared to take on an apprentice if they are provided with some assistance.

Completion rates, just coming back to that – why are they low in other sectors? Largely, when they are not occupationally licensed, they will often look around and go, ‘Well, I get paid a lot more to be a labourer.’ And it is not necessarily a bad thing. It does not mean that they are actually leaving the sector. Unfortunately, the data does not exist to tell us if they are staying in the sector or not. So it is not necessarily as bad a story as it does sound.

**Wayne FARNHAM:** But an assumption could be that it is wage-driven and therefore they move out and move on to something else.

**Kate RAYMOND:** Particularly for non-occupationally licensed sectors, that is right. They may stay even working in their trade but just not complete their qualification because they do not actually need it to do the particular task. Yes, they would earn more as a labourer, but they would not be able to progress and not be able to start a business and be licensed. Certainly in electrical they need to finish to be able to work as an electrician.

**Wayne FARNHAM:** Kent.

**Kent JOHNS:** The dilemma that we have is the figures that we get out of the federal government do not reflect that. They reflect completion rates that are extremely low, even in our occupation. We have found through our training institutes and talking to ECA in Victoria that pastoral care has a lot to do with it – and not in the strictest term. What we find is apprentice support networks do not necessarily support some apprentices. When they first get into the role, it is ‘Dad’s mate is an electrician’. That is how you get into the industry, and you have not got that support behind you. A lot of the time, from the work that we have done with our apprentices, if they are having problems at home, if they have got substance issues – because these are young men and young women – or if they have been kicked out of home, they are not getting that support. With a group training organisation such as NECA, Electrogrouop, which is the ETU, or similar ones, what you find is your field officer will go out and find out what is going wrong. If you get kicked out of home, you quit your apprenticeship, you fall off the scale. That intensive care that we give as an industry association is we want to make sure the kids succeed.

There is also a differential in TAFE with the screening. We run a group training organisation, so if you apply to NECA, we will put you through the testing to assess your capabilities – whether your mathematics is up to speed. It is quite a gruelling electrical apprenticeship. It is highly technical, same as plumbing, same as building. You have to study. What we do is we will screen the apprentices prior to them joining. If they need to do a cert II, we will ask them to do it. If their mathematics is fantastic, we will put them straight through. If they are falling back, we will tutor them. Every Thursday night at our training campuses, if you are falling behind, we will tutor you. Our clients are the Stowes of the world, and what we have to do is make sure that these kids complete. We follow them from the time that they are a first-year apprentice through to the time that they start their own business, so we are mentoring them all the way. Now, TAFE does not have that opportunity. If you apply to go there, you are working with a local guy.

The other thing that we do not do – as tradesmen, you would understand that you have never been trained how to train an apprentice and how to mentor an apprentice. You might be the best electrician or the best plumber in the world; you do not know how to train that apprentice, mentor them and parent them through. If you get a good master of apprentices, you are a very lucky person. If you are getting a field officer from NECA or Electrogrouop, you are a very lucky apprentice. If you are just there with a guy in a van who maybe just wants you to run cable trays for three years, that is not an apprenticeship. There are arguments there. And TAFE has a difficult job. They do not have the same support mechanisms, and they are also not screening the kids. He may come through from year 10, not having the mathematical acumen, and in his first year he just gives up. That is what we are fighting. We will mentor them and get them up to speed before we throw them in. You would not throw a year 10 kid into university mathematics, and an electrician is the equivalent of an electrical engineer in some of the subjects they are trying to understand. It is quite a complex technical job. I do not know if you would like to add something, Neil.

**Kate RAYMOND:** Just on that, Kent, we have got some advocacy on that. We would love to see a year 12 subject be introduced that is actually ATAR-scaled to encourage more girls to undertake the subject. It could be given a name like ‘sustainable technologies’ or the like and actually incorporate elements of the cert II in both sustainable tech and electro tech into an ATAR-scaled subject so that it would attract a lot more people and cover off on those fundamentals – there is a program in place around those fundamental literacy and numeracy skills that are needed – because where dropouts do occur, the stats show they are largely in that first year. As Kent said, it is around when they realise that they are not really cut out for it – maybe the maths is too hard. It could cover off on that, where they have got the help through the school system to get through some of those fundamental mathematical areas. We would love to see the school system actually pick that up so that when they finish school more people might consider a pathway in the trades, including electrical, and be more prepared for it.

**The CHAIR:** Talking about skills and expertise, what percentage of the electrical industry has experience and expertise to work in apartment buildings?

**Kent JOHNS:** Neil? Our answer should be 100 per cent.

**The CHAIR:** I was hoping that. I was hoping it was a bit of a Dorothy Dixier.

**Kent JOHNS:** The electrical licence is the electrical licence. There is no other.

**The CHAIR:** You have got very negative body language. I am a bit nervous, Neil.

**Neil ROBERTS:** There are two parts to that. There is building apartment blocks, which is something that Stowe apprentices would get exposed to. They get to see the backbones of the apartment blocks. For your suburban electrician, their work on apartment blocks is more akin to general house work because they are running in power points. It might get a little bit more advanced than that. They might run in sub mains. There is a difference in scale. If you are starting from scratch on an apartment block, you are working to a design, and then you will get to see a lot of the modern technology. If you are servicing older apartment blocks, you are going to see a variety of things, but you are not necessarily exposed to the latest technologies or the possibilities. There is a good solid range there. Most electricians at some point would have been exposed to an apartment block situation.

**Kent JOHNS:** This is where Victoria is leading the country. I will reflect probably on New South Wales. CPD and compulsory training are extremely important, and that is where in Victoria they are leading the way.

You do the additional training after you have finished your trade, whereas in some other states they are not exposed to that compulsory training. We are pushing for a national licence, and believe it or not, we believe Victoria's licensing system is probably the best. Rob, you deal with –

**The CHAIR:** We certainly believe that. That is fine.

**Rob SELYMESI:** Certainly the work that ESV has done and rolled out in terms of the requirement for CPD before you renew your licence is exceptional. I did mine about 18 months ago when I undertook the course. A national licensing program would be a wonderful opportunity for us to be able to either promote or transition employees and have opportunities around the country. It would be a seamless transition for some of the internal operations for an organisation such as Stowe. To your point, Neil, most electricians would have experience at domestic and fundamental apartment levels, and the competency exposure to varying types of projects would change when you get into commercial and complex types of data centre projects and infrastructure. That is where you would have a differential, a real tangible difference, between the competencies and skill sets of electricians. They are not necessarily interchangeable. But most sparkies, most electricians, would have reasonable experience across apartments and the domestic space – low rise.

**Neil ROBERTS:** I might add something, if I can.

**The CHAIR:** Please.

**Neil ROBERTS:** I think both we and Masters have identified that existing apartment stock is probably where the problem is in terms of electrifying. There are additional skills there as well, because quite often electrifying an old apartment building has more to do with engineering as well as the trade outcomes.

**The CHAIR:** I am conscious of the time.

**Daniela DE MARTINO:** That flew.

**The CHAIR:** Martha, jump in.

**Martha HAYLETT:** Just in terms of specialising in the renewable energy space for apartments – and we have heard that there are some people that are taking it as their niche and then there are others who are not – how can the Victorian government support more businesses to specialise in this field? Is it what you were saying, Kate, about incentivising employers? That is a bit more of a training point. But how do we boost this field of work so that we can have the workforce to actually do it?

**Kate RAYMOND:** Ensuring the places are there for these solar and battery accreditation required courses, which are post-trade qualifications, is necessary, that they are adequately trained in those particular technologies.

**Neil ROBERTS:** I would add that one of the difficulties with existing strata schemes is getting those projects raised, because trying to get a project proposed, adequate advice, the strata managers and the strata committee – getting all of that in line so that electricians can actually get their teeth into those jobs is a significant hurdle.

**Martha HAYLETT:** We have heard that loud and clear today, haven't we?

**Daniela DE MARTINO:** We have.

**The CHAIR:** Terrific. Thank you so much to you all for joining us in a great discussion about your industry. We really look forward to having further discussions, obviously, with the minister about what we can do to support more electricians, because we know in our communities and in our electorates there are kids who would give their eyeteeth to become electricians, and we would really like to see more and more students choosing that pathway. Thank you very much and thanks for your time today. We really appreciate it. We will end the broadcast now.

**Witnesses withdrew.**