



Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Thursday 15 May 2025

Members of the Legislative Council

60th Parliament

President

Shaun Leane

Deputy President

Wendy Lovell

Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Jaclyn Symes

Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Lizzie Blandthorn

Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

David Davis (from 27 December 2024)

Georgie Crozier (to 27 December 2024)

Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Evan Mulholland (from 31 August 2023)

Matthew Bach (to 31 August 2023)

Member	Region	Party	Member	Region	Party
Bach, Matthew ¹	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib	Luu, Trung	Western Metropolitan	Lib
Batchelor, Ryan	Southern Metropolitan	ALP	Mansfield, Sarah	Western Victoria	Greens
Bath, Melina	Eastern Victoria	Nat	McArthur, Bev	Western Victoria	Lib
Berger, John	Southern Metropolitan	ALP	McCracken, Joe	Western Victoria	Lib
Blandthorn, Lizzie	Western Metropolitan	ALP	McGowan, Nick	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib
Bourman, Jeff	Eastern Victoria	SFFP	McIntosh, Tom	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Broad, Gaele	Northern Victoria	Nat	Mulholland, Evan	Northern Metropolitan	Lib
Copsey, Katherine	Southern Metropolitan	Greens	Payne, Rachel	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LCV
Crozier, Georgie	Southern Metropolitan	Lib	Puglielli, Aiv	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Greens
Davis, David	Southern Metropolitan	Lib	Purcell, Georgie	Northern Victoria	AJP
Deeming, Moira ²	Western Metropolitan	IndLib	Ratnam, Samantha ⁵	Northern Metropolitan	Greens
Erdogan, Enver	Northern Metropolitan	ALP	Shing, Harriet	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Ermacora, Jacinta	Western Victoria	ALP	Somyurek, Adem	Northern Metropolitan	DLP
Ettershank, David	Western Metropolitan	LCV	Stitt, Ingrid	Western Metropolitan	ALP
Galea, Michael	South-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Symes, Jaclyn	Northern Victoria	ALP
Gray-Barberio, Anasina ³	Northern Metropolitan	Greens	Tarlamis, Lee	South-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Heath, Renee	Eastern Victoria	Lib	Terpstra, Sonja	North-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Hermans, Ann-Marie	South-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib	Tierney, Gayle	Western Victoria	ALP
Leane, Shaun	North-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Tyrrell, Rikkie-Lee	Northern Victoria	PHON
Limbrick, David ⁴	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LP	Watt, Sheena	Northern Metropolitan	ALP
Lovell, Wendy	Northern Victoria	Lib	Welch, Richard ⁶	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib

¹ Resigned 7 December 2023

² Lib until 27 March 2023

³ Appointed 14 November 2024

⁴ LDP until 26 July 2023

⁵ Resigned 8 November 2024

⁶ Appointed 7 February 2024

Party abbreviations

AJP – Animal Justice Party; ALP – Australian Labor Party; DLP – Democratic Labour Party;

Greens – Australian Greens; IndLib – Independent Liberal; LCV – Legalise Cannabis Victoria;

LDP – Liberal Democratic Party; Lib – Liberal Party of Australia; LP – Libertarian Party;

Nat – National Party of Australia; PHON – Pauline Hanson’s One Nation; SFFP – Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party

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Thursday 15 May 2025

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

Papers

Papers

Tabled by Clerk:

A Statutory Rule under the Health Practitioner Regulation National Law – No. 26.

Business of the house

Notices

Notices of motion given.

Motions

Middle East conflict

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (09:37): I move, by leave:

That this house:

(1) notes that:

- (a) since the ceasefire in Gaza ended on 25 March 2025, more than 2.1 million people are again trapped, bombed and starved, while at crossing points food, medicine, fuel and shelter supplies and equipment are piling up, stuck in a blockade of aid;
- (b) according to the Ministry of Health, 2545 people have been killed and 6856 injured since the escalation of hostilities on 18 March 2025;
- (c) Gaza's medical system is at breaking point, overwhelmed by traumatic injuries, damaged infrastructure and severe shortages of nurses, doctors, specialists, supplies and equipment;
- (d) as reported by UNICEF, access to food and drinking water is diminishing, malnutrition and diseases are spreading and vaccines are running low, with 75 per cent of households reporting deteriorating access to water over the past month, and acute watery diarrhoea – often fatal – now accounts for a quarter of disease cases reported in Gaza;
- (e) the heads of UN agencies, including the World Health Organization, UNICEF and the World Food Programme, recently issued a statement which said, 'We are witnessing acts of war in Gaza that show an utter disregard for human life. New Israeli displacement orders have forced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to flee yet again, with no safe place to go. No-one is safe.'

(2) does not support the State of Israel's continued invasion of Gaza; and

(3) supports calls for an immediate and permanent ceasefire.

Leave refused.

Members statements

Kurdistan National Prayer Breakfast

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (09:39): Last month I had the honour of travelling to Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan region of Iraq, to attend the inaugural Kurdistan National Prayer Breakfast, a historic gathering that brought together political, faith and civil society leaders from across Iraq and around the world. The gathering was one that was quite informative. It was one where through candid policy discussions and reflections we were all united in a shared commitment to promoting social cohesion, interfaith dialogue, peace, religious freedom and human rights.

As a member for Northern Metropolitan Region, the visit was deeply meaningful to me. My electorate is home to the majority of Victoria's 40,000-strong Iraqi community, including large and proud Kurdish, Assyrian, Chaldean, Syriac and Arab communities. The struggles faced by these communities on their journey to Australia, including displacement, persecution and migration, are directly tied to the history of this region. During the visit I had the privilege of engaging with faith leaders who are well known in my local community, including His Holiness Mar Awa III, the Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East; His Excellency Archbishop Bashar Warda, Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Erbil; and His Eminence Archbishop Mor Nicodemus Daoud Sharaf of the Syriac Orthodox Church. These institutions have been and continue to be powerful voices for justice and unity here in Australia as well as abroad. A particularly moving moment came during my visit to the Lalish Temple, a sacred site for the Yazidi people. The stories of survival shared with me are ones that I will never forget.

I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge Mr Ayad Yokhanna from VicTalk – *(Time expired)*

Traralgon Girl Guides

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (09:40): As ambassador of the Gippsland Girl Guides, I was delighted to celebrate an extraordinary milestone last weekend, the centenary of the Traralgon Girl Guides. This remarkable achievement represents not only longevity but a century of positive impact on young women in our region and the broader community and growing leaders. I congratulate Gumnut, aka Amanda Clark, and current and past leaders and guides on this wonderful achievement.

Federal election

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (09:41): May I also take the opportunity to congratulate my federal Nationals colleagues Anne Webster, Sam Birrell and my friend Darren Chester on returning some of the highest margins in the nation; and Andrew Lethlean, our Nationals Bendigo candidate, a businessman, a family man and a community champion, who achieved an extraordinary outcome – he won a 10 per cent swing away from Labor, the largest swing in the entire country. This was a mighty effort to take Labor down to the wire in a key seat, and it sends a clear message to the Premier Jacinta Allan in her own backyard. I credit Andrew with amazing hard work. I also make comment to my dear colleague Gaelle Broad and our amazing team in head office – our state director Lyndel, Adam, Bart and the huge team of volunteers behind. Make no mistake, we are empowered by this result and will continue to focus on Bendigo as the state election looms next year.

Retail and hospitality workers

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:42): Rage Against the Machine once told us 'We gotta take the power back', and it is true – too many workers in retail and hospitality jobs are being treated like crap in this country, and they have had enough. Big companies are making huge profits off the back of their often casual, often young and often migrant background workers. Every week I hear another twisted way that staff are being mistreated in their workplaces, whether it is at Grill'd, City Chic, Domino's, Cotton On, Chemist Warehouse, Lovisa, EB Games – the list is endless. People are being underpaid, overworked, refused breaks and forced to buy and wear company products and are on the receiving end of behaviour that nobody should have to tolerate. It is just not good enough – workers deserve better. A shout-out to the Retail and Fast Food Workers Union, who fight for these workers right across this country. Taking the power back means fighting together for workers rights. We are stronger together, and I stand with retail and hospo workers in their battles for better pay and better conditions. More strength to your arm.

Simon Lund

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (09:43): I want to pay tribute to an exceptional man, a man who made a profound and lasting difference to his community and to the lives and property of the people for whom he turned out time and time again. Simon Lund worked for

decades within fire services and frontline response. He was so well known and respected, admired and loved across Gippsland, and when he was diagnosed with terminal oesophageal cancer his community rallied around him, because they loved him and they honoured him and they wanted to respect him. Simon, rather than taking the time that he had to be with his beautiful family, including his wife Tracie, stayed and fought until the very end to make sure that people in positions within the CFA could have access to support, to services and to programs to recognise the harm that they put themselves in, as well as making sure he could continue to contribute to the CFA family and to his brigade, Traralgon West, as well as the work within group officer and district planning committee chair positions. Simon was a proud member of the ASU and the fire and emergency services subgroup. He was a delegate. He was a secretary. He was the president of the Morwell branch. He is so loved. He will be so missed, and the legacy he has created will go on for many, many decades to come. Vale, Simon Lund.

Education system

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (09:45): I want to draw the chamber's attention to the developing, strange denials by the Labor government, the Minister for Education and the Treasurer yesterday of the cuts that they have instituted in the \$2.4 billion education cut. There is no doubt about this cut: it is in their own cabinet committee minutes. It is there; it is plain. They have decided not to increase funding according to the Gonski formula that they signed up to – according to the Gonski formula that all state governments and the federal government have agreed to. This will put federal money at risk, so our students, our kids, will have less funding than they otherwise would. It is disingenuous of the government to say, 'Oh, we've increased funding.' It is true that their overall funding has increased, but not at the rate that they have committed to. They have wound back the rate of increase in funding, and our kids are suffering for it. The Chip Le Grand article today in the *Age* very clearly calls the government out on this, and I think he is right. It is a Trumpian denial that we are seeing of this government, and they are denying things that are black and white, things that are dead clear – just denying and denying and denying. This is what we see with this government. They are always denying the obvious and the facts. They have always got a spin, but the truth is our kids are paying the price.

Daniel Peterson-English

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:46): I rise to recognise the life of Daniel Peterson-English. Daniel was a kind, generous and sensitive young man who loved films, animals and video games, but most of all he loved his mum Margaret. Daniel suffered from mental illness for many years, and he appreciated everything that Margaret did for him. He reminded her often by leaving flowers for her to find at the door of their home in Eltham when she returned from her shift as a nurse. But the demonisation of people during the pandemic led to a tragic series of events. Margaret tells us that up to 22 September 2021 Daniel had only experienced kindness from local police, but on that morning, after being unsettled by a minor earthquake, he travelled to the city by train, as he often did, to check on his friends amongst the homeless people in the city. Daniel had an exemption from wearing a mask, but this led to an argument with police, culminating in him being thrown violently to the tiles of Flinders Street Station. The footage is sickening and was seen by millions. Margaret ended her long career immediately to care for him, because she felt terrible that she was unable to answer Daniel's calls for help that day. She says Daniel suffered from PTSD ever since and was never the same. He passed away in March this year. He was only 32. Let the record show that Daniel English was greatly loved by his family and the community and will be missed by all.

Barwon Heads Road

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (09:48): The Allan Labor government is making the investments that our growing communities need. Armstrong Creek is a booming suburb in Geelong, quickly becoming one of the region's most sought after places to live, work and play. That is why I was so pleased to join Libby Coker MP and Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles for the announcement of an extra \$68 million for stage 2 of the Barwon

Heads Road upgrade, taking it to Lower Duneed Road, and I take this opportunity to congratulate both of them for their re-election in the recent federal election. This upgrade means four lanes, better intersections and a shared use path for pedestrians and cyclists and builds on our government's \$125 million commitment, ensuring locals can stay connected. With work starting in late 2025, this upgrade will cut congestion, boost safety and make travel easier across the region. It is a huge win for Armstrong Creek and local communities and proof of what is possible when the federal and state governments work together.

Western Victoria Region sporting facilities

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (09:49): On another matter, we are also backing local sports. The new Armstrong Creek sports centre, funded through the regional sports infrastructure program, will feature multisport courts, a civic plaza, cafe and EV chargers, driving participation, business and jobs. Construction is starting very soon. And in Torquay a brand new hockey pitch is coming to Banyul-Warri Fields, complete with lighting, spectator seating, an electronic scoreboard and upgraded amenities, including a new car park. A big shout-out to Andrew Crowley from the Torquay Tornadoes Hockey Club, who told me how this new facility will finally give the club a home – (*Time expired*)

Easter

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (09:50): It was so great to join many of the churches in my community in the north for Easter services. I had the moving experience of joining St Charbel Parish in Greenvale for stations of the cross and indeed going to a special screening of *The Passion of the Christ* at United Cinemas in Craigieburn with Alive in Spirit, the Chaldean Church youth group, with Father Mahir Murad. I also attended the Saturday evening service at the Assyrian Church of the East, led by His Grace Mar Benyamin Elya, with thousands in the community for a moving Easter service.

Bishu Parva

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (09:50): I also had a fantastic evening at the Far Western Nepalese Society of Victoria for their Bishu Parva festival. Happy Nepali New Year to all my friends in the Nepalese community, and thank you to my friends Naresh Rawal and Keshav Pant for a terrific event.

Sri Lankan New Year

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (09:51): It was once again great to attend the Sri Lankan New Year festival in Craigieburn with so many dear friends in the Sri Lankan community. I want to sincerely thank Asanga Witharanage, the chief organiser, and all the committee members of the North Victoria Sri Lankan Welfare and Cultural Association for a fantastic day.

Duck hunting

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (09:51): The Greens will keep standing up to save Victoria's native waterbirds. The duck-shooting season in Victoria should be cancelled. Not only is this a year of drought which is wreaking havoc on wild bird populations, as the slaughter continues we now see reports, as we do every year, of shooters flagrantly breaking the law. There is evidence from Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting documenting cases where shooters are engaging in illegal activities, including using toxic shot, using boats and shooting protected species. A reminder to everyone: it is illegal to use or possess toxic lead shot; it is illegal to hunt ducks from a boat with the motor running on open water such as lakes, reservoirs or dams; and it is illegal to use boats to pursue, hunt, take or destroy game in Victoria. The Regional Victorians Opposed to Duck Shooting have reported these illegal activities to the regulator and included photos in their evidence. We understand the regulator has yet to respond, and I hope it is with prompt and appropriate action.

There are even incidents of shooters themselves being hit with stray shotgun pellets and evidence from shooters warning each other that they have been shot. This reminds us how much of Victoria becomes a public shooting range for months across this season of slaughter. These are public waterways. There are no signs, usually, warning the public that these are areas where shooters are active, and you risk getting shot if you are out having a walk. I will be asking the minister: who is liable if someone gets shot and injured on our wetlands?

Vyshyvanka Day

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:53): Today is Vyshyvanka Day, a day which celebrates the wearing of a vyshyvanka, Ukrainian traditional dress, as a way to nurture and promote Ukrainian culture. Vyshyvankas are identified by their distinctive form of embroidery and are an iconic symbol of Ukraine. Of the many heinous acts inflicted by Russia on the Ukrainian people, one of the most insidious has been the attempt to deny and destroy culture. The wearing of such garments on days like today has therefore taken on an even greater importance over the past few years. Today I am honoured to be giving this statement wearing my new vyshyvanka, which was gifted to me as part of my recent visit to Ukraine. Last year on this day the Victorian Parliament was visited by members of our Ukrainian community for Vyshyvanka Day. For some, me included, it would be the last time that we would see the late, great Stefan Romaniw. Stefan was a powerhouse advocate for Ukraine both in Australia and across the world and was adored and respected by all who met him. We all dearly miss him. Today again the Ukrainian community has joined us in Parliament to mark this special day, and I acknowledge the presence of both the Association of Ukrainians in Victoria and the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations here. I encourage all members to join them and us in marking this important cultural day and show Ukraine that we continue to stand with them. Slava Ukraini.

Drought

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (09:54): I rise to highlight the growing impact that drought is having not just on farmers but on every Victorian household. In the Eastern Victoria Region, especially across Gippsland, dairy farms are running out of water and feed. Some have already begun destocking; others are facing financial ruin. But it is not just a rural issue. When farmers cannot produce, supermarket shelves cannot stock food. When stock numbers fall and crops fall, food prices rise. In a cost-of-living crisis this is really hurting families. Without urgent drought relief, things will only get worse. Milk, meat, fruit, vegetables – all of those things will get more and more expensive. South Australia has stepped in with real support, but in Victoria the Allan Labor government has done nothing – no subsidies, no relief, no urgency – and this is not an issue that can be ignored. If the government does not act now and deliver meaningful support to our farmers, the damage will reach every single family and every single household.

Greater Dandenong Anti-Poverty Consortium

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:56): I recently had the privilege of attending a meeting with the Greater Dandenong Anti-Poverty Consortium, a dedicated network of local service providers working together to address poverty in our community. We discussed some of the key challenges facing Greater Dandenong, including homelessness and housing, bill stress and social isolation. With one in five residents currently living below the poverty line, it is clear we need practical and lasting solutions to create positive change. What stood out to me was the insight shared by those in the room and their dedication to improving the lives of Dandenong's most vulnerable. I want to acknowledge Elena Sheldon and the Springvale Learning and Activities Centre for their Real Chance program, which re-engaged young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness through skills-based training and pathways into employment. Despite its success, the program ended due to a lack of funding. We desperately need ongoing support and investment into local initiatives that tackle our communities' unique challenges. I commend the important work of the Anti-Poverty Consortium and encourage my south-eastern colleagues who have not met with the steering committee to take the time to do so and listen to their calls for collaboration and commitment to real change.

Drought

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (09:57): Over the past few months I have been meeting with farmers across Western Victoria to hear about the drought. I have met with and heard from dairy farmers in the south-west and sheep and grain producers in the Grampians and Wimmera. I have also met with the United Dairy Farmers of Victoria (UDV), the Victorian Farmers Federation and GrainGrowers Australia. In addition, I have met with small business owners and community groups, including last week in Pomonal, Moyston, Mafeking and Willaura. Anyone driving through communities like Koroit, Simpson, Timboon, Orford, Cobden, Dunkeld, Nelson – I could go on – can see the dry and pastureless land. In many cases stock are in holding pens being manually fed fodder. Supplementary feed is in tight supply across the state.

Farmers are the backbone of our communities and our regional economies. What hurts them hurts everyone. Our local grain supply companies are reporting to me the stress that their agents encounter when they visit farmers. The impact on wellbeing and mental health for farmers and our communities is concerning. I want to thank everyone who has called me and shared their experience.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Reset the clock. This is not a provocative members statement. I will reset it again if there is more yelling, until we get through it without interruption.

Jacinta ERMACORA: I appreciate that; this is an important issue. Over the past few months I have been meeting with farmers across Western Victoria to hear about the drought. I have met with and heard from dairy farmers in the south-west and sheep and grain producers in the Grampians and Wimmera. I have also met with the UDV, the Victorian Farmers Federation and GrainGrowers Australia. In addition, I have met with small business owners and community groups, including last week in Halls Gap, Pomonal, Moyston, Mafeking and Willaura. Anyone driving through communities like Koroit, Simpson, Timboon, Orford, Cobden, Dunkeld, Nelson – I could go on – can see the dry and pastureless landscape. In many areas stock are in holding pens, manually fed grain and fodder. Supplementary feed is in tight supply across the entire state.

Farmers are the backbone of our communities and our regional economies. What hurts them hurts everyone. One local grain supply company has reported to me the stress their agents encounter when they visit farmers to negotiate prices. The impact on wellbeing and mental health for farmers and our communities is concerning. I want to thank everyone who has shared their experiences and concerns with me, and I want to assure all my constituents in western and south-western Victoria that I have heard them and I will continue to advocate for them.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region schools

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:00): Education transforms lives, and it has been a great privilege to visit several schools in my region. I have visited Emerson School in Dandenong, David Scott School in Frankston and now, more recently, Berry Street School in Cranbourne Road, Narre Warren. These schools are all unique because they are developed for young people who have challenges in their lives. In many cases we have young people who are truant and not going to school, but in this case these schools provide education for young people who would otherwise miss out. In the case of Berry Street they take in young offenders and they take in young people who are struggling with homelessness, and to see this government rip out \$2.4 billion from the budget for education is simply criminal. Education is something that can actually change lives. When we have young people who are struggling with their mental health, when there is an increase in that and there is a decrease in personal resilience, we have to encourage education in schools. We have to also provide alternative forms of education to help young people that have special needs because of their circumstances, which are unprecedented since the incredible lockdowns that people in Victoria experienced, in Melbourne, the most locked-down city in the world. I want to applaud the people at Berry Street. There are a number of wellbeing people there. They work with young people to make

sure that they have the opportunity to go to school. They cater for years 7 to 12, and their vision is for all students to have a high-quality education where students can thrive, achieve and belong.

National Road Safety Week

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (10:02): This week is National Road Safety Week. It is an annual event which is aimed at raising awareness about road safety. As you know, I have nearly 40 years experience in the road transport sector. That includes serving time as the national president and branch secretary of the Transport Workers' Union. I have seen firsthand some of the horrific accidents that have occurred on our roads – from heavy vehicles to commuter traffic. That is why the work of the Transport Accident Commission, the TAC, is so important to injured drivers. Did you know that for every 1 kilometre per hour average increase when you travel on the road, there is a 4 per cent increase in the fatal crash risk and a 3 per cent increased risk of having a serious crash? And the risk of death for pedestrians hit by a car rises 4.5 per cent each time you increase from 50 kilometres an hour to 65 kilometres an hour. We also know that driving under the influence of alcohol and drugs is a risk, and it is not a small one. That is why the work of the Transport Accident Commission, in partnership with the Allan Labor government and the Department of Transport and Planning, to improve road safety in my community of Southern Metro is important. There is more work to be done, but because of the work of the TAC, we are getting there.

Business of the house

Notices of motion

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:03): I move:

That the consideration of notices of motion, government business, 278 to 936, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Bills

Fire Services Property Amendment (Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund) Bill 2025

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Harriet Shing:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (10:04): There are times in politics where doing the right thing transcends the political left and right, and this is one of those times. For all the smoke and mirrors, the spin and the falsehoods that we see the government have peddled, we are yet to see any honesty. Those opposite claim this bill is about supporting volunteers – the people that turn up free of charge to fight fires, save properties, rescue people and protect communities. These are the same volunteers that have to endure the CFA being systematically gutted by the Labor Party, the same Labor Party that continually punch down on volunteers, because they have dismantled any concept of volunteer control. And now the Labor Party are telling them – not asking them – that they are going to have to pay for the privilege of volunteering. And the kick in the guts? Those opposite think that volunteers should be thankful for that, because according to those opposite, government knows best. We always hear from those opposite about their values, but in reality they do not believe in any values at all; they just selfishly believe in themselves. Because if the Labor Party truly believed in equality, why would they be slugging farmers with a 189 per cent increase in the fire services levy? Wouldn't there be a more equal spread? If the Labor Party truly believed in a fair go, why didn't they consult with CFA volunteers or SES volunteers, rural communities, local councils or even our union members? Why did they choose to keep them in the dark? How is that fair? 'Delivering for all Victorians', 'Doing what matters', 'Building Australia's future' – these are all hollow, cheap slogans from a soulless political movement. Because as much as those opposite might chant these hollow words, they clearly have no tangible bearing on this bill. Delivering for selected Victorians, doing what matters to the government,

building Labor's future – that is the honest truth about what those opposite actually stand for, because those opposite certainly do not stand with volunteers and farmers, like we do on this side of the chamber. So why is the government trying to push this through? It is to plug a big black budget hole, because they have run out of money, plain and simple. Instead of prudent financial management, they have taken the old trick out of the old, tired Labor playbook: tax, tax, tax.

But even some of their own Labor MPs are starting to wake up to how awful this new regime is, though they are powerless to stop it. The member for Ripon Ms Haylett, who only this week turned up to a public meeting, refused to admit that she supported the legislation in the Assembly. Ms Haylett said there was 'no straightforward answer'; *Hansard* says otherwise. She told frustrated locals that she had raised concerns with both the Premier and the Treasurer. She then went on to say that she wants to have 'massive changes' to the regime, despite voting for it. If the Treasurer was here, we could ask her, 'What were those massive changes that the member for Ripon came to you and asked for?' Because if you cannot even convince your own MPs to support this, why on earth should anyone else?

But do not take it from just me – and do not take it from your ignored MPs – take it from Peter Marshall and the United Firefighters Union, who have slammed this tax. Take it from SES and CFA volunteers. Take it from local governments, some of whom are even refusing to collect the tax. Take it from farmers who have rallied twice in the space of a week on the steps of this Parliament. Listen to their stories, like Trevor from Ballan. He has said:

My wife and I run a modest beef cattle farm in Ballan and are very concerned with the bill proposing the new emergency services tax. As a majority of this impost is expected to be met by farming communities, it goes to show we are an easy target for the government to bleed in order to ease its budgetary problems.

Ian and Sally Crick from Beaufort said:

As farmers in western Victoria, we wish to express our opposition to the government's Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund. This tax financially discriminates against Victoria's hardworking farmers, already suffering extreme drought conditions.

Ted O'Brien from Elliminyt said:

As a Victorian ratepayer, farmer and CFA volunteer for over 45 years, I wish to strongly object to the proposed ESVF legislation. The bill is erroneously named the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund, but it is proposed to fund much more and does not fund volunteers.

Marty Gleeson from Clarendon, just south of Ballarat, said:

This bill will drastically raise the fire services property levy for farmers, forcing us to pay more. It also expands the levy beyond the fire services to things like Triple Zero Victoria and Emergency Management Victoria, which should be funded by the government, not by an extra charge on property owners.

Sarah from Glendaruel–Mount Beckworth fire brigade said:

Our community is facing economic challenges, including drought conditions, increased input costs for agriculture and ongoing fire and flood recovery. The ESVF tax will worsen the financial pressures, reduce local spending and compound economic stress on our largely rural areas.

Ruth from Smythesdale said:

As a CFA volunteer for 20 years, this new tax is an insult to my service. The tax is unproportionately taxing the very people who do the greatest service as volunteers.

Philip and Sue from Burrumbeet have said:

While we acknowledge the importance of funding our emergency services, it is concerning that this tax appears to support non-frontline services that have traditionally been funded out of government consolidated revenue. It appears this new tax is a way to shift the cost of emergency services from the government to the Victorian public.

Jodi Jansen from Beaufort said:

Coming from a third-generation farming family, I see firsthand the toll that prolonged drought and rising costs are taking on people like my father. He is up every day feeding stock, buying inexpensive barley and lucerne and holding onto hope that lambing season will help recover some of the mounting losses. The emotional and mental toll of trying to survive season after season under pressure is enormous. This levy feels like one more burden too many, and for many farmers it could be the breaking point.

These are just a very small sample of the people that have contacted me and many other MPs across this chamber to try and stop this levy. The last one I want to mention is Steve Peel, a sixth-generation farmer from Barunah Plains. He said:

Our family has a long and proud history of involvement with the CFA. My grandfather was the captain of the Inverleigh fire brigade. My grandfather was a life member. My father was a member and later captain of the Barunah North brigade, and I have been a member of the Barunah North brigade for 25 years and am now nominated as deputy group officer for the lead group. Our family have been involved in many significant fires, including Cressy, Ash Wednesday, Linton, Enfield, Dereel, as well as numerous other small incidents. We have also been called out at all hours of the day for car accidents, truck crashes, machinery fires and shed fires. The introduction of these new levies could be the breaking point for us. If implemented, I may be forced to leave the CFA, the organisation I love serving, and I will need to find an additional \$30,000 to \$50,000 just to keep my farm afloat.

I need to congratulate Steve Peel. He started a petition, which I am proud to sponsor, which is calling for the government to cease this heartless tax. Since starting this petition just a week ago he has already gained nearly 14,000 signatures.

I want to give a shout-out to every single farmer, every single CFA volunteer, every member of a union and every single person from a rural community that took a stand and signed the petition. The Liberals and Nationals will always stand with our farmers and our volunteers in rural Victoria, because without farmers there is no food. I urge those on the crossbench to also stand with our farmers. Please help us defeat this unfair tax. Send a message to the government that you vote with your heart, not the heartless, and simply do right over wrong, because the right thing to do is to defeat this unfair tax.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (10:14): Victoria is in a climate emergency. We saw it during the Black Summer bushfires, which burnt for months across this state, destroying 1.5 million hectares and tragically leading to five deaths and blanketing the state in toxic smoke for months. We have seen it in our storm and flooding events: swathes of northern and western Victoria were hit during 2022 with devastating floods that they are still recovering from. We have seen it in the sudden violent storms that down trees, powerlines and communications, isolating towns like Mirboo North for weeks. We are seeing it with the drought that is devastating my electorate of Western Victoria and growing parts of the state, and we are seeing it with the deadliest climate emergency's heatwaves. The number of very hot days has more than doubled since 2005, and the state has warmed overall by 1.4 degrees since pre-industrial levels. Unless we stop opening new coal and gas mines and start shutting down the ones we have, we will exceed the 2-degree target.

Communities around the state are experiencing rolling climate disasters, with the next hitting them before they have picked up the pieces from the last. All of these more intense, more frequent climate emergencies in Victoria are creating increased pressure on our emergency services. Every one of us relies on these services to keep our communities safe, and that need is only growing in a bushfire-prone state staring down the barrel of climate collapse. We know when fires tore through the Grampians this year dozens of firefighting trucks had to be retired because they were too old. Volunteers felt rightfully unsafe, and there were serious shortfalls. Our SES – critical in responding particularly to storms and floods – has been crying out for secure funding for years and similarly struggles to secure adequate facilities and equipment. Many fire trucks in urban areas are also well past their use-by date and at risk of failure due to no rolling replacement plan. Funding for recovery is getting harder to come by for communities who are affected by these disasters. None of this is acceptable. I am genuinely terrified about what lies ahead, particularly for rural and regional Victoria. The climate crisis is here now, as we have seen, and we are not well enough prepared.

Funding our emergency services properly and ensuring that funding cannot be eaten into to fill budget black holes is a critical part of climate preparedness. This was a key lesson from the parliamentary inquiry into the devastating 2022 floods, and numerous recommendations point to the need for increased funding and secure funding for our emergency services. This levy is part of the government's response. While this is not necessarily the response we would have taken and we could argue all day about some of the government's other budget priorities, this is the only option that the government put on the table to ensure our emergency services are funded properly.

We had serious concerns about this levy, especially regarding the impact on farmers, residents experiencing hardship and rural councils, and we were not convinced that enough of the fund was going towards actually supporting frontline emergency services with everything that they need. That is why the Greens first abstained from voting on this bill in the lower house to consider it in more detail and consult with a variety of stakeholders, including local councils, farmers, members of the CFA, the rural fire brigade, SES, firefighters and many more. We have worked really hard over these past couple of months, meeting with all those stakeholders to understand their concerns and look at how this bill could be improved. I would sincerely like to thank them for the time and energy that they have put in to meeting with us. As a result of your advocacy, we have secured some major improvements to reduce the burden on those doing it toughest, like our farmers, and to make sure the money actually goes to where it needs to. Thanks to the Greens' negotiations, every dollar from the levy will now go directly to strengthening emergency services and cannot be used to fill budget black holes or fund activities that are not frontline emergency services. People expect 100 per cent of this levy to go towards frontline emergency services, and thanks to us it now will.

We are also pleased to see that Labor agreed to a \$10 million a year rolling program to replace ageing, unsafe fire trucks that were putting firefighters and communities at risk. We have been provided assurances that our fire stations will remain safely staffed. They have agreed to increase the funding for FRV from 87.5 per cent to 90 per cent and remove the words 'up to' to ensure that this funding level is guaranteed.

We are proud to have argued for better recognition of the pressure farmers are currently under, including a drought relief package to be announced before the budget and exemptions for drought-affected farmers from paying the new levy rate for the duration of the drought. There will also be funding to support farmers to reduce their energy bills. We have argued for a reduced rate for primary producers, and it is worth noting at this point that the rates for different categories of property are not actually part of the bill itself; they are not part of this legislation. This is something set by the Treasurer outside the bill. The Treasurer has agreed to lower the rate for primary producers, and while it is not nearly as far as we would have liked, it is certainly an improvement.

For councils there will be funding allocated to support the administration of the levy. They will not be required to determine the volunteer status to work out who gets a rebate, and we have received assurances that they will not be left holding the debt if residents do not pay. They will be given 12 months to adjust their system to determine the difference between a primary and secondary residence. To all these groups: I know this is not everything you wanted, but be assured we listened and did go in to bat for you on those things, and if not for your advocacy, none of this would have happened.

I want to thank the government for being willing to compromise, but I would urge the government to keep engaging with all the affected groups, like farmers, fires and councils, who have been raising concerns, many of which fall outside the legislation itself, such as the differential rates applied and safe working conditions for frontline responders. Please listen to them, work with them in good faith and ensure they are supported. We all depend on the work of these groups, and they deserve respect and fair treatment. The final levy may not be perfect and I know not everyone will be happy, but we have done everything we can to secure key improvements, ensuring a fairer levy, while also – we have to remember this is point of the levy – making sure emergency services get what they need amidst a climate crisis. If we had left the table, as many others in this place did, the alternative outcome would

have been no funding certainty for these key services, no truck replacements and in fact likely cuts that would leave communities even more vulnerable –

Members interjecting.

Anasina Gray-Barberio: On a point of order, President, we gave the member across the chamber the respect of silence, and we would like to be afforded that same silence as well while the member finishes her speech.

The PRESIDENT: I uphold the point of order. Mr McGowan, Dr Mansfield is to be heard in silence.

Sarah MANSFIELD: If we had left the table, as many others in this place did and have, the alternative outcome would have been no funding certainty for these key services and in fact likely cuts that would leave communities even more vulnerable the next time we have a climate crisis.

Importantly, in passing this bill, there is increased funding for these services that is protected. It is secure from government decisions down the track that might seek to cut their funding. As the party for climate action, funding emergency services is non-negotiable for us. The Greens changes ensure Victoria will have the trucks, staff and resources needed to protect lives, homes and communities, and that is something we should all support. For these reasons we will be supporting the bill today.

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:22): I am rendered speechless after listening to the Leader of the Greens give her speech. All I can say is that this is what happens when we have to deal with the Greens and the crossbench to have any sort of normality and fairness in this state. We are in a situation where people are completely let down, and let those words that have been said today be on record so that when people do not have their fire trucks, when people do not have their needs met and when it is not fair, people are bleeding and the volunteers, the farmers and even our career firefighters are not getting the things that were promised, then let it be known that the Greens let them down today in this chamber.

I rise to speak also on this Fire Services Property Amendment (Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund) Bill 2025. I am absolutely gobsmacked to think that the Greens have sold out and got into bed – once again the watermelons are green on the outside, red on the inside – and are doing whatever the government wants them to do. So now we have no genuine opportunity to really go into bat for Victorians: our farmers, our volunteers who are on the front line, our CFA, our SES – they are all going to be taxed through the roof – and our FRV career firefighters, many of whom have come to be on the balcony today and have joined us because this is so important to them as well. These taxes are what this government is all about now. It has been incompetent with the budget that it has had, it has been incompetent with the money that it has held and it has just spent, spent, spent, and now we are in a situation where it is going to tax, tax, tax hardworking Victorians, giving them less but expecting more. It is simply unfair.

If I go to the actual bill itself, the Fire Services Property Amendment (Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund) Bill 2025 amends the Fire Services Property Levy Act 2012 to replace the existing fire services property levy with an expanded Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund levy from 1 July 2025. That means that people do not have a lot of time. They need to understand that as soon as this financial year is finished this is going to kick in. It changes the fixed charge component of the levy applicable to certain property types. It also inserts a new concession from the fixed charge for owners of residential land. What that means is that in respect to principal place of residence, as was mentioned, they will be able to make some adjustments for that over the next 12 months – the Greens have secured that. Well, let us just wait and see how that works out for everybody, because the reality is everybody is going to be sluggish with a tax. This new tax is going to slug Victorians \$2.1 billion over the next three years – that is right, \$2.1 billion over the next three years – with an additional \$610.9 million in 2025–26. It is going to expand its scope of collection so that now we are going to bleed our emergency services and we are going to bleed our farmers even more.

Some of these farmers are just hanging in there. In fact we have a number of farmers that have already sold up, packed up and moved on. It is just getting too difficult to live in this state with the way this government handles money – which is that basically it cannot handle money; it does not handle money. Now we are in a situation where Victorians are constantly paying the price for a Labor government that cannot handle money. It appears that despite promises of exemptions for volunteers, the government is set to implement the rebate system, and it is going to be administered by a yet to be named agency. Goodness me, what does that mean? Money will be getting funnelled somewhere, but nobody is going to actually know where that money is going. Meanwhile everyday Victorians are being bled with tax after tax after tax, struggling every day because this government wants to take more and give less. In a further attack on farmers already facing a levy, this is an increase of 189 per cent. People cannot afford these increases now – they simply cannot.

I was really pleased to hear my colleague Mr McCracken mention the generational CFA volunteers. Many people who have been in the CFA, as has been said in this place by my colleagues, are generational volunteers. They have been on the front line. Their great-grandfathers, their grandfathers, their fathers, their mothers, their sisters have been on the front line. They continue to give, and they continue to help us. There are areas where it is very difficult, where if we did not have our CFA volunteers, we would not be covered in our entirety. We need that component of both the career firefighters and the volunteers working side by side with respect, understanding that in many cases local knowledge and local volunteers can actually make the difference.

I also want to thank our SES community for the great work that they do. We are just so blessed in this country to have people who are prepared to put their lives on the line to help other people. That is the nature of what Australia is all about. It is what we were built on: people who were prepared to fight for their country, to stand up for what was right and to put themselves out for other people. And yet what does this government do? It taxes them, it taxes them and it taxes them to the point that there is nothing left. And we cannot see where that money is going, because I can tell you that I have visited enough stations to know that there are really old trucks out there. In fact I am horrified to think that we still have trucks that the CFA are expected to use where you have to sit on the back of the truck without any covering; it is outside. How archaic is that in a First World country? If this money is really getting funnelled to where it needs to go, then how come we are constantly putting our volunteers at risk, our emergency services people at risk, by not upgrading the appliances that they need and giving them the resources that they need in order to do their job and to do it well?

That is not to say that every appliance and every resource is out of date. Everybody knows that there have been some upgrades, but there are many, many places where those upgrades are outstanding, where we are still waiting. People are doing it tough, and now you are going to tax them even more. For many people, this is the final straw for them. The CFA are already having trouble getting volunteers. They are doing a great job trying to recruit and to train, but how can they do it if they are constantly under the pressure of taxes that this government intends to increase at such an exorbitant rate? Under the proposed changes the median fire services levy for primary producers will jump by a staggering 109 per cent increase. This change is going to result in some landholders receiving hikes in the tens of thousands of dollars, and they simply cannot afford it. They are running on a shoestring budget as it is.

The Labor government has confirmed what we feared. They are brazenly turning a funding mechanism that should have been focused on emergency services into a big new tax. The problem with these big new taxes is that we cannot always see where that money is being funnelled. Have a look at the type of documentation we are given as parliamentarians at budget time and the number of books and how convoluted it is. Simple budgets are not opaque, they are straightforward and easy to see; we can see where the money is going and we do not have these problems. But in this case, in this government, we have everything being so convoluted that it makes it very difficult to track where this money is going. But we know where it is not going, because you only have to look at some of the things that people are having to put up with, like old fire trucks.

The Greens think that there is going to be X amount of money going into upgrades. Well, let us just wait and see, because if I see one more fire truck where people are having to stand outside over the next couple of years, well, I will just be raising the roof over it, because simply this government has failed Victorians and is continuing to fail them with this amendment bill. It is absolutely ludicrous. Labor is actually taxing Victorians for more services. These are core businesses – farmers, for instance. Producers for every Victorian are being taxed in a way that is going to make it even more difficult for them to make a living and to produce. We know our state has issues with floods and fires, and we now have drought, and that impacts farmers. They take that risk, but when they are constantly being hitting with taxes, the pressure is just so much. Some of the farmers that wanted to come on the steps and actually protest could not come because of the pressure they were under. I spoke to some of the mothers who said, ‘My son wanted to come, but he just can’t deal with anything more. It’s too much.’ And what does this government do? It rewards them by slugging them with a tax that they simply cannot afford. This Labor government is tightening the screws on our emergency services volunteers and our farmers, and it is forcing them to pay this tax over a miserly and complicated rebate scheme to seek reimbursement.

The \$2.4 billion over three years is something that we are really going to be watching, because we do not want this passed. We want this bill stopped, we want the amendment stopped, and we would have loved to have had the support of the crossbench, but sadly they have sold out to the government. So now we know this is going to go through and Victorians are going to pay the price. Victorians already pay for public service agencies, such as Emergency Management Victoria, Forest Fire Management Victoria and Triple Zero Victoria, and now Victorians are being asked to pay for even more.

In short, with the Victorian government’s proposal to increase taxes I guess the concern is that this money is going to be paying external lawyers and consultants over \$33 million of taxpayer money. That is what happened in the 2023–24 financial year. So what we are concerned about is that this cash grab is going to be so poorly managed by this government, and people are literally bleeding. Services are bleeding. The last thing we need to do is to tax our emergency services and our farmers – as if the country and the state are not in enough trouble under Labor. But it is continually putting the pressure on services and on people who provide for this state in ways where it is vitally important for our survival and for us to be able to continue on as a functioning society. But no – tax, tax, tax. And what gets me is it is not just taxes but it is lies. It is constant words that mean absolutely nothing. The drivel that comes from the other side of the chamber is just a loud noise that constantly means absolutely nothing. They make promises and they tell everyone everything is fine. It is not fine. It is not fine when you are taxing your farmers, and it is not fine when you are taxing your emergency services to the point that they know that it is going to be so costly for them that they are going to miss out on more and more things. With all these promises, well, I can tell you there will be lots of people looking to see whether this government delivers on any of its promises, because so many Victorians have already paid the price and have been let down by this Labor government.

As I come to a conclusion, there is so much that I really want to say about this, but the big thing is that third-party rights are also going to be cut here. Government is going to be prohibiting the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund rate from being reviewable by the Supreme Court – that is in section 19. They are just going to be turning this funding mechanism – which should have been focused on emergency services and which should have been focused on helping our farmers to just be able to produce for our state – into a situation where we will not see where that money goes. There are many people who are going to be left without. And you can thank the Greens for some of this – not just the Labor government but the Greens, hand in hand with the Labor government, taxing our Fire Rescue Victoria, taxing our CFA, taxing our SES and taxing our hardworking farmers, who work seven days a week and take risks beyond all manner of things in order to produce food and opportunity for us to survive and sustain ourselves in this state. It is simply not good enough, it is an absolute disgrace. This bill should have been blocked and we should have had the help of the crossbench. Like I said, it is an absolutely appalling decision that has been made by the Greens, and we ask – in fact we implored –

them to change their mind, because that is the only way that we are going to be able to do something fair for all Victorians.

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (10:37): I rise to make a contribution to the Fire Services Property Amendment (Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund) Bill 2025. I oppose what is yet another great big new tax by the Allan Labor government. This new tax is yet another enormous hit on all Victorians. In the middle of a cost-of-living crisis we see a tax grab on the state's valuable resources – our primary producers. These are the people who put food on our table. This bill we are debating today has been devised primarily to expand the scope of the catchment of funding for emergency services and the hardworking volunteers of those organisations that currently fall under an umbrella, one of which is the CFA and another the FRV. This tax increase will nearly double the existing fire services levy, and yes, it might – and I will emphasise the word 'might' later in my speech – enhance the financial support available to these organisations to undertake their operations, but only by way of imposing an extra \$2.1 billion in taxes on Victorians. The question is: how much benefit will this extra \$2.1 billion in tax bring with this bill, which is proposed to replace the existing fire services property levy with a new funding framework that will also accommodate other services like the Victorian State Emergency Services, or the Victorian SES; Triple Zero Victoria; Emergency Management Victoria; and the Secretary of the Department of Justice and Community Safety, to name a few, and not just supporting the CFA or the FRV?

Households like those in my electorate, the Western Metropolitan Region, are already doing it tough. We have had to withstand cost-of-living increases along with all the other expenses that are going up. This increase effectively means they will be paying double next financial year. Victorians simply cannot afford this latest blatant tax grab. What this government wants us to believe is that this levy supports additional emergency services. What it really is is another burdensome tax on property owners in our state. It is unfairly targeted at primary producers. Our primary producers are hurting right now and are constantly being subjected to additional tax hikes. Under this Allan Labor government we have seen an increase in taxes and the introduction of new tax after new tax after new tax. To date we have experienced 60 new or increased taxes. Now, with this levy, we are focusing on our resources – the very people, the farmers, the primary producers who put food on our table, as I emphasise. What those sitting opposite us, the Greens and the crossbench, do not seem to realise is that when you target our primary producers and farmers with additional taxes this will flow down to consumers. The mums and dads and everyday Victorians will be paying more for their groceries and more for the household items as well as this additional increased tax in their rates bill. Farmers and primary producers simply cannot afford to continue to be the subject of a tax slug.

The bill broadens the tax burden on the already overtaxed Victorian community and widens the scope of how these funds are collected and dispensed across government operations and services. The issue with this bill is the dishonesty of this Allan Labor government to nearly double the levy rate for property owners under the pretext that it helps fund the core services our emergency services provide. But in essence it is just another tax grab. This government has produced 60 new or increased taxes.

To address the claim of natural disaster and rising frequency and severity, we are like other states and territories; Victoria is no different. We also experience these natural disasters, and yes, natural disasters are a reality at the moment. We do not see other governments in other states imposing a nearly doubled levy of rates on property owners to compensate for the government's reckless spending and mismanagement. We understand there is a rise in the frequency and no doubt the severity of natural disasters, which will put upward pressure on the budget. But the government need to understand and be able to work through these issues properly and prioritise the funding available to them without reverting to significant increase in property levies and taxes on Victorians that cannot afford them. There is a clear pattern regarding this Allan Labor government about mismanagement and taxation. They go hand in hand. Victorians are paying the price for their mismanagement of public funds, and they are using every means at their disposal to impose taxes on Victorians without addressing the underlying issues of resource allocation and emergency preparations.

This bill has been introduced in response to Fire Rescue Victoria, FRV, and other financial demands that this government is managing. However, when the government moved agencies previously funded out of consolidated revenue, including services such as Triple Zero Victoria and Emergency Recovery Victoria, into the new fund stream, the so-called Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund, you need to question whether this new model this government has created affects other services and whether the model will improve service delivery for Victorians. This is where some of the concern lies.

This new model addresses certain items. The bill as introduced amends the Country Fire Authority Act 1958 and Fire Rescue Victoria Act 1958 to allow this new model the flexibility to fund the CFA's and FRV's operating budgets. However, the new restructure provides some concern for the CFA and FRV. When you insert the word 'funding' with up to a percentage of the budget, the word 'up to' means no guarantee that the CFA will get that percentage or will see a real gouge out of that percentage. Whereas the previous model had a fixed guarantee that the FRV would get 87.5 per cent of their annual budget and the CFA would get 77.5 per cent of their annual budget, this new model says it is up to that percentage of 87. It is for portions. Also, this new model will fund up to 90 per cent of all the other services, including the Victorian SES, Triple Zero, State Control Centre, Emergency Recovery Victoria, Emergency Management Victoria, the emergency alert program, the emergency management operational communications program, Forest Fire Management Victoria and the support function within the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action. All this will be included in this model. How will it affect service delivery when the government is consolidating all these services under one umbrella? The rates and taxes collected also go to the other services I mentioned.

Just to clarify the commitment of this government to these services: back in December 2024 the government released a plan to fund several new or improved services, which included some funds to establish a rolling fleet replacement program for VICSES and the CFA, which is fantastic, because I have raised the issue in this chamber about member safety and how our fire truck fleets are past their use-by date and are not fit for purpose when tackling extreme situations. However, this Labor government have not said how the \$70 million initiative will be allocated. They also made this funding subject to this bill, which shows their lack of genuine commitment to upgrading the fleet. They also announced a doubling of the volunteer emergency services equipment program to upgrade the vehicles, equipment and station facilities, which is fantastic – this is vitally important funding so the hardworking men and women who volunteer under very stressful situations can access the very best equipment and facilities. And yet they have been told they will only get this equipment if this bill is supported. 'Rub my back and I'll rub yours': that is the way the government operates. It clearly shows the type of commitment this Allan government has for the Victorian SES and CFA's safety – 'rub mine and I'll rub yours.'

Other concerns have been raised regarding alarm bells and warning signals regarding this bill. Local governments who expect to bear the financial burden on households, farms and businesses have expressed concerns about their ability to effectively administer the new levy, further stretching their limited resources. Their peak body, the Municipal Association of Victoria, highlighted that councils are being tasked with responsibilities that they are ill equipped to handle. Importantly, the state government need to acknowledge that this this bill is not a council tax; they should not be shifting the blame of the tax onto council. The government must accept that this tax is coming from the state government and explain why they are doubling the levy and justify the benefit of expanding the emergency services.

The remaining matters I would like to address are in relation to the impact on commercial industries and primary producers in regard to this bill. Those on this side are very concerned about this increase in costs and the impact the new levy will have on commercial industries and primary producers. For commercial landowners, they are expected to increase to the magnitude of 100 per cent with this bill. Industrial landowners are looking at an increase of 64 per cent, and for primary producers a staggering 189 per cent is coming their way if this bill is passed. This should send alarm bells to every single primary producer in Victoria and every Victorian who purchases their products and uses their

products – the levy will make the cost go up and skyrocket. The government needs to understand that when primary producers and commercial landowners receive an additional tax grab by this government at every turn, citizens will eventually pay the price and the costs will be passed down to consumers. I heard firsthand from rental providers that additional tax by this government is likely to result in them having to pass down costs to tenants. It is simply impossible for them to absorb all the outrageous charges. Availability in the rental market is already at a crisis point, and an additional tax burden will just heighten the tension for the already stressed rental market.

I just want to touch on the exemption in this bill for emergency services volunteers. I want to briefly mention that the members on this side have concerns regarding the exemption. The emergency services who are exempt under this framework will have to pay tax up-front to claim the exemption back through the State Revenue Office. However, this levy is administered by councils, not by the SRO, so it is unclear how the rebates will operate in reality. The government is not forthcoming with a clear plan on how volunteers will seek the rebate. That is another hurdle for volunteers and Victorians to go through.

With the 2 minutes I have got remaining I would like to conclude that with this bill overall we have some great concerns for the new emergency services tax. It is yet another blow to Victorians. The devil is in the detail of this bill: like I said, the words they have inserted in this bill and how the tax is being collected. The more we engaged with stakeholders, the more holes we found in this bill. It is just another Allan Labor government tax grab. Let us call it for what it is: it is a tax grab on Victorians. We should be mindful of the fact that the government is frightened of the backlash it is about to receive from our primary producers, our farmers, our volunteers and Victorians, and the councils who administer it are burdened with administering this new tax. The backlash that we see from these ratepayers and providers will be significant, you will see, and you can lay blame squarely on the Allan Labor government. I fear for our business, homeowners, farmers and producers, who will need to bear the cost – those who can – and I fear for those mums and dads and consumers who will ultimately pay the price for the flow-down effects. That is why I and those on this side of the chamber oppose this bill.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (10:51): I rise to speak to the Fire Services Property Amendment (Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund) Bill 2025, and like the title, which is so deceitful, so much of what this government does is deceitful to the Victorian public. This should just be named the fire services property amendment bill, because what it does is undermine our emergency services and the good work of the tens of thousands of volunteers in this state. This government have shown through the actions of this bill how low they will go, and we have in the chamber the very architect: the minister, the former Minister for Emergency Services, a former minister for agricultural and regional development and now the Treasurer. The Treasurer, who is responsible for this bill, should get the wrath of the Victorian public along with Jacinta Allan and the rest of her team, because what this is going to do is decimate so many businesses across our state. This is a tax grab, as my colleagues have said. It is nothing more than a tax grab to fill a huge black hole in Victoria's budget. Why have we got that? We have got that because this government is so hopeless at managing taxpayers money. It is taxpayers money they are responsible for that they are wasting and mismanaging every single day.

This bill purports to expand the scope and catchment of funding for emergency services and volunteers and therefore enhance the financial support available for these services. What this government will do is broaden the tax burden, not just on emergency services but on businesses and households. This is where the deceit comes in. This is a very deceitful government that is using this bill to massage and con Victorians about how volunteers and others who provide necessary services to our state need to be funded.

This bill will replace the existing fire services property levy, which only currently funds the CFA and the FRV, and will provide a new framework with that broader range of emergency services, which will include both the CFA and the FRV but also the Victorian SES, Triple Zero Victoria, Emergency Management Victoria and the Secretary of the Department of Justice and Community Safety for

funding in relation to emergency management, and the Secretary of the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action to fund forest fire management. These are core services of government, for goodness sake. These are not volunteers in those organisations. They are core services that you expect, as a Victorian taxpayer, the government to be able to fund, but they cannot because they have wasted and mismanaged the Victorian budget. We are paying \$15 million of interest every single day, and that is going to be rising to \$26 million a day in the out years. \$6.6 billion of interest annually today – \$15 million a day – and it will go to \$9.3 billion in the out years. That is an enormous amount of money, and the billions unfortunately just roll off this government's tongue like it means nothing. It is an enormous amount of money.

In December the government committed to providing the following funding: \$70 million to establish a rolling fleet replacement program for VICSES and the CFA; more than \$62 million to double the volunteer emergency services equipment program; \$53 million to modernise the VicEmergency app and the central database for emergency services, EM-COP; and \$30 million to deliver training and support programs to VICSES. That is all necessary funding, but that amounts to \$215 million. That is a long way short of what this tax grab is actually going to get: \$2.1 billion over the next three years. Look at that, just do the maths – even \$1.33 billion this financial year. \$215 million – where is that additional money that the government is grabbing from our businesses and our farmers going to go to? That is going to go into the black hole.

To the Treasurer, who is the former Minister for Emergency Services and a former Minister for Agriculture: you should be ashamed of yourself. There is pressure on our farmers, who are going through a drought. A drought is nothing new; I grew up on a farm, I have seen droughts. I have seen the enormous toll it takes on farmers. It is heartbreaking. I remember the years very clearly as a small child. What farmers have to do is nothing new, but you, disgracefully, are imposing this burden on farmers. The pressure will mount. The mental health toll for farmers will mount, Treasurer. You hold your head in your hands; you will have blood on your hands. I am telling you there will be some very sad circumstances because of the pressures you are putting on people. It is a disgrace. You all should be ashamed of yourselves.

I know CFA volunteers. My family have been involved in the CFA since its inception. The FRV do a magnificent job working to protect Victorians, but the CFA volunteers who are fighting those wildfires have a special skill. The farmers who go out to those areas and provide their expertise, their equipment and their time cannot keep doing that when they are not supported by government, when they are being slugged like this with a tax. They will not go out into the further reaches like they always have to provide surge capacity for strike teams. Where are we going to get these personnel? What are they going to be able to do? You are so discrediting their expertise and driving down what they are excellent at. It is completely unreasonable, what you are asking them to do. You are putting this pressure on everyone, whether it is the FRV and their professional firefighters with the work they have to do or whether it is the CFA and the volunteers and the work that they do in conjunction with the professional CFA staff. I do not know where you get off, government, in not understanding how critical this is to support them in a way that is sustainable. What you are doing is not sustainable. It is actually going to drive people out of business and cause so much pressure for the very people that feed and look after us.

I am horrified by the fact that there seems to be no understanding by this government and the Treasurer, who has, as I said, held all of those portfolio areas. What a disaster. All this government does is rotate positions. They get into trouble, they cannot manage their portfolio so they are moved on, because they are so goddamn useless at their job – useless. You do not know what you are doing. You are actually going to drive people out of business, and you are going to drive farmers to the brink. You are a disgrace.

I want to just go back to what the CFA volunteers have said to me and to Mr McCracken, who did an excellent contribution around the many people who have really seen this for what it is and are reaching out, pleading with this chamber, with this Parliament to stop this bad legislation – the thousands and thousands of Victorians who understand exactly what is going on. The crossbench – how disgraceful.

You have sold Victorians out for a song, for nothing. You should be ashamed of yourselves too. You are all together. You actually do not care. You have this complete folly about how this is going to solve everything – it will not. It is going to cause so much harm and pressure. And it is not just this bill which is taking money off hardworking Victorians, who are fighting, in a cost-of-living crisis, so many challenges.

I listened to Angie here on radio this morning – I think you did too, Mr McGowan – a business owner in Dandenong. His land tax bill has gone from \$8500 to over \$200,000 in 10 years.

Nick McGowan interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: For less land. This is what this government is doing. It is screwing businesses everywhere – the very businesses that actually pay taxes to provide core services. But you cannot even manage the core services; you cannot even manage government. You are so useless, so hopeless and so deceitful. You are going to cause more problems down the track. What you are doing is unsustainable. For all those good Victorians out there, for all those hardworking Victorians out there, never forget what you have been subjected to by this government. It is a deceitful government. It is a government that is out of its depth in managing taxpayers money. It is not their money; it is Victorians' money. It is your money, not their money. They blow it the whole time. They have not even managed to see the ongoing corruption that they have overseen and allowed to occur, and the waste and mismanagement has just exponentially blown out. Here we are – the very people who are the fabric of our society, who do what they do right across this state to enhance our economic return and to enhance our state, are being absolutely smashed in every sense.

I am just horrified, as I said, about the extent of what this government will go to to ruin this state. They are wreckers. They are wrecking this state. They are wrecking the future of this state and our children's future in this state. They do not care. They are for the here and now, not for the future. They are here for the few, not for the greater good of Victorians. They do not govern for all Victorians; they govern for a few. I urge the crossbench: think about what you are doing. Think about what is going to happen. Think about the impacts of this huge tax grab on businesses, on farmers, on everyday Victorians. It is a shocking bill, it should be rejected outright and it needs to be rejected outright. I oppose the bill.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:04): Well, this crossbencher is certainly not supporting this bill. When I gave my first speech in this place, I made a promise that I would never support an increase in taxes on Victorians. I have kept that promise, and I intend to keep it again today. Victorians are taxed too much. We constantly hear about this cost-of-living crisis, and we hear people like the Greens point the finger at supermarkets and things like this. Well, let us talk about the cost of government, because that is costing Victorians a lot, and it is one of the biggest expenses that they have got. They pay income tax and land tax and they are going to have this new tax as well, and they cannot afford it. Victorians have reached the limit of what they can handle in taxation. At least with the supermarket I can choose whether or not I go there. At least there is competition. I can go to the local greengrocer or I can go to Aldi or something like this. But with this tax every landholder, every person that pays rates in Victoria, is going to get a tax increase.

There has been a lot of talk about firefighters and volunteers and farmers, and the reason that we are talking about them is because, to their absolute credit, they have led this fight against this tax. But I think that there are a lot of Victorians out there, a lot of ratepayers, who do not know that this is coming, and they are going to get the shock of their life when they get their bills. They are going to be very upset, I think. It was mentioned out the front of Parliament the other day that there are a lot of people in Victoria that just do not know that this is coming down the line. Well, they will know soon enough once they get the bill.

The councils have been upset about this tax because they are going to cop the heat from it because it comes in their rates notices as if the councils are charging it. The councils are being forced to do it by the state government, so I actually have some sympathy for the councils that are being forced into

doing this. It is just wrong that they are going to cop the heat over this, because whenever someone gets a high rates bill, the first person they call is the council to complain about it, and the councils are going to have to explain that they were forced into this.

The idea that we need more taxes, rather than reducing waste in government, reducing duplication in government, that we could not somehow reduce waste to the point where we could fund this through cost savings in other areas, is just unbelievable – that a new tax is the only way we could do it. I heard Dr Mansfield talking before about this tax as if they had no other option but to do a deal with the government. How about they just say no for once? I am saying no. The coalition is saying no. People can say no to the government and force them. They say, ‘Your vote is powerful.’ Well, their vote is to do a deal and tax Victorians. They have got no right anymore to talk about the supermarkets raising costs for Victorians. They are raising costs for Victorians. They are the ones that are responsible for enabling the government to do this.

I mean, look at waste. I was the chair of the Commonwealth Games inquiry – \$589 million wasted. What did Victorians get for that? Nothing. It paid for the games in Glasgow. They did not even give us free tickets. I mean, they could have at least given us some free tickets that we could raffle off. They gave us nothing. There is waste left, right and centre, and there is duplication. I will be very interested to see the Treasurer’s first budget next week; we will see what happens. The Treasurer I know is going to have to make some very hard decisions, and I will be interested to see what decisions she does make. But Victorians have reached the limit on taxation. Land taxes are driving manufacturing out of this state. I have spoken to many manufacturers in the south-east. They are going bankrupt left, right and centre, or if they are making investment decisions they are not hiring more staff or they are thinking about moving interstate. Some of them have just closed down. They have just disappeared.

We constantly hear complaints from the Greens about the rental crisis. Who pays land tax? It is the landlords. They pay the land tax. Of course it makes rental availability worse. During the pandemic I was constantly saying the government is spending money like a drunken sailor and that one day we are going to have to pay for this. And who is paying for it? Well, we found out eventually. They raised land taxes. Everyone that owns land in this state had to pay the COVID levy. Eventually we have to pay for it. Nothing that government does is free. They talk about free stuff all the time; everything is paid for through taxes. It is either paid for by today’s taxpayers or it is paid for by our children in the future, who are going to have to pay off this debt one day. I do not know when they are going to manage to pay it off. But we are in a perilous situation because our debt is so high, and, God forbid, if we end up getting a credit rating downgrade, the cost of issuing more debt by the Treasury Corporation of Victoria is going to be out of control.

We should not be raising more taxes, hurting Victorians even more. The government is too big. Government needs to be smaller. We need to scale back the size of government in Victoria, indeed throughout the whole nation. But in Victoria we need to scale back the size of government. The government needs to focus on what is important: police, emergency services, crime, basic functions. But they get their hands into every single aspect of people’s lives. They interfere in every single aspect of people’s lives, and it has got to stop, because every time they do that it costs money – and it is not the government’s money, it is taxpayers money. It has got to stop.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:10): I rise to speak on this ridiculous tax. We are told that fairness is non-negotiable in Victoria. Well, you can fool some people all the time, you can fool all the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time. The government has absolutely nowhere to hide on this new tax. It fools no-one. It is a tax grab dressed up with fluffy language, misleading titles and appeals to virtue, complete with utter gaslighting of the Victorian people. You fool no-one.

You, sadly, have found a partner in crime to facilitate your gaslighting. We have just sat through the Greens using climate change to justify this tax. After being in opposition to the tax for months, suddenly today they have woken up and discovered that taxing farmers is the solution to climate

change. How does this tax do this? The funds are not going to address climate. They are not even going to address those who deal with the consequences of a changing climate. It goes into general revenue. What the Greens have done today is to stand in this chamber with the overt intention of trying to retrospectively justify their support for this injustice, this unfair tax, this unjust tax – and for what? What was the price? What did they sell their vote for? The wider green movement must be deeply, deeply ashamed of what they have done today to prostitute the cause of climate change for the support of a tax increase on farmers, on struggling communities, on the very volunteers who fight climate change, on community members in not insignificant numbers who serve also on Landcare and conservation groups and on people who practise sustainable agricultural practices even when it involves a cost to their efficiency and to maximising their own profit. And today you agreed to tax them for it. You sellouts. You hypocrites. You have burnt a very good portion of any credibility you had today. Your drift away from a genuine environmental party to a party of political game players and activists is complete. The people across this state will not forget it. They have done so to serve a government that is shamelessly, barefacedly doing this purely to cover black holes in their budget. They have done this to prop up their priorities, to spare their blushes, as they are forced into cut after cut to essential services, core deliverables to our state. It is a government so desperate to add anything to its bottom line that it has resorted to taxing emergency services, to taxing volunteers, to taxing every home owner, to taxing the community and to taxing every business to add \$2 billion to its bottom line.

You are not going to see any cuts to Big Build expenditure, you are not going to see any cuts to the North East Link, you are not going to see any cuts to the Suburban Rail Loop (SRL). Yesterday we sat through the faux concerns about the lack of housing for the next generation. Well, you are not going to see any cuts to the tax disincentives to builders, to councils and to rent providers. You are not going to see any cuts to the taxes on housing.

If you need to scrape \$2 billion back to support the state's bottom line, well, let us talk about how that might be done. Why don't we wind up that complete failure called Breakthrough Victoria? I will point out to anyone interested in this issue that Breakthrough Victoria has \$2 billion of your money locked up to supposedly invest in new startups and ventures. It has been panned as a complete failure. It has barely invested a thing. It has wasted your money on bad investments to prop up unviable projects. It has wasted your money to prop up unviable companies, thought bubble businesses and fashionable projects. Farmers are funding this. The SES, the CFA, volunteers and businesses are funding that \$2 billion. We can suggest to the Treasurer and to the government that if they want to return \$2 billion to the bottom line, why not wind up this self-indulgent failed cost centre and use that instead? But no, that would disturb the cosy corporate relationship they fund with that. They would not disturb the lovely offices and the high-powered meetings and the patronage it funds. They would rather that you pay for it, and they would rather cut services than do that.

What we are going to see will be cuts to education, health and mental health services. Drought support has been a pittance – \$13 million five or six months ago. South Australia provided \$74 million and have much more to come. They are going to cut roads – well, they have always cut roads. Local councils are going to continue to suffer cost shifting and be overburdened with delivering state responsibilities with no matching funding. Now they have got to add to this a 64 per cent increased levy to business, a 100 per cent levy increase to property owners and a 189 per cent levy increase to farmers.

This is a choice. The government, the Treasurer and the Premier have a choice. They have a choice between SRL and the farmers and a choice between good project practices or project practices that allow blowouts and health services. They have a choice between the needs of Victorians and Labor's own objectives, and every time they choose themselves. This is a government that waltzes through every sector of our community, reaming every community. Whether it is communities who want consultation over activity centres or communities that are going to be completely blown up by the SRL, whether it is our fisheries and wildlife services, whether it is cuts to Parks Victoria, whether it is the demonising of councils or whether it is the humiliation of the Commonwealth Games cancellation,

they walk through every community, slice their way through every community, and then tell us to be grateful, tell us that they are doing a great thing and tell us that they are investing in things. 'Investing' under this government is a code word for 'borrowing' or 'taxing'. When they say they are investing, they are not investing; they are leveraging the state. As my colleague David Limbrick said, they are leveraging the state against our taxes and our incomes or the incomes and the debt of our children. That is what they mean by investment. Nothing is free.

My colleagues in this chamber and in the other place have spoken at length about the impact on communities, particularly rural communities, and I entirely endorse their words, protest and outrage on behalf of our fellow Victorians, particularly those in the regions, particularly farmers and volunteers. But I will bring my contribution around to some of the observations of the impact this will have on business.

Let us be really clear: properly understood, land tax is a process by which the state confiscates the working capital of business and puts it into general revenue. It is a destructive economic exercise because taking working capital from businesses decimates their ability to retain and apply that working capital for expansion, for investment, for innovation – all things that deliver productivity to the state. Without working capital, businesses cannot grow and they cannot innovate. When you have worked through a company's working capital, then you are starting to take it from their cash flow, and businesses cannot survive without cash flow. That is what land tax does. That is the economic impact of land tax on business, and it is reflected in Victoria because in Victoria since 2009 we have been the laggard across the entire nation. We have the lowest productivity growth in Australia since 2009, and we have the highest number of insolvencies. Land tax is an economically destructive mechanism, and that means that our businesses cannot grow, cannot innovate, cannot upgrade to new technologies and cannot employ people. They come to the end of a financial year and they have to make a hard decision. Do I keep people on? Do I pay the land tax? Do I have enough cash flow to pay the land tax? Do I go and borrow some more money or do I just wind up? The data says a lot of them are doing the latter, and new investment is not coming into the state, because land tax is a direct attack on the ability of businesses to operate – not theoretically, practically – and the numbers back this up.

With this government it is like being on a game show where the first couple of seasons you sort of enjoy the game show because it is full of surprises and twists, a bit like reality TV, but after a couple of series you actually see behind the scenes in the way it works. You actually get to see how the whole thing is manufactured for entertainment. This government, for a decade, has gaslit this society because it has used those mechanisms – using terms like 'investing', moving and cost-shifting things around budgets so that they can constantly spin. They have also always used the practice of releasing information in salami slices so that no-one can see the full picture and the consequences of their decisions and their strategies until it is too late, and then they will wrap it up in a whole bunch of motherhood statements about how they are investing in care and it is about fairness. Well, it is all a charade. It is a complete charade, and people like us in the political world are a bit closer to it, and you hear us go on about it all the time. But people outside: I know you see it now. I know you have decoded the plot; you have decoded the methodology, and the methodology no longer works. When the Treasurer stands up next week and delivers that budget, we will see it revealed for all to see where we are at in this state, because you cannot hide the debt, and you cannot hide the funding cuts that are going to come. You cannot do it anymore – the formula has been exposed. This state has to renew \$120 billion of debt over the next 10 years. We are rolling over \$30 billion of Treasury bonds every year. When that debt was first incurred, interest rates were around 3 per cent; they are now around 5 per cent on 10-year Treasury bonds. We are paying \$26 million a day in interest. We have an SRL project that is going to blow out. We have a pseudo budget where they want to pretend it is only \$34 billion, which apparently has no capital costs either. Well, I can tell you now: \$34 billion of debt attracts around \$16 billion of interest over the life of that project. That does not appear anywhere; we are being lied to. The whole budgetary process has become a farce. The whole budgetary process has been degraded. The accountability and transparency of government is gone, and for taxes like this where they say, 'We're going to come and grab this from you, but please be grateful for it,' those days

are over. Those days are over, and there is nowhere to hide. You can fool some of the people all of the time and you can fool all of the people some of the time; you cannot fool all of the people all of the time. My time is just about up, but I tell you what: this government's time is definitely up.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (11:24): Mr Batchelor did just go and sit in his spot, but if you look around this chamber, you will see that it is just about empty. And do you know why that is? It is because it is hard to face people when you know that you are doing the wrong thing. This is absolutely the wrong thing. It is another move by the government to rip the guts out of rural communities, to crush volunteers and to punish the people that are the lifeblood of this state. I was pretty disgusted when Mr Batchelor finally moved to his place and the first thing he said to Mr Welch, who is fighting for his community, was 'What are you on?' I tell you what, that is pretty disgraceful.

I rise to oppose the Fire Services Property Amendment (Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund) Bill 2025, a bill that poses a clear and present danger to fairness, transparency and economic survival in regional and rural Victoria. This bill does not just rebadge the fire services property levy, it more than doubles it, expanding its scope and embedding cost burdens deep into the lives of those who are already giving the most and receiving the least, which is our CFA volunteers, our SES volunteers, our farmers, our renters and our local businesses. Families and people that support their local communities once again are being crushed by this government.

Let us be clear: revenue from this levy will soar from \$1.3 billion to \$2.1 billion within three years. That is a 100 per cent increase. The Victorian government will be collecting twice as much from landowners across the state, not because of actual service improvements but because it is offloading responsibility for emergency funding onto everyday people, because it cannot manage the budget. They have made a complete mess of this, and now they are going after more and more Victorians. They are crushing them more than they already have over the last 11 years. Who bears the brunt? Farmers do, and they will see that with a 189 per cent increase in levy payments, jumping from \$2525 to \$6805 on average. This is not sustainable, and as the Victorian Farmers Federation has rightly warned:

... it could be the nail in the coffin for their farm businesses ...

We have already spoken this morning about the devastating impact that drought is having on our farmers. Already in Gippsland six farmers have completely run out of water, according to GippsDairy, and about 30 to 40 are about to run out of water. This is a devastation.

We have been here before. The original fire services levy, introduced after the 2009 royal commission, was supposed to fund firefighting alone, but in recent years we have seen that the money has been quietly redirected to fund Triple Zero Victoria and Emergency Management Victoria – services that were once covered by consolidated revenue. That is disgusting. You cannot just keep mismanaging the state finances and then going after the people that already give so much to this state in order to fund things that should be your bread and butter.

This bill follows the same pattern. It expands the levy to now fund not only the CFA and Fire Rescue Victoria but also VICSES, Emergency Recovery Victoria, emergency alert programs, operational communications systems and even administrative functions within the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, and yet there is no guarantee that the funds collected will go where they are most needed. As East Gippsland Shire Council has said, and I quote:

The new Emergency Services and Volunteer Fund represents a 150% tax hike on some rural landholders ... despite a complete lack of guarantees regarding how (or where) the new money will be spent.

We are now being asked to trust a government that has already broken its promises over and over and over again. We are being asked to believe that this expanded, more expensive levy will not be misused, that it will not just disappear into a bureaucratic abyss of salaries, consultants and central administration.

While the city may not notice this straightaway – it will notice it, by the way, but it will not be the first to take the hit – rural and regional communities certainly will, because it is not just the bush where CFA volunteers are being taxed more and supported less. Let us talk about those volunteers. The government boast about the offsets, but let us be honest, they are just tokenistic offsets at best. CFA and SES volunteers are only eligible for a concession on their primary residence, not the farmland they use, not the sheds where they keep all their equipment, not the remote blocks they patrol. The average exemption in fact will be \$108 per person. What an absolute disgrace. And they do not get that automatically. They have to pay the full levy up-front, and then they have to apply to the State Revenue Office to get a portion of that back. As Ms Britnell in the other place said, and I quote:

It's sneaky that the Allan Labor Government think they can fool farmers with a pitiful exemption ... on their home, but not on their farmland. I entirely agree with her.

Meanwhile Fire Rescue Victoria is swimming in taxpayer dollars. In 2023 and 2024 alone its budget was boosted by \$192 million, bringing total government grants to \$1.7 billion. Employee expenses hit \$929 million, with \$125 million in overtime and \$31 million on consultants. Yet the FRV have still failed to meet their own response times and targets. In contrast, the CFA, the backbone of bushfire defence in our most vulnerable regions and communities, have had their funding cut from \$351.6 million in 2021–22 down to \$339 million following on. 230 CFA trucks are more than 31 years old. Another 244 are between 26 and 30 years old. The CFA needs \$55 million a year to maintain safe fleet standards, but under this bill they will only get \$25 million. That is less than half of what is required. This is not support; this is a slow strangulation of our volunteer firefighting forces. A force that we have depended on for so many years to keep our state safe and to keep our community safe have once again been slapped in the face by the Allan Labor government.

The consequences do not just stop there. This bill will absolutely push up cost of living across the board. Residential rates will rise sharply, commercial rates will double, industrial properties will be up 64 per cent and primary producers will now be forced to pay another 189 per cent. This is the 60th new or increased tax this government has introduced. Rental providers will face a new fixed charge of \$167 in addition to the increased variable levy. With the rise in land tax and over 130 rental reforms already in place, this levy will be the final straw. My colleague Gaelle Broad said last sitting week:

... rental providers are already stretched ... they have no other option but to increase rents or sell ...

We have seen this over and over again. In one of my communities we have heard from real estate agents that say for every four rentals that come on the market only one returns to the market. It is because this government is crushing Victorians, and it is cheaper to do business in any other state than it is in this one.

Let us be brutally honest. This levy will lead to higher rents, fewer rental properties and more sell-offs – an even tighter squeeze on vulnerable tenants that are already battling in a housing crisis. It will move more farms onto the market, stripping our regional communities not only of economic power but of community resilience. One Corangamite shire councillor said that this levy, if not restructured, could lead to the closure of viable family farms.

Even councils are being dragged into this. This bill forces local governments to act as the tax collector for the state. Rural communities are being told to absorb this new responsibility without the systems or staff to manage it, while there is no guarantee of where the funds raised will flow back to. There is no guarantee that the people that are footing this bill will see the benefits in their community – there is absolutely none. The mayor of Mansfield said it plainly:

We don't think it's fair that we're the ones being asked to put it on the rates notice – we should not be the tax collector for the state government ...

That is absolutely spot on. Just about every mayor and councillor in Eastern Victoria has contacted me with extreme concerns about this – about the unfairness that once again the government is shifting the responsibility onto them to be the bad one. It is not fair; it is wrong, and it should be rejected. We

support emergency services; that is why we are fighting for this. We support emergency responders. We support the infrastructure that they need to save lives. I just think this is absolutely disgraceful: a government that is over its head in so many ways keeps punishing Victorians. It centralises power and decentralises responsibility. It shifts costs without guarantees. It inflates budgets while eroding service quality. It redistributes funding from the bush to bureaucracies. And worst of all, it does it without any promise of where the government is putting this money.

Let me finish by bringing this this back to the people. This bill punishes those who give the most and receive the least. It takes from our farmers to fund consultants. It undermines the CFA while inflating urban bureaucracies. It hits regional families with rising bills, shrinking rental options and fewer protections while slashing transparency and accountability. I oppose this in so many ways. It is unfair, it is unsustainable and it is a blatant disregard of those who carry the weight of Victoria's emergencies on their shoulders. This bill must be rejected – not just renamed, not repackaged, but rejected outright – because Victorians deserve better.

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (11:36): I rise to oppose this bill, which will be no surprise to anyone. When I first came to this place some time ago, one of my principles was not to oppose the government unless I felt it was necessary. Over the time I have probably supported some stuff that has irked some people. I certainly know it has irked the opposition from time to time, as I have been the subject of some of their mean hit campaigns. But there comes a time when you just cannot support something, and this is it.

This is a poorly timed bill – I am being the most charitable I can be. Yes, it brings two-point-something billion dollars into the coffers of the government. We have had enough about all the debt the government is in; I am not going to re prosecute that. It is going to hit the regional communities probably the hardest, but surely just sticking your hand further into the pockets of the public is not the answer. We are in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis; I do not think anyone disputes that. Asking people to pay more is not helping. Asking people to pay more is going to lead to more stress. Interest rates are one thing, but they go up, they go down – that is the nature of the beast. This is just a case of extra money they have got to shell out. They have got all sorts of land taxes and this tax and that tax.

Now we have another levy. One of the problems I have with this, as I said, is the timing, because there is a drought coming, and the drought and the problems this is going to cause regional and rural communities and farmers are probably going to be the end for some people, whether it is the end of their business or – I take it to probably the extreme – some people ending themselves because of the stress of these things. It is not one thing – it is not just this bill; it is everything. Life is tough out there at the moment. We are well paid in this job. A lot of people go through their lives not ever earning nearly as much as us, and every time something comes in, whether it is a federal tax or a levy or something like that, it is just another little bit of stress.

In the context of the timing, anyone that knows me knows I am a mad motorsports fan. Formula One is not exactly my top thing, but I will watch it. Ever since Ayrton Senna hit the wall all those years ago I have kind of lost interest. I do not know if it is a contractual obligation or not, but spending more than \$300 million on renovating the Albert Park facilities – maybe it is needed, but I do not think that it is timed with perfection, and that is being extremely charitable. I think in the absence of any knowledge of the details, it should have been put off. I am not saying it should not be done, but it should have been put off. Certainly new investment now is definitely a bad thing. We are in dire straits, and I think whatever we do, there is going to be a ripple effect. We do not know what is coming in the next budget. Maybe there are going to be savage cuts we are not all aware of and this will not have the effect we expect, but honestly I do not believe that. The stuff that has been released has been pretty benign so far, except for stuff like the grand prix, but – how should I put it? – the government has been hammered about this.

I am going to talk about my crossbench colleagues. I have been here for 11 years, and I have heard various Greens pontificate at great length about the cost of living, about poor people and about how

they stand for the marginalised. Well, I guess even people that live in public housing are going to feel this, because the cost of everything will go up. Those in low-income housing, those with low incomes, those that are living week to week – the people they claim to represent – this is going to hurt them so badly, and the people who are trying to pay a mortgage. If they are paying rent, the increase will go to the owner of the property; that has to be passed on. We heard their reasons, what they said they – I will use the words – ‘sold out’ for, but it is what they did not tell us that I worry about. How many pieces of silver did they really sell out for? What is that silver? When will we find out?

On Legalise Cannabis Victoria, I note, as has been pointed out, it is kind of quiet over there. There is no-one – and I am talking about the other crossbenchers. A lot of my people are young people that shoot, fish, four-wheel drive, love the outdoors. No matter what my personal opinion is on it, they like their weed – their wacky weed. As long as it is done in a responsible fashion, does not compromise safety and is within the laws – except for possession, use and all that sort of thing – well, that is up to law enforcement to deal with. But I do not think my people that express support for LCV – and in fairness to LCV, they have been pushing the cannabis cause pretty hard – realise what they get with it. I do not think they realise that they support this stuff. I say to my people that support the legalisation of weed: come election time, it is fair that you can look at that and say, ‘Well, I support that. I’ll put the shooters second’ or whatever it might be, but this is what you get with that. I may not agree on some things, but you will never get me supporting something of this magnitude.

One of the Greens – getting back to them – is a country representative, and I thought that they would have fought this, would have refused it. Sometimes there is a time when you just have to say no. Animal Justice has a Northern Victoria member, and I am sure her Northern Victoria constituents will be making their views known on this. As a crossbench we are here to prosecute our own agendas, and we have an opposition to keep the government in check, but we also have a little bit of that responsibility ourselves, and that is where we have to step up in times like this. I will not be supporting this bill. That should not surprise anyone. I have not ever said I would – I would not. Before I forget, I do have an amendment.

Amendments circulated pursuant to standing orders.

Jeff BOURMAN: To paraphrase this amendment, it is getting rid of the word ‘volunteers’ from the bill – and there is a reason for that. Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria got in touch with me and said they do not want in any way to have it considered that they are in any way in favour of this, part of this or whatever. So to cut a long story short, they want anything to do with volunteers removed from the bill. Now, it is a statement rather than a wild change. I did circulate this broadly before the break. I urge people to support it, because if nothing else it is a statement. The volunteers do not want it. We have got a gallery full of paid firies. We all know that the United Firefighters Union Victoria have their own opinion on this – Mr Marshall was quite vocal about that this morning – and I agree with them. This is a time to stand up; there is still time for the left of the crossbench, for want of a better term, to do the right thing. I will not hold my breath waiting. I think this is just another thing of a party that calls itself ready for government proving they are not.

Wendy Lovell interjected.

Jeff BOURMAN: I will take up Ms Lovell’s interjection. It is not just titles; it is also a whole lot of other parts of –

Wendy Lovell interjected.

Jeff BOURMAN: We will do that in committee. It will give me something to do.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (11:46): I rise to speak on this Fire Services Property Amendment (Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund) Bill 2025. This is an egregious tax. It is an extremely and conspicuously bad tax. It is a typical Labor government bill, because this is about hurting those who are the most vulnerable in our community. This is not a tax on the wealthy; this is

a tax on everybody, and this tax will impact, as Mr Bourman said, every Victorian, right down to the poorest Victorians. This is typical of Labor and the Greens, who grandstand about caring about people, colluding to actually hurt the most vulnerable in our community. This tax will drive up the cost of living, this tax will drive up the cost of food and this tax will drive up the cost of rent, and it will drive up the cost of rent for the most vulnerable in our communities. Many of the cheapest rentals in this state are old houses on farming properties that some of our poorest families will reach out to farmers to rent. This will drive those prices up too, because farmers are being hit the hardest by this tax.

I am proud to stand here in the red and white colours of the CFA, wearing my CFA badge, and oppose this tax, because at the CFA firefighters games in March that were held in Mooroopna, the volunteers were coming up to me and saying, 'We do not want this tax – this tax is bad – but particularly we do not want the word "volunteers" in the title of this bill, because people are blaming the volunteers for the increase in the tax.' And the volunteers get such a small proportion. Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria has done the numbers, and they actually think that next year it will be about 6 per cent that goes to volunteer organisations and only about 11 per cent in outer years, and yet the volunteers are being blamed. Volunteer firefighters were saying, 'Our neighbours are coming to us and saying, "It's your fault our bills are going up, because all of this money is going to volunteers."'

This is about the government once again politicising the title of a bill for their own purposes. This is a bad bill, and this bill should be opposed. This is a de facto land tax on top of the existing land taxes that we already have, and we know that this bill is going to hit primary production the hardest, because we know that the increases in the levy rates that will be imposed are the harshest for farmers. Primary production will cop a 189 per cent increase in what they pay on the fire services levy now; commercial properties, 100 per cent; residential properties, 99 per cent; and industrial properties, 64 per cent.

As I have already said, this will hurt farmers and regional Victorians the most. It will drive up the cost of food production at a time when we are trying to fight inflation and bring down the cost of living, but Labor and the Greens – and the Legalise Cannabis Party and the Animal Justice Party; we cannot forget them either – are colluding to impose this tax and hurt all Victorians. What we see if we look at the budget papers and the budget update from 2024–25 is that the government expects next year to collect \$610 million in additional revenue just from this tax alone and then \$735 million in the 2026–27 year and again an increase in 2027–28. This tax will actually collect an extra \$2.14 billion in revenue for the state government over the first three years of it alone. That extra spending is not going to cover our fire services or our volunteers; it is actually going to cover the delivery of core government business that has always previously been funded through consolidated revenue. It is things like Triple Zero Victoria, things like Emergency Management Victoria, things like the operations of the department – they are all in there being funded out of this money. These are things that have always been funded from consolidated revenue. But there is no offset. There is no offset to land tax or anything for people for the transfer of this tax. We are just paying more. So the government will use that money that was traditionally funding those things in consolidated revenue to prop up their bottom line and fund their pet projects, and they will charge Victorians more to deliver emergency services in this state. This is wrong.

We know that the government actually outlined that only \$215 million – over five years, by the way, so only \$150 million of the \$2.14 billion that they collect in the first three years will actually go to replacement vehicles and equipment for the CFA. That is not very much, and we have a spending breakdown on that: it is actually only \$70 million over the three years that will go toward fleet replacement. There will be \$62 million, which does increase the volunteer emergency services equipment program grants – something that I think I actually do like, an increase in VESEP grants. There will be \$53 million for the VicEmergency app; well, that should be core government business out of consolidated revenue. And \$30 million will go to the VICSES for training and support programs. So that only totals \$215 million – out of the first three years' \$2.14 billion. So where does the other \$1.75 billion go? It goes to prop up the government's bottom line; it goes to fund what should be core business of the government.

What we know too from what the definitions in this bill set out definitively is who can benefit from these funds, and in that we see that it is all those government departments, emergency management, the CEO of emergency management, the chair of emergency management, Triple Zero; what we do not see is a number of volunteer organisations listed there. The Shepparton Search and Rescue Squad is not listed. The Echuca & Moama Search & Rescue Squad is not listed. Marine Search and Rescue is not listed. Australian Volunteer Coast Guard is not listed. Life Saving Victoria is not listed. Alpine Search and Rescue Victoria is not listed. Bush Search and Rescue Victoria is not listed. These are volunteer organisations; they are not going to get any funding from the government.

When the Shepparton Search and Rescue Squad met with Minister Ward, she told them that, ‘Oh, yes, you will be able to get funding. It’ll come through the SES.’ But if you read the definitions of who can actually receive funding, it does not include them. It is very definitive about which groups can receive funding under this, and it even goes on to further define what the SES is. So it does exclude those volunteer organisations from receiving any funding out of the direct funding for organisations out of this fund.

There is a clause on who can benefit from the rebate that may be used to allow volunteers from those organisations to actually get the rebate, because it does say that the Treasurer can gazette other organisations to receive a rebate. But that is only the rebate to volunteers, and we all know that the rebate to volunteers is an absolute joke anyway, particularly when you are talking about farmers who are volunteering and their bill may be \$80,000 a year. Whilst they may be able to gazette that volunteers can receive a rebate, it does not allow for these volunteer organisations to actually receive funding. The government would need to fix that if this bill gets through, because those volunteer organisations deserve to be supported as well.

What we know also about the rebates – and this is revealed in the budget update as well – is that although the tax kicks in from 2025–26, the rebates actually do not start until 2026–27. So why are the government not giving a rebate in the first year of collecting this tax? That is really nasty and sneaky, but typical of this Labor government.

There are a whole lot of criticisms that have come in about this tax from all sorts of areas. I have had a number of organisations contact me. I want to quote from the letter that was sent to Ellen Sandell, the Leader of the Greens, this morning by Peter Marshall, the branch secretary of the United Firefighters Union. He started out by saying:

Dear Ellen,

This evening, the Victorian Greens sold out Victorian firefighters and the Victorian community they protect.

Sadly, every Victorian will suffer the consequences.

There will no doubt be consequences for the Victorian Greens at the 2026 State Election, for acting as the artificial lung of a dying Labor Government.

He went on to say:

It is a blatant lie, a gross perversion and, put simply, misleading, to dress this tax bill up as something that supports Victorian volunteers and emergency service workers.

He noted that there has been little or no consultation, he talks about the impact of the Victorian government’s position on firefighters and he talks about the costs of the tax to the Victorian people. He went on to say that the passing of this egregious tax:

... was only made possible with a complicit crossbench.

I am pleased to see one of those complicit crossbenchers has actually come into the chamber now, a member of the Legalise Cannabis Party, because none of them have been here to listen to this debate,

to hear about how it is impacting Victorians and particularly farmers in Victoria. Peter Marshall went on to say:

... the Greens – and, it appears, Legalise Cannabis and the Animal Justice Party – have put their own interests ahead of the safety of Firefighter and public safety. This is unforgiveable and will follow you into the next State Election.

It is frightening what these people are willing to do to sell out Victorians.

Regional Cities Victoria have done some analysis of the increased taxes that will be collected in regional cities. In my area in the regional city of Bendigo it is an extra 46.94 per cent, in Mildura an extra 54 per cent, in Shepparton an extra 55 per cent, in Wangaratta an extra 67 per cent and in Wodonga an extra 43 per cent. But that money will not come back into our communities. We will not see that money spent on increasing the capacity of firefighters or increasing the capacity of our SES. It will not come back to our areas. It will be spent on other things: to prop up government departments, to run Triple Zero, to run Emergency Management Victoria, core functions of government that have always been funded from consolidated revenue. This is a disgrace. In the Yarriambiack council it is an extra 123 per cent; Macedon Ranges, 62 per cent; Swan Hill, 62 per cent; Mansfield, 73 per cent; Benalla, 81 per cent; Murrindindi, 85 per cent; Indigo, 99 per cent; Strathbogie, 91 per cent. It is not coming back to our areas.

But you need to look too at the breakdown. In a shire like Indigo, residential properties will go up by 29 per cent, commercial properties by 63 per cent and farms by 197 per cent. This is so unfair on the farming community and on those who are actually the volunteers who put out our fires. The local government do not want to be the tax collectors. They have not had any contact from this government since Tim Pallas was the Treasurer, and they do not believe that they can be ready in time for the rates notices this year anyway.

Business interrupted pursuant to standing orders.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Budget 2025–26

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:01): (909) My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, I refer to the 368 government programs due to end unless extended on 30 June, totalling almost \$22 billion in core government services, including \$173 million in suicide prevention funding, which if it lapses is an effective cut to this critical service. I therefore ask, Treasurer: will you guarantee that the \$173 million in suicide prevention funding will be restored in full, or will you support a harsh cut to these critical services?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:01): I thank Mr Davis for his question. As happens every budget year as we approach the budget, there is funding that is potentially lapsing that is considered as to whether it will be renewed or not in the budget. This happens each and every year. To indicate that a lapsing program will not be re-funded would be very irresponsible, Mr Davis. The government is making responsible decisions that reflect the priorities of Victorians, and this will be reflected in the budget next week.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:02): I would indicate that suicide prevention is the sort of service that should get priority. In the Parliamentary Budget Office analysis another program that will lapse is early years education, where \$31 million of funding will crash to zero unless restored. I therefore ask, Treasurer: will you guarantee the restoration of the \$31 million of early education funding, or will you choose to continue to fund more concrete or projects like the SRL as your priority?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:03): Mr Davis, we have a very strong record on identifying projects and services that Victorians rely on. We have outstripped expenditure on early years – and you can ask the

minister herself this question – more than any other state. We have led the nation in mental health support following the royal commission.

Mr Davis, I make the point about not ruling things out before a budget. I have told you again and again that by standing there saying that, you are trying to create fear in the community that funding will not be provided. Funding will be revealed in the budget next week, and this type of commentary is really, really unhelpful.

Corrections system

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:04): (910) My question is for the Minister for Corrections, Minister Erdogan. Thanks to this government's regressive changes to bail laws, there has been a 22 per cent increase in adults and a 71 per cent increase in young people on remand in Victorian prisons. To deal with the increased number of people being denied bail, the government has already hired 800 prison staff and will invest \$727 million. This money would be better spent addressing the root causes of criminal behaviour, which has been proven to reduce reoffending. Therapeutic support services are essential to this. You cannot fund additional staff without also increasing funding for these services, otherwise the government is setting itself up to fail our most vulnerable. So my question is: what level of increased investment will there be for therapeutic support services in our prison system?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:04): I thank Ms Payne for her question in relation to our adult corrections system but also our youth justice system. I think it is a really important question that I have been asked a number of times this week, and I think it is important that we address it. From the outset let me say that I do not want to see anyone come into contact with criminal justice in the first place. As a government we are fully focused on that work, and that is why a lot of the investments we have made start from early on – Best Start, Best Life, early childhood education and primary and secondary education, and – I know those opposite are not big fans – free TAFE. These are all about creating protective factors so that young people do not engage in the criminal justice system in the first place. But when they do we have an obligation to support people and give them the best chance of turning their lives around, and that means supports in health. During my term and my time as minister we have seen a significant increase in health expenditure across our corrections system and we have rolled out a lot of successful programs, such as the hepatitis program, but we have also invested in education and employment programs. We have been recognised internationally in relation to the work we have done in this space.

The announcement I made on Tuesday was really about that work, because fundamentally a foundational part of having a safe and stable system is investing in your staff – your frontline staff. A lot of those programs that we run successfully in getting people back on track, so to speak, are focused on the work that staff do. They are the ones that speak to people in custody. They are the ones that make sure that programs can be rolled out safely. A lot of that investment is making sure we have got appropriate staff in the appropriate posts, effectively, so that those programs can roll out. I think as part of that funding a significant amount of that will go to an increase and an uplift in the amount we spend on health and the amount we spend on programs, because there will be greater demand. Greater demand means we will need to allocate greater resources. We are looking at that mix very closely as we ramp up, because we are going to scale up throughout the year. We have seen an increase, and it is important that we do it the right way.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:06): I thank the minister for his response. By way of supplementary, can the minister advise how much in total will be spent on additional corrections staff?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:07): In terms of the \$727 million announcement, I can say the majority of that will be spent on increasing the levels of staffing we have, because as a government we have already spent significant amounts on the physical infrastructure, and

now we need to scale up. That means having the appropriate staff in those roles, getting people of experience and from different walks of life. In our youth justice system I have seen the transformation in the staff we are able to recruit because we increased the levels of pay and the number of people attracted to those roles. In adult corrections as well I think there will be opportunities. We have some existing vacancies – that has been much discussed – in Aboriginal wellbeing officers and in some of the health services. If people are watching out there, there are going to be opportunities across our corrections system – please apply. You can make a real difference and improve community safety.

Ministers statements: early childhood education and care

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:07): It is very timely that I rise to update the house on how the Allan Labor government will continue its significant investment in kinder over the coming years. Recently I was delighted to visit Lollypop Creek Kindergarten in Werribee with the Premier and member for Werribee from the other place to announce the location of three more new kinders on school sites in 2027. These additional kinders bring the total number of kinders on school sites in 2027 to 13, creating more than 1900 kinder places. They will open in 2027 at Seville Primary School, Willow Grove Primary School and Rochester Secondary College. We know that co-locating kinders on school sites brings many benefits to families and communities. It supports children transitioning to school from kinder and also helps more families ditch the dreaded double drop-off. It also helps ensure that there is sufficient kinder capacity for these communities, at the same time providing new and modern kinder facilities for children to learn, play and grow in.

I was also pleased at this event to celebrate the opening of kinder enrolments for 2026 and in particular the enrolments for pre-prep. In 2026 pre-prep will become available in 12 new local government areas – a further extension of the pre-prep program – meaning that another 3000 children at 130 services will be eligible for up to 20 hours of kinder per week. Families in the 12 local government areas of Benalla, Buloke, Corangamite, East Gippsland, Horsham, Loddon, Mansfield, Mitchell, Pyrenees, Strathbogie, Wangaratta and Wodonga will all be able to start pre-prep next year.

Our government also continues to support vulnerable children and families, and next year up to 25 kinder hours a week will be available to priority cohort children, no matter where they live. In practical terms, this will provide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children from a refugee or asylum seeker background and children who have had contact with child protection to access more hours of kinder wherever they live. We know how important this is for each child's learning and development and the lifelong learning that it brings. Those opposite should support it rather than fearmonger.

Land tax

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:10): (911) My question is again to the Treasurer. Treasurer, land tax exemptions – that is, reductions in land tax for a variety of purposes, including a land tax exemption for principal place of residence and charities – are provided for 20 categories of landholdings. Will the Treasurer guarantee that none of these exemptions will be removed or wound back, including the exemption on principal place of residence and charitable institutions, in the forthcoming state budget as part of your desperate attempt to fill the black holes?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:10): Mr Davis, as you have rightly indicated, there are a range of exemptions for land tax. You have identified principal place of residence and charities. It is also primary production land that is exempt from land tax. As I indicated in my previous answer, it is not my practice to foreshadow things that are in or not in next week's budget, but I would not be looking for big changes in land tax.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:11): I thank the Treasurer for the answer, and I think the partial answer is no – but we will see. You have already announced you are going to clobber

primary producers with a massive surge in emergency services taxes, and I therefore ask: will you guarantee that the land tax exemption for primary production will remain unchanged? It is indeed sacrosanct.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:11): Mr Davis, I certainly mentioned primary production exemption in my answer to your first question, and the answer that I gave in relation to not foreshadowing next week's budget I am going to stick with. But you are barking up the wrong tree.

Education system

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:12): (912) My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, on Tuesday in response to a question from Mr Davis, you told the house that the government has a commitment to funding schools to 75 per cent of the schooling resource standard in the life of the agreement whilst denying that cuts were being made to education funding. It has been reported in the *Age* this week that the Victorian and Commonwealth governments signed an agreement in November 2023 which committed Victoria to providing 75 per cent of the SRS standard by 2028 but that 2024 cabinet-in-confidence documents show that commitment has been pushed out to 2031. Treasurer, are you denying reports that the government has delayed its SRS commitment from 2028 to 2031?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:12): I thank Ms Copsey for her question and indeed her interest in public education. She shares a passion, obviously, that the government has for public education, and that is why year in, year out education budgets increase and they go up and up every year. As you have indicated, we are committed to funding government schools at 75 per cent of the schooling resource standard. Following the federal election, the Deputy Premier and Minister for Education will continue the discussions on the bilateral negotiations, and therefore he is best placed to update you in relation to those. But we are firmly committed to funding the things that schools need and the capital that they rely on.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:13): Treasurer, in terms of seeking a surplus for Treasury, how much money in the budget bottom line will be stripped out of education funding over the forward estimates by delaying this Gonski funding from 2028 to 2031?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:14): It is fortunate that the budget is only days away and will be delivered next Tuesday. I will respond to budget questions once it has been delivered.

Ministers statements: TAFE sector

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:14): The Allan Labor government is building the pipeline of skilled workers Victoria needs. More than 40,000 Victorians have gained their trade papers since 2019, enough to fill Federation Square four times over. I joined the member for Ivanhoe Anthony Carbines recently to visit Melbourne Polytechnic's Heidelberg TAFE campus to congratulate some of the newly qualified tradies. A trade paper is a certificate awarded to those who successfully complete a recognised apprenticeship in Victoria, whether through TAFE, a trade school or another training provider. We reintroduced trade papers because we know that a trade qualification is just as worthy of being framed on a wall as a bachelors degree. Trade papers are issued for over 120 different qualifications, with carpenters, electricians and plumbers topping the list and making up almost half of all those tradies who receive their trade papers. The previous Liberal government scrapped trade papers as part of their savage cuts to TAFE and training, making it harder for apprentices to get a job. Unfortunately, we saw Peter Dutton campaign against TAFE and against free TAFE, and we saw the Australian people reject this attack on free TAFE, which would have increased the cost of living for TAFE students by thousands of dollars a year. Only Labor is backing TAFEs and backing tradies who build the new houses, schools,

roads and rail that Victorians need. Unlike the Liberal Party we will always stand up for tradies and their families. We have made it easier for them to find a good, stable job with trade papers and free TAFE, and Victoria now has 40,000 more workers at the ready. A trade paper is a passport for a great job and career, and it speaks many languages. It speaks high-skill qualifications, it talks about job readiness and it absolutely signifies quality that allows pathways to great jobs and careers.

Suburban Rail Loop

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:16): (913) My question is for the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop. Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles recently refused to back any new money for the Suburban Rail Loop in their second term, saying that they have got other priorities. Given the Commonwealth are only contributing \$2.2 billion, will Victorian taxpayers pick up the additional \$9.3 billion required from the Commonwealth contribution?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:16): Thank you, Mr Mulholland, for again coming out to talk about the SRL, in what must be a pretty galling exercise for you and for your colleagues. For four elections now, Mr Mulholland, we have heard from Victorians who know that in order to ensure that the city grows and grows well we need to address the challenges of growth and take on the opportunities that come with good planning. As Melbourne moves to be a city the size of London by the 2050s, we know that it is simply not an option to just release land left, right and centre without any consideration for consequence. We know, Mr Mulholland, and you should know firsthand, that spending 2 hours in traffic to get your kids to sport, spending more than an hour in traffic to get your kids to school, is an example of what –

Renee Heath: On a point of order, President, the minister seems to be confused and is doing a members statement. I would ask you to bring her back to answering the question.

The PRESIDENT: I think there is a point of order there. It is very difficult for me to judge the type of answer the minister is giving, because the side of the chamber that asked the question straightaway started yelling at her. It is very hard for me. I call the minister to the question.

Harriet SHING: The point that I am making, Mr Mulholland, whether you want to hear it or not, is that as we grow as a city we need to grow well. That is how we want to do it. You have never supported, you do not support and you will never support the Suburban Rail Loop. And when I look to the newly appointed Minister for Cities Clare O’Neil, when I think about the work that has gone into the Suburban Rail Loop in partnership with the infrastructure department and when I look to the comments and the statements from the newly returned Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, his Treasurer Jim Chalmers – the work that has gone into discussions and the release of a report from Infrastructure Australia, alongside a \$2.2 million commitment – and the federal infrastructure minister, now returned to that portfolio, Catherine King, it is clear that this is a project which is needed to ensure that we are –

Evan Mulholland: On a point of order, President, on relevance, I have given the minister plenty of latitude. The question was: will Victorian taxpayers pick up the additional \$9.3 billion required from the federal contribution?

The PRESIDENT: I think the minister, towards the end of her answer, was being relevant to the question.

Harriet SHING: You do not like to hear about the fact that we have a partnership with Canberra, because you never gave us any assistance in the nine years that the coalition was in government. What I will say is that the release of \$2.2 billion and our priority project under Infrastructure Australia’s own assessment is part of making sure that we deliver infrastructure. We will continue to work through this process, but Mr Mulholland, to say that in fact the Commonwealth has decided not to fund this project shows just how far removed from the reality of the situation you and your colleagues across the

opposition sit when it comes to the investment in infrastructure that we need. We will keep working with our partners in Canberra. We will keep working to deliver the things that your community has indicated very clearly – for the fourth time – are needed and are wanted and will occur notwithstanding your fierce objection to the project.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:21): On a supplementary, given the ratings agency S&P has previously warned that Victoria's credit rating risked being downgraded if the Victorian government forged ahead with the first phase of the Suburban Rail Loop without additional funding from the Commonwealth and given you refused to answer my first question, I will ask: does the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop agree with the comments of the Minister for Health that the Victorian government can go it alone on the Suburban Rail Loop?

The PRESIDENT: I think that is asking for an opinion. You can rephrase it if you like.

Evan MULHOLLAND: The Victorian Minister for Health has said the Victorian government can go it alone on the Suburban Rail Loop. Is this government policy?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:22): Mr Mulholland, you were not listening to the answer that I gave to the substantive question, because you do not want to hear about the fact that this project is necessary, because you are so desperate to avoid having a position. You do not support it, you have never supported it, you will not support it into the future, but I know that people in your communities are coming to Liberal MPs and saying, 'Why won't you change your position on the Suburban Rail Loop?' They are coming to you, you know they are coming to you, your colleagues are coming to you, and you do not know what to do about it.

What I will say is the business case – I have got one here, Mr Mulholland; I have actually tabled it a couple of times now – refers to a specific model of a third, a third, a third, Mr Mulholland.

Renee Heath: On a point of order, President, it is outside the standing orders to use a prop.

The PRESIDENT: Yes. I 100 per cent uphold Dr Heath's point of order.

Evan Mulholland: On a further point of order, President, on relevance, I asked the minister if it is government policy, as the Minister for Health has said, that the Victorian government can go it alone on the Suburban Rail Loop. She has not come near that question.

The PRESIDENT: In the 7 seconds the minister has got I will let her continue her answer.

Harriet SHING: We are literally delivering the Suburban Rail Loop right now and have been since 2022. Dr Heath, if you think that this is a prop, then you should get out and see what is actually happening on the ground.

Artificial intelligence

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:24): (914) My question is for the minister representing the Minister for Government Services and is related to the use of generative AI and Copilot tools within the Victorian public service. We are not quite at the point of fighting for the survival of humanity against robots, but there is certainly a tension between algorithms, outsourcing analysis or decision-making to computer programs and human oversight. Whilst the Libertarians are generally in favour of improved efficiency of government services, the use of these tools presents challenges for privacy, data security and bad outcomes derived from flawed processes. There is clearly an intention for government to utilise these powerful tools to improve efficiency, but going forward too quickly without developing the relevant data protections, processes and oversight poses significant risks. My question is: has the use of Microsoft Copilot been deactivated in the Victorian public service whilst these protocols and training are being developed?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:25): Thank you, Mr Limbrick, for your question. I am going to have to do a straight referral on that and get you advice. There is obviously a lot of work going on in that space, and I am sure that the minister will be more than happy to talk to you about it, both in written form and in person.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:25): I thank the minister for passing that on. Privacy commissioners around Australia, including OVIC here in Victoria, have all shared concerns about potential privacy breaches, and they all agree that current privacy and data-sharing legislation has not been constructed with the scale and autonomy of modern AI tools in mind. There are massive potential problems, as accurate data-labelling and permissions access are absolutely critical to ensuring that AI queries are not inappropriately allowing access to data that is supposed to be unavailable to that particular user. OVIC identified many potential risks in relation to the information privacy principles, including principle 4 on data security, principle 11 on transborder data flows, principle 2 for the use and disclosure only for the primary purpose, principle 10 on sensitive information restrictions and many more. My question for the minister is: what protocols and training are being established throughout the public service and all areas of government to ensure that privacy and data security are not compromised by these tools?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:26): Mr Limbrick, I will again forward your question on to the minister. I concur with you in relation to the importance of data integrity. It is something that is a focus of the government. It is also a topic of conversation across jurisdictions. As I said, I am sure that the minister will be more than happy to give you an update on where things are up to. I think that the general consensus is we want to get ahead in terms of the guidelines and protections, rather than lag behind.

Ministers statements: Melbourne City Football Club

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:26): A modern corrections system is about keeping our community safe now and into the future. That is why we have dedicated programs and services that are designed to support those in the corrections system to turn a new leaf. The twinning project is a global soccer program operating out of the United Kingdom, the United States and South Africa. In an Australian first we introduced this program to our Victorian system in November 2023. Some of you may remember me talking about the first graduation at the Metropolitan Remand Centre, which I had the privilege of attending. I am proud to update the house that the success of this project is now being replicated in our women's system too.

Last month I had the pleasure of attending the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre with the hardworking member for Wendouree in the other place to witness the graduation of the second cohort of female participants. It was deeply impactful to hear from them about the positive and lasting impact of this eight-week initiative. Some of the participants spoke about the leadership, resilience, teamwork and communication skills they developed during this program. Sixty-seven participants have graduated since the program's commencement, and I am confident that there will be many more.

None of this would be possible without the commitment and partnership of Melbourne City Football Club, in particular City in the Community. I want to commend the people who are crucial to the running of this project, namely Melbourne City's head of community Sunil Menon, who is known to many in this chamber – Mr Tarlamis, I will look at you – and also general manager Anne Morgan and the wonderful staff at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre.

Programs like the twinning project are an important part of achieving the goals of our corrections system. By helping people turn their lives around and also equipping them with the tools they need, our government is delivering on our commitment and our responsibility to support people in this endeavour.

Budget 2025–26

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:28): (915) My question is again for the Treasurer. Treasurer, Labor's 2022 financial statement commits to returning to operating surpluses, delivering a \$1 billion surplus in 2025–26. Will this be achieved?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:29): Mr Davis, you know what my answer is going to be in relation to this question. The budget will come out next Tuesday.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:29): I thank the Treasurer for the non-answer. The same Labor financial statement confirms that capital projects will be fully offset, meaning they can be delivered without increasing net debt. Net debt in the pre-election budget update was \$116 billion projected, and net debt in the 2025–26 budget update is projected to be \$187.3 billion. Treasurer, will you admit that you have not delivered on your commitment to delivering your capital program without increasing net debt? Will you admit a failure on this commitment?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:30): Mr Davis, in relation to the aggregates, that will all be available for you to look at, to interrogate, to examine. There is the PAEC process et cetera. I am not pre-empting the outcomes that will be revealed in the budget.

Fox and wild dog control

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:30): (916) My question today is for the Minister for Environment in the other place. Foxes cause immense damage to livestock and native animals in our region of Northern Victoria. For over 20 years the fox scalp bounty has helped farmers and hunters alike keep their livestock and native animals safe by paying them to remove invasive species such as foxes and wild dogs. In fact, in 2022, 82,558 fox scalps were handed in. While it is pleasing to see the bounty on foxes extended until June 2025, will the minister commit to the ongoing funding of this vital pest management program?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:31): I thank the member for her question, which is a question for the Minister for Environment, and I am more than happy to pass that on and get the answer that is required.

Ministers statements: Victorian Senior of the Year Awards

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:31): I am pleased to rise in my capacity as Minister for Ageing and advise the house that nominations are open for the 2025 Victorian Senior of the Year Awards. For more than 30 years the annual Victorian Senior of the Year Awards have celebrated the community contributions and volunteering achievements of older Victorians. The awards are presented each October at Government House as part of the Victorian Seniors Festival. Last year I had the honour of joining Lieutenant-Governor of Victoria Professor James Angus AO and the Premier to present the awards, including the Premier's Award for Victorian Senior of the Year, awarded to Dr Manjula O'Connor for her amazing work supporting women facing family violence. Other recipients were recognised for fostering inclusion, promoting health and wellbeing, honouring veterans and empowering fellow older Victorians. There are six categories of awards in 2025, including veterans support, promotion of multiculturalism, community participation, and healthy and active living. Nominations are open online until Sunday 1 June, and I encourage members to promote the awards to Victorians and ask them to take a moment to nominate an older person in their life that is making a meaningful contribution to their local community.

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (12:33): Minister Tierney will get Mrs Tyrrell an answer to her question from the Minister for Environment, and Minister Symes will get answers for Mr Limbrick's two questions to the Minister for Government Services within the standing orders.

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, President, on 18 March I raised a number of questions to the Treasurer around the government having been found to have committed wage theft affecting thousands of doctors. At the time there was some discussion around the Treasurer undertaking to get a proper response. You ruled that for the next day, 19 March. That has not been undertaken. I am just wondering if the Treasurer could follow up and provide that to the house before we rise this evening, please.

The PRESIDENT: We will look at *Hansard*, and if the Treasurer made that commitment –

Jaclyn Symes interjected.

The PRESIDENT: The Treasurer is happy to follow up.

Constituency questions

Eastern Victoria Region

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (12:34): (1565) My question is for the Minister for Veterans in the other place, and I would like to thank Minister Suleyman for the opportunity to represent her at Anzac Day celebrations at Mornington Secondary College this year. It was a privilege to join the school community once again, honouring the service and sacrifice of our veterans. The school does a tremendous job of pulling together the school and broader community to mark Anzac Day. My thanks also to principal Linda Stanton on her leadership at the school and her continued leadership on this day and others throughout the throughout the calendar. Can the minister please outline how the government will continue to support Victorian students in understanding and commemorating Anzac Day, including the roles and sacrifices of our veterans both past and present, the relevance of recent conflicts and the ongoing importance of paying our respects to those who have served our nation? I have had the privilege of meeting with the eastern Victoria winners of the Spirit of Anzac Prize, which offers them the opportunity to travel to Gallipoli to participate in the incredibly meaningful services they continue to hold in Türkiye.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:35): (1566) My question is to the Minister for Youth, and my question, Minister, is from a local community Scout group in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region and relates to Scout sleepovers. I ask: will you provide an exemption or have the government provide a reduced cost to allow these Scout and community groups that cannot afford a temporary occupancy permit the ability to use Scout halls for sleepovers? As you would be aware, under the National Construction Code building classifications most scout halls are classified as class B, which restricts those that do not have a temporary occupancy permit the ability to use their halls for Scout sleepovers. These permits are costly and beyond the reach of many Scout groups, particularly during these difficult times. Scouting teaches teamwork and life skills essential for resiliency. Scouting activities are important post COVID lockdowns due to the increases in depression and mental health issues in children, and sleepovers provided an introduction to camping, which forms an important part of the outdoor activities for the scouting movement.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:36): (1567) My constituent is a proud mother and grandmother from Dandenong. She was 18 when her first child was born in 1967. Before she could hold her newborn the baby was taken for adoption without her consent. For decades my constituent has been fighting for justice alongside an estimated 250,000 Australians impacted by

forced separation and closed adoption. At its height, from the 1950s through to the early 1980s, these mothers endured abhorrent treatment. Recommendation 24 of the inquiry into responses to historical forced adoption in Victoria called for changes to the Wrongs Act 1958 to give these mothers greater access to justice. Despite the Victorian government's commitment to exploring the reform, nothing has changed, so my constituent asks: when will the government implement recommendation 24?

Eastern Victoria Region

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:37): (1568) My constituency question is for the Minister for Consumer Affairs. Minister, the Traralgon Probus Club has been hit with a newly imposed fee of \$425. This new charge is in addition to the standard fees in meeting their requirements under the act. By contrast, the New South Wales Probus clubs only pay \$26. There are six Probus clubs in Latrobe Valley and another five Probus clubs in Gippsland. This equates \$5000 which clubs have to raise. In a cost-of-living crisis, for not-for-profit organisations whose membership is composed of pensioners and senior Victorians engaging in positive social interaction to keep them well and healthy, this additional cost is unfair and very miserly of you. Minister, will you withdraw the fee to the Traralgon Probus club and all other Probus clubs in my electorate who have been whacked with this extra charge?

Western Victoria Region

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:38): (1569) My question is to the Minister for Environment. The iconic growling grass frog listed as a species threatened with extinction within the Melbourne Strategic Assessment (Environment Mitigation Levy) Act 2020. Once widespread, it has experienced significant decline in population due to habitat loss, disease and other factors, becoming locally extinct in some areas. The Lake Connewarre complex, a Ramsar-listed wetland, supports a population of the growling grass frog, and yet at Hospital Swamp duck hunters are permitted to carry out their season within this internationally recognised waterway. Shooters pose a significant risk to the population by damaging and degrading breeding and overwintering habitat, as well as spreading fungus, a deadly threat to the growling grass frog. Minister, will you close Hospital Swamp wetlands to duck hunting immediately for this season and all future seasons to ensure the conservation of this highly vulnerable species?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:39): (1570) My question is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport. With the incredible amount of investment that is going into our transport infrastructure, we are starting to see the benefits of it in relation to the Metro Tunnel with the very exciting announcement this week of upgraded train frequencies right across different corners of Melbourne. Whether it is on the Werribee line, the Sandringham line, the Craigieburn line, the Upfield line or three regional lines as well, the Metro Tunnel will, by unlocking some of this capacity in the network, allow all these lines to benefit from increased services and will also allow the Pakenham, Cranbourne and Sunbury lines as part of the new Metro Tunnel line to have a significant boost in frequencies. This is really maximising the benefits of these state-changing projects such as the Metro Tunnel. So I ask the minister: what benefits will my constituents in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region have – people who use the Pakenham and Cranbourne lines – from these frequency upgrades?

Northern Victoria Region

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (12:40): (1571) My question is to the Minister for Mental Health, to ask that the appropriate funding be provided in the state budget for the valuable work of Lifeline Loddon Mallee. Lifeline Loddon Mallee provides critical mental health and crisis support services across Northern Victoria from Kyneton to Mildura, including Bendigo. In addition to operating a local call centre for the national Lifeline crisis line, they also offer face-to-face counselling. These services support people in crisis and help build long-term community resilience by training local volunteers, who bring their skills back into their communities. Despite Victoria generating nearly 30 per cent of Lifeline's national call volume, only 12.5 per cent of those calls are answered in

Victoria. Unlike other states, such as New South Wales and Queensland, Victorian Lifeline centres receive no direct state funding to build local capacity, and this urgently needs to change. Will the minister support Lifeline's state budget proposal and provide funding to enable Victorian Lifeline centres to recruit and train more local volunteers and improve local crisis support?

Northern Victoria Region

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (12:42): (1572) My constituency question is for the Minister for Environment. In Plenty Gorge Park, an essential natural sanctuary that exists within parts of Northern Victoria, vital habitat for some of our most iconic and vulnerable wildlife is facing serious and immediate threat. A group of reckless individuals on bikes are disrupting the environment directly within an area of a large flock of gang-gang cockatoos, who use the region for feeding, breeding and raising young. This habitat is absolutely critical for our endangered gang-gang cockatoos, whose populations are still recovering from the 2019–20 Black Summer bushfires. Despite numerous pleas by community members to local councils and police, little to no effective action has been taken. What will the minister do to help stop environmental vandalism and protect the wildlife that exists within Plenty Gorge Park?

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:42): (1573) My constituency matter is for the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop. Community members and Whitehorse and Monash councillors have all criticised the Labor government's plan to build towers of up to 20 storeys or higher along Gardiners Creek in my electorate. These towers will overshadow the creek, they will degrade the environmental quality of the area and they will undo 40 years of Landcare restoration of this area. It is fiercely opposed by my community, and it follows a broader pattern of where consultation with the local community is lauded as an exercise but then totally ignored. Minister, in light of the strong objections from both councils and residents, will you please revise these plans and assure the community that we will not have 20-storey towers along Gardiners Creek?

Northern Victoria Region

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:43): (1574) My constituency question today is for the Treasurer, and my constituents ask if the Treasurer will expand and increase the drought support package to cover the Northern Victoria region. These last six months have been some of the driest for my region of Northern Victoria in many years, with little to no rainfall being measured. Feed for stock is becoming increasingly scarce, water sources are drying up and our farmers are facing more financial strain than ever with mounting costs, taxes and levies being heaped upon them. My constituents feel neglected and their plight forgotten, unlike their neighbours in the south-west of the state, who have already been given access to this vital package. Farming is the lifeblood of our communities in the north, and by acting now and releasing these funds to farmers already feeling the impact of the dry season, my constituents hope that the disastrous sell-off of what few family farms remain can be avoided. Treasurer, my constituents ask: will you expand and increase the drought support package to cover the Northern Victoria Region?

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:44): (1575) My question for the Treasurer concerns the shamefully misnamed Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund. As we have heard this morning, it has very little to do with funding volunteers. In fact it is more about taxing volunteers, and most of the hiked taxes on agriculture – a 189 per cent increase, no less – will effectively be general revenue, funding metropolitan services and bureaucracies. In my electorate Moyne Shire Council will face one of the highest average rises. They report primary producers will face a 170 per cent increase, rural residential landholders a 34 per cent increase and commercial operators a 74 per cent hike. This translates to an additional \$5.9 million extracted from the Moyne shire alone. Given the prolonged drought conditions in Moyne and neighbouring municipalities like Corangamite, how does the

government justify imposing such disproportionate increases on rural areas, as the revenue will largely be spent on general government spending? Treasurer, what steps will you take?

Southern Metropolitan Region

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:46): (1576) Much talk in this chamber this week has been on the planning amendments that force high-rise, high-density into our suburbs. My question to the Minister for Planning relates directly to that. VC257, VC267, VC276 and GC252 are key planning amendments that seek to implement the government's forced high-rise, high-density decision-making into councils and into communities, overriding councils and overriding communities. But the minister – and we heard this in transcript, and I well understand the way the planning amendments work – is provided with a background and information which enables her to make an informed decision about whether to use section 20, part 4, as she has done in a number of these cases. But information that she has used to arrive at these decisions should be in the public domain. We have asked for it through the process, and I ask her to release that information.

Eastern Victoria Region

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:47): (1577) Dairy farmers in Eastern Victoria are facing a severe drought crisis. In South Gippsland, Baw Baw, Bass Coast and Latrobe feed is scarce and stock water is running low. GippsDairy is currently supporting five farms that have already gone dry, and over 30 more are expected to run out within weeks. A typical 350-cow farm requires more than 63,000 litres of water every single day. Farmers are exhausted, working double time just to keep animals alive. Meanwhile the South Australian government is providing direct drought support, including transport subsidies. Victorian farmers across the board have received nothing. This is not fair. It is a risk to animal welfare, mental health and regional productivity. My question is for the Minister for Agriculture: what immediate, targeted drought support across Victoria are you going to deliver, including subsidies for stock water transport? The time for watching is over, and it is desperate. Action is needed now.

Northern Metropolitan Region

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:48): (1578) My constituency question is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport, and it is about the Craigieburn train station. I am regularly contacted by constituents about this station. One issue that has been raised with me is the inadequacy of the car park, including the lack of space available for pick-ups, which is causing gridlock. Because it is an electrified station, you get lots of people from Mickleham, Kalkallo and Mount Ridley coming down to Craigieburn train station, and it is packed, always, at peak hour. There is an issue with entry and exits as well. One of my constituents has suggested that a further exit at the southern end of the car park onto Stockton Street is needed to make it safer than using the Hothlynn Drive roundabout. I ask the minister to investigate what can be done to improve the issues around parking and access to Craigieburn station and to stop neglecting the northern suburbs.

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:49): (1579) My question is for the Minister for Regional Development. Will you support the visitor economy in Macedon by funding planning work for the Hanging Rock to Daylesford rail trail? The Macedon Ranges are a major drawcard for international tourists as well as Victorians on day trips or long weekends. It is the perfect place for a cycling adventure, and one of the top priorities for the Macedon Ranges Shire Council is developing and connecting 57 kilometres of shared-use trails and rail trails all the way from Hanging Rock to Daylesford, linking communities through some of the most picturesque areas of Victoria. Council estimates that completing the trail will bring up to 60,000 additional visitors each year, who will spend an extra \$11 million in local tourism and hospitality businesses, boosting the local economy. Council needs a \$3 million investment from the Victorian government to design and plan this project so that it

is shovel ready. With an expected benefit-to-cost ratio of three to one, this project is a clear winner. Victorian tourism businesses are hurting under the Allan government – *(Time expired)*

Bills

Fire Services Property Amendment (Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund) Bill 2025

Second reading

Debate resumed.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:50): I rise to speak on the Fire Services Property Amendment (Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund) Bill 2025, and let me be absolutely clear from the outset, this bill is an absolute shocker – it is a doozy in the worst sense of the word. It represents an enormous, unprecedented cash grab, a financial hit to every household, every small business, every farm, every property owner in this state – every industrial property owner in this state and commercial property owner in this state. And make no mistake, this is not just a levy, it is a tax – a big fat new, indiscriminate tax.

Let us talk about numbers. The government's own budget papers lay bare the reality. If you look at table A.1 in the most recent end-of-year budget papers, the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund is expected to collect \$610.9 million in 2025–26, \$765 million in 2026–27 and another \$765 million in 2027–28; that is \$2.14 billion in just three years. Let that sink in: more than \$2.1 billion is being hauled in from hardworking Victorians under the guise of emergency services funding. This tax is a killer, plain and simple. Let us not forget the context. This is a government that brought in nearly 60 new and expanded taxes since it came to office, and this one dwarfs most of them. This one goes further, wider, deeper and nastier than all of the rest. It hits families struggling with the cost of living. It hits businesses trying to recover costs post pandemic. It hits farmers who already shoulder enormous financial and environmental burden. It is cruel, it is unfair and it is unnecessary.

This government has always wanted to charge farmers land tax – let us make that clear. It has always been a pipedream on that side of the chamber that is disconnected from regional Victoria. They have always wanted to charge farmers land tax; they are doing it under another name. You know what happens when you charge farmers land tax? People pay more at the check-out. People in my electorate, in a community like Craigieburn – who are usually checking their bank apps as they go through the check-out to see if they have got enough to pay for their groceries – are going to be paying more, because this government cannot manage money. It is communities like mine in the northern suburbs that are also going to be paying the price, because this government cannot manage money. It hits families struggling through a cost-of-living crisis.

And don't you dare pretend or give mealy-mouthed words to say that you are supporting farmers through the drought that they are going through at the moment. You have not just stabbed them in the back; you have stabbed them in the front during a drought. We heard from Dr Heath before about what constituents in her electorate and farmers in her electorate are going through in regard to the drought.

The government wants to pretend this is all about supporting volunteers and emergency services; they have wrapped this tax in the warm glow of community spirit and altruism. But if you scratch the surface, if you even just dig a little bit, you will see what is truly a desperate tax grab by a government that has mismanaged public funds, has run out of money and is now scrambling to plug the holes with taxpayers' hard-earned dollars. Victorians are angry. Ordinary people are angry, confused and deeply concerned about this legislation. We have heard from farmers, CFA volunteers, small business owners, professional firefighters and local councillors. The member for Ripon even spoke to farmers and said that she had spoken to the Premier and Treasurer and was advocating for changes – well, they never really came – and only voted for it because she had to, not because she supported it. She voted for it because she had to. Well, I think the people of Ripon now know that by voting Labor in Ripon, you just get a rubber stamp to betray regional Victoria, and that is what all regional and peri-urban members

should know. We are going to make it clear, and I am telling you now: as a result of these changes, we are coming after you, and so are your communities.

Let us talk about those communities. Communities like Eureka are coming after the Labor Party, as are Wendouree, Bendigo East, Bass, Hastings, Yan Yean, Macedon and the last Labor spot in the Eastern Victoria Region. Unfortunately, Mr McIntosh, who is not here, is likely to be safe in his number one spot from my electorate of the northern suburbs of the inner city, but there is that spot as well. And the Greens have done a dirty deal with the Labor Party after supposed consultation. They bragged after the last election that they had won their first regional seat in the western region. Well, I can tell you, you can kiss that goodbye, the Greens, because as many people discovered recently, you cannot vote for the Greens, not this time. And for the people in Western Victoria Region: you cannot vote the Greens – never again – because they have turned their backs on regional and rural communities for a grubby deal with the Labor Party, because just like the Labor Party, the Greens political party have never seen a tax increase they did not like. You cannot trust them that they are serious about emergency services or volunteer firefighters or professional firefighters or standing up with the UFU, because they are not. They have never seen a tax increase they did not like. So my message to regional and peri-urban Labor MPs is that there will be political consequences for this. Do not think your communities will forget about this.

On Tuesday I had the privilege of joining many of my colleagues and hundreds of farmers and firefighters, volunteer and professional alike, from across the state on the front steps of Parliament who were there and who made their voices heard. Their message was consistent and loud and clear: 'We are being punished.' And they were right. Agricultural land is going to be hit hard by this bill, and everyone is affected; this tax does not discriminate. Their message was loud and clear that there will be political consequences for those who support this grubby new tax.

What the government is proposing to do is to replace the existing fire services property levy, which has been in place to fund the Country Fire Authority and Fire Rescue Victoria, with a much broader and much more expensive structure. Under this bill the new Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund will not only support the CFA and FRV but also extend to Triple Zero Victoria, the State Emergency Service, Emergency Management Victoria and even the Department of Justice and Community Safety and the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action. That is right – it is not just about trucks and brigades anymore; it is about funding public services, departments, bureaucrats and core government services that should be already financed by the state's general revenue. But this government are addicted to pouring concrete instead of funding our essential services, and we saw that with their nasty \$2.4 billion cut to public schools this week. That was in leaked cabinet subcommittee documents. It is an absolute disgrace.

This new Treasurer has shown her stripes. I thought we were going to get a bit of a change from this government when the former Treasurer last year in August admitted that we might have reached our limit on new taxes. That is what Mr Pallas said: we might have reached our limit on new taxes. So what does the new Treasurer Ms Symes do? She says, 'No, we can definitely do more.' That is the response from this government: 'We can definitely do more taxes.' Indeed we heard her say today or yesterday, 'They can afford to pay.' Our farmers, who are going up against the wall during a drought, can afford to pay more. They can afford to pay more, just like the business community can afford to pay more. Just when we are seeing investment run up against the wall, when you have got aggressive, competent Premiers like Mr Malinauskas and Mr Crisafulli going to Victorian businesses and poaching them out of Victoria, our Treasurer and our Premier say, 'They can afford to pay more. We're just going to increase your land tax, your property services levy.' We know their hidden agenda. They do not care about regional and rural communities, and we know they have secretly, ideologically and prospectively always wanted to put a land tax on our farmers. And it is all Victorians who will pay the price for that.

The real problem here is Labor's fiscal mismanagement. We have all seen how this government's major projects have spiralled out of control. Remember when the North East Link was a \$10 billion

project, and then it was a \$16 billion project, and then it was a \$26.9 billion project? I am tipping and I have been told quite widely it will probably end up at over \$30 billion when it is all said and done. The Metro Tunnel – almost \$5 billion in blowouts. We are seeing a pricing reset for even the early works for the Suburban Rail Loop. We saw the Auditor-General's report of major projects performance showing huge blowouts across all major projects – none left out. They basically all have blown out consistently. The West Gate Tunnel – another blowout there. This is what happens because Labor cannot manage money. They do nasty cuts to public schools – \$2.4 billion – and they find new people to tax.

The previous Treasurer said we might have reached our limit. This Premier, Jacinta Allan, says, 'No, there is more to do. There are more people to tax.' Victorians will be feeling this at the check-out. Absolutely, make no mistake, Victorians will be paying for this at the check-out because this government cannot manage money. We have got debt that is out of control. We are looking at debt levels rising from 6 per cent of gross state product in 2014–15 to more than 24 per cent today. The government's response is not to rein in spending, it is to hit Victorians with another tax. That is what this bill is. It is not emergency reform; it is budget repair at the community's expense.

Let us be absolutely clear: we support emergency services. We support our firefighters, our SES volunteers and all those who work on the frontlines during floods, fires, storms. They deserve to be properly resourced. But funding emergency services should not come at the cost of fairness, and it should not be used as a smokescreen for broader taxation. The state government has always traditionally funded Triple Zero Victoria. The state government has traditionally funded most other emergency services to a greater or lesser extent. The truth is that the state government is now looking to scoop in all this money, and I have to say the spending on a number of emergency services has not really been well scoped or managed well by this state government.

Despite promises for exemptions of volunteers, the government will implement a rebate system that will be administered by a yet to be named agency. As my colleague Mrs McArthur pointed out, it will put massive pressure on local government. I have recently met with a number of local governments within my community, like Hume City Council, Mitchell Shire Council and the outer suburban councils, who are very concerned about this levy. They are going to be the ones that have to administer this great big new tax. They are going to be coping the backlash, and all Victorians should remember when they receive this on their rates notice: it was the Labor Party and the Greens that put it there. This government has done this in a way that they want you to think it is your local council. It is the Victorian Labor Party.

I say to the member for Ripon, the member for Eureka, the member for Bass, the member for Hastings, the members for the Eastern Victoria Region, the Greens member for the Western Victoria Region: Victorian communities in regional and rural Victoria will not forget this grubby deal with the Labor Party and the Greens and this grubby tax increase that will be paid for at the check-out by every single Victorian. Shame.

Sitting suspended 1:05 pm until 2:06 pm.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (14:06): I rise, very sadly actually, to speak on the Fire Services Property Amendment (Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund) Bill 2025. My colleague Ms Crozier said they would have blood on their hands on that side of the chamber. I am here to tell you that you have blood on your hands. There were two suicides last week as a result of what you are imposing on farmers, and I have also been informed that a stock agent has had to go and make 35 calls for clients who he feels are under severe stress and strain. Suicides in rural communities are incredibly sad. We live in small communities, we live in close-knit communities, and the CFA volunteers are often the first on the ground when these things occur. The victims are often known to the CFA volunteers. They are not trained to do this but they do it, and it is incredibly hard and difficult. Our sympathies on this side of the chamber go out to the families who are now in distress as a result of the

absolutely callous move of this government to impose a tax when farmers in regional communities are at their lowest.

We have a drought that is the worst, in many cases, since 1900, and you are sitting over there – very few of you, I might add. You have hardly ever been here to listen to the debate today. Nor have the crossbench in that corner been around. You clearly do not care. I want to say, for the members on the other side who are from the rural electorates – Ms Ermacora is from my electorate, and she is there now. You spoke about the difficulties that our communities are having at the moment with drought, absolutely. Mr McIntosh, who is in a rural electorate, Ms Shing, Minister Tierney, Minister Symes: you are all from rural electorates, and for you to do this to rural communities is unbelievable. I want to point out that Dr Mansfield is from my electorate as well and Ms Purcell is from the northern region, both apparently voting for this incredibly callous piece of legislation. You all ought to be ashamed of yourselves, and you do have blood on your hands.

In opposing this bill and this new tax, it makes sense to ask the most basic question: why? Why would you be doing this? The answer is frankly damning. This tax is not about prudent planning or sustainable funding, it is an indictment of economic mismanagement. It is a \$2 billion patch-up job for a broken budget, yet another cash grab from a government that has run out of options. It is a measure born of desperation, not of principle or policy foresight. The truth is simple: this government are not doing it because it is a good idea; they are doing it because they have to. Wasteful spending has caught up with them. Economic mismanagement has stymied growth, and now they raid regional Victoria to clean up the mess. And worse still, this tax is just the beginning. Who knows what other concessions have been handed out to the Greens and others behind closed doors to get this across the line? A Greens party that was roundly rejected by the people at the recent federal election is now holding a weak Allan government to ransom.

Of course the trickery of the bill's title should be no surprise. It would not be a Victorian Labor government tax without a carefully misleading name. I am not just referring to the semantic trickery of calling it a levy; this government has made an art of using every word under the sun except 'tax'. But what is worse is the cruel irony of the branding: the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund. You would think it might be a help to volunteers, to support these brave men and women who donate their time, their energy, their own safety and often their own farm equipment – often they leave their farms and then they are burnt down – to protect others, but the opposite is true. The very people who are hit hardest by this tax are our emergency services volunteers – farmers, landholders, the backbone of our CFA brigades.

It is even worse than that, because even as they pay more, the money they contribute will not come back to their communities. While fire trucks in regional towns are outdated, while volunteers ride into danger on ancient equipment, millions of dollars are being siphoned away from their areas. And we know why: the funds are being absorbed into general government revenue, not quarantined for the services they claim to support. They will fund backroom staffers in Melbourne, not frontline services in our regions. This is not a volunteers fund, as the bill title has it: it is to fund the Treasurer. That is why we are proposing amendments to this legislation – amendments that would stop the government from spending this money on unrelated public service costs and instead require that funds be directed to volunteer emergency services organisations. If and only if this tax is to pass, then the bare minimum this government owes our volunteers is that the contribution is used for them, not against them.

Now let me speak to the real impact this tax is already having on Victorian families. I have been inundated with correspondence from constituents, and I have taken the time to go out and meet with people at rallies across the state. I have been at communities in Beaufort, Ascot and Barunah. Not one Labor MP was there, not one Green, not one Legalise Cannabis Party member, not the Animal Justice Party. My colleague Joe McCracken and my colleague Richard Riordan have been with me. I have been on the steps of Parliament House on two occasions – again, not one Labor MP, not one Greens MP, not one Legalise Cannabis Party MP, not the Animal Justice Party. You will not front the constituents of Victoria, especially the people that feed you, inside the tram tracks. I want to share with

you just a few of the voices I have heard. They speak far more eloquently than I ever could about what this tax means in real terms. I will start with this letter from a farming family in the Pyrenees:

Our farm is already facing severe economic challenges, We are buying in Grain, Hay and Water to feed our livestock ...

I might tell you people are spending \$1000 a day on water. Some of us are spending \$20,000 a week on fodder. It goes on:

... Farm insurances have doubled, Agricultural input costs have increased, Cost of living has increased, Bank Interest rates have increased ...

and council rates have increased. Remember, this levy is based on the rateable value of your property.

This massive increase in the ESVF Levy, will be another financial burden, which our farm realistically cannot afford.

We urge you to reconsider this tax, especially towards the farmers, who volunteer their time to become CFA members, and help fight the fires ...

free of charge to the government, I might add. Here is another story sent to me by a concerned constituent. So often farmers do not want to make a public spectacle and complain, so in this case it is a neighbour who has seen the enormous injustice and wanted to speak out to help his friend. He wrote:

The true story of a local farmer and his family highlights the profound impact the state government's proposed projects and levies have on their lives.

I am now paraphrasing his story. John Drife is a fifth-generation farmer north-west of Ballarat. His family has been deeply involved with the CFA since the brigade formed in 1951. John was active early and formally signed up in 1971. He became a brigade captain in 1977, then Ballarat group officer in 1989, serving for over a decade. He later chaired the brigade for eight years and received both the National Medal and CFA life membership. Over four decades John has fought nearly every major fire in western Victoria, from Ash Wednesday and Black Saturday to the 2024 Pomonal and Bayindeen fires. He remains chair of his local brigade and mentors young members. In 2023 he was named Hepburn shire Citizen of the Year. John's sons now represent the sixth generation of Drife farmers continuing the family's legacy of services. But despite their contribution, the Drifes are under pressure. Their land is at the centre of state government projects – the Western Renewables Link and the proposed Nyaninyuk wind farm – bringing disruption and uncertainty. They have also been hit with higher land taxes, worsening drought and now this 189 per cent increase in the emergency services levy, ironically funding the very service they volunteer for. My correspondent concluded:

Across rural communities, farmers are struggling as government projects reshape their lands and livelihoods. Their concerns often go unheard, leaving them to fight battles in silence. Is it any wonder the farming community experiences such alarmingly high suicide rates?

And I have just referred to two.

With immense external pressures and little acknowledgement of their plight, many feel abandoned by the very system meant to support them.

Another farmer sends the numbers. He wrote:

As a CFA member with over 20 years service, the new levy is an insult to my service. The levy is unproportionally taxing the very people who do the greatest service as volunteers.

My total income from this farm in the last 12 months is \$3,700. Of that I currently pay \$1,900 in Rates. That leaves \$1,800 of which I still have to pay shearing costs, animal health & welfare costs and fencing repairs and maintenance.

I might tell you that at the moment in the drought-stricken areas kangaroos are out of control. They are wrecking everybody's fences. They are drinking the water. They are eating the fodder. That is a major issue as well.

This is from another concerned constituent:

Our business (family) paid \$3214.50 last year the Fire Services levy, the expected rise of 189% for primary producers will see the new Emergency Services Levy increase to \$9289.9. Why do we have to pay so much for a service that we volunteer for (and would not exist without us)?

From another part of my electorate, Donald, a farmer wrote:

As a volunteer CFA firefighter, and landholder in central Victoria, I'm feeling somewhat ripped off at the proposed increase in levy's. I spend many hours every year, breathing in smoke, in hot horrible conditions, to help fight fires. We often take our personal appliances, and get the job done. We give up productivity on our farm, mostly at the time of year when we make our money, and now we're going to be sluggish with another tax in the vicinity of \$15,000.

Another person wrote:

At this time most farmers across Victoria, particularly in the west of the state are enduring ... the worst dry periods ...

that he has seen in 50-plus years of farming.

This is leading to enormous mental health pressures on farmers. This new tax will be the final straw for many of them.

It is very easy to dismiss individual stories like these as anecdotes even when the figures are alarmingly high, but the fact is even the collection authorities have done their sums. They know it is not just the odd individual farm which will see a rise; they know that whole areas will see a massive rise. We talk about the \$2.1 billion to be extracted, how it has risen by hundreds of millions from the existing tax and the way the vast scale of that makes it harder to really understand. Joseph Stalin is said to have remarked, 'A single death is a tragedy, a million deaths are a statistic.' In the same way a \$15,000 tax on a struggling farm is a tragedy, a \$2.1 billion statewide levy is just a statistic for this government.

At a community meeting I attended in Beaufort, Pyrenees shire mayor Cr Tanya Kahoe revealed that her shire currently collects \$2.1 million annually through the fire services property levy but the new levy will require them to take twice that amount – \$4.2 million – from their residents, out of their economy. This is a criminal tax. It should be defeated. It is disgusting that the Greens, the Legalise Cannabis Party and probably the Animal Justice Party have agreed to put this through, slaughtering country Victorians. It is unfair, punitive, mismanaged and fundamentally unjust. It forces local councils to act as unpaid tax collectors for a scheme they did not design, do not control and often oppose, while wearing all the political fallout. And perhaps the worst part of all of this is what we do not know. We do not know what the government has promised the Greens. Let us reject this bill today outright. It is a crime.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (14:22): At the outset I would like to start by acknowledging the many volunteers and emergency services workers who will benefit from this bill. It is an important piece of policy work that began with them, particularly those in the SES. I would particularly like to call out Goldie Pergl and Mike Bagnall, who many, many, many months ago came and spoke to me about the feelings of SES volunteers in particular about not having a sustainable funding model along the same lines as our fire services.

These reforms are about recognising that climate change and population growth are having real impacts here in the state of Victoria. We are seeing not only more floods, storms and fires but also the very real and lasting devastation that they bring to our communities. The bill, although obviously a Treasury bill, is about listening to emergency services. We have spent many hours in this place acknowledging the impact of these disasters. We have spoken about the many families who have lost homes or lost livelihoods, and we have spoken about the loss of our natural environment and farming land, which has been incomprehensible in recent times, and how we know that the communities that are impacted by these events are very much changed forever.

Support for this bill will send a strong message to those who respond on the fireground, in floodwaters and in storms that the work they do is valued. Support for this bill suggests that you support organisations and you know that they deserve more funding to assist them in their work. Support for this bill will show VICSES volunteers that they are as important and deserving of sustainable funding as those in our fire services. Support for this bill means more trucks, more training and more grants for volunteers through the volunteer emergency services equipment program and improved flow of advice during emergencies from the central database that communicates to responders.

There is a lot of politics at play in relation to this bill. I think that is unfortunate, but it is a playbook that I am not unfamiliar with. I have seen it before. How many times have we heard the Liberals and Nationals stand up and ask for more funding for new trucks, new stations and extra support for their communities following a disaster? The member for Eildon got up in the Legislative Assembly on Tuesday and asked for upgrades to infrastructure in her community for emergency services directly after the Premier had been attacked –

Members interjecting.

Ingrid Stitt: On a point of order, Acting President, I think that on this side of the chamber we have listened silently to everybody's contributions since we came back from the lunchbreak, and it would be good if we could hear the Treasurer in silence.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Gaelle Broad): The Treasurer to continue unassisted.

Jaclyn SYMES: What I can say is that in relation to the funds that would be raised should this bill pass, these are the exact things that can be invested in more and over and above what we are already doing. I have not yet heard from the coalition their commitment to repeal this legislation, and I am wondering if that will come out, a commitment to repeal this legislation, because I am interested in how they would seek to deal with all of the requests for funding that they do try to put forward.

Here today we have a bill that is responding to many of those requests. It will be able to accommodate much more than we are already able to. To be clear, we are really interested in ensuring that for the amounts raised it can be demonstrated where they go. I know a lot of people have raised concerns about that. We will have more to say about that in committee, and I have got some amendments that will back that in.

The government, through this bill, is planning to futureproof funding. We are making sure that any future government cannot cut the funding to a local brigade – we have seen that before as well. The bill will ensure we can fund, as I said, new trucks, new pumpers, new tankers and new radios that have been asked for and are needed. The bill that is in the house today is about standing up for those Victorians who stand up for us – who keep us safe and who help us and our families – delivering what they need and what they have asked for. This is about being fiscally responsible and ensuring that we have the money we need to respond to increasing and overlapping disasters that are continuing to happen across the state.

The bill will deliver more than \$250 million for CFA and VICSES. It includes an investment of \$70 million to establish a rolling fleet replacement for VICSES and CFA so that they can get new and upgraded trucks, tankers and pumpers. The first round of these trucks will go out to various communities. The list for VICSES units includes Glen Eira, Geelong, Alexandra, Kinglake, Essendon, Chelsea, Otway, Beechworth, Kyabram and Murrayville. The CFA brigades who will be first in line in relation to this new funding and rolling fleet will be Darraweit Guim, Corop West, Barmah, Erica, Lubeck, Goroke, Crowlands, Modewarre, Kawarren and Moe South, and they will be getting medium tankers funded through the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund (ESVF). A lot of people are familiar with the volunteer emergency services equipment program. This fund will contribute to a doubling of that fund. This is a very popular fund across the emergency services sector.

We also know that timely, accurate and accessible information is critical during a natural disaster. That is why, through the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund, we will invest \$53 million to modernise the VicEmergency app and central database for our emergency services – it is known as the EM-COP. This will mean VicEmergency can be translated into different languages as well. We will also provide VICSES with almost \$30 million to deliver training and support programs for their volunteers. This is something, as the former minister, I heard was very much at the top of their wish list. We are also providing a new rolling fleet program for FRV, which will be \$10 million to contribute to their trucks. This is in addition to obviously the many vehicles that are on order, underway or rolling out soon. I do note that regularly I see the new electric FRV fire truck, EVIE. I have seen that vehicle on occasion.

The bill, as we know, is an amendment to the current system, the fire services property levy. I will just give an overview. From 1 July 2025 the ESVF will continue to fund Fire Rescue Victoria and the Country Fire Authority and for the first time will include VICSES, the State Control Centre, Forest Fire Management Victoria, Emergency Recovery Victoria and Triple Zero Victoria. It will ensure that our agencies have the resources that they need to keep Victorians safe and help them recover from natural disasters. It will bring Victoria's funding arrangements for emergency services into line with other Australian states and territories. It is expected to raise around \$600 million more in 2025–26 and \$765 million more in 2027–28, when fully implemented. As I said, I want to repeat and make it very, very clear that every dollar raised will go towards vital life-saving equipment, vehicles, staff, training for volunteers, community education and recovery support for when Victorians need it most.

I have been having a lot of conversations and consultations in relation to this bill. It was announced in December last year. I have met with farmers, firefighters, community members and councils, and I have heard a lot of feedback in relation to this. We have heard that the current variable rates and how they were set are a concern for farmers, and I understand that. That is why I have made a decision to revise the rates. Although the rates are not actually in this legislation, I did make it public today and informed particularly the Victorian Farmers Federation that following their advocacy and conversations with others we will be proposing a reduced rate for farmers from 83 cents per \$1000 of capital improved value to 71.8 cents, and on this you will see some savings. This might be a good opportunity for me to circulate my amendments.

Amendments circulated pursuant to standing orders.

Jaclyn SYMES: Some of the commitments that I have articulated today are outside legislation, such as the farmer rate, but these ones are subject to consideration for the house: a guarantee that 95 per cent of the CFA and VICSES budgets and up to 90 per cent of FRV's budget will be funded through the levy. To be clear, we obviously continue to fund 100 per cent of these agencies' budgets, but the levy is used in that regard. We are introducing a clause to absolutely confirm that every dollar raised will be spent on emergency services. And I do not have a problem with the coalition's suggestion; we have just crafted an amendment that is a little more workable.

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: No, honestly, it is not. I am not that petty. We are committing to annual reporting on how much we are collecting for each land use classification and how much has been allocated to each agency, just to be really sure that people can feel confident in relation to this fund. We are also making it really clear that the bill, in relation to the funding that is notionally allocated to the Department of Justice and Community Safety and the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, just how that will work, because I know people were concerned that it was funding bureaucrats and the like. It is just the way the government works. For example, the Secretary of the Department of Justice and Community Safety would be responsible for the contract for radios for volunteers and the like, so it is just making sure that we can explain that to people.

There will be some council implementation issues that I want to put on the record as well. The ESVF will still be collected as it always was through the former levy. That will be again on rates notices, but

I do want to acknowledge the advocacy of the Municipal Association of Victoria. Following conversations, we have certainly been able to ensure that there is funding available for any implementation issues for councils. But also one of the big concerns they had was whether they would have to be responsible for administering the exemption rebate for volunteers, and I have made it very clear that a government entity will be responsible for that. That will be Service Victoria, similar to the app. The app already does rebates, so that is the platform that we will be using. We are estimating around 40,000 rebates in relation to volunteers accessing that to be processed.

On that volunteer exemption, I do want to acknowledge that through this process we really wanted to recognise our volunteers and ensure that we were providing an exemption from the levy for all active support and operational CFA and SES volunteers. We can talk through the definition of ‘volunteer’, but it is about striking a balance between operational and support volunteers and picking them up so that if you are on the back of the truck or you are responsible for the books or you do the fundraising, you will be eligible for an exemption. I would like to thank the CFA and SES for their constructive work on this. They will help to ensure that this is as smooth as possible and that volunteers can access the rebate.

Another question that I know was raised pretty early on – and I will just put it on record that I have said it from the very start: Shepparton search and rescue have an MOU with VICSES, so they will be treated the same in relation to the ability to access an exemption. We will also allow eligible volunteers to claim the rebate against a farm of which they are the owner, even if it is not their principal place of residence, so we are giving them the ability to make a choice and it is fairer for farmers who do not live on their farm. We will also allow the rebate to apply across a range of farm ownership structures, including trusts and companies and farm businesses with separately titled land, with a full exemption available for farms up to a value of \$5 million – that is, the land value.

I appreciate the indulgence of the house. In summing up, I do want to reiterate that the bill is designed to make sure our emergency services have the sustainable funding and equipment they need to keep Victorians safe and to recover from natural disasters. It is tangible, real support for our emergency services, and I find it disappointing that we cannot come together in a bipartisan way to support this. It is the change that is fair. It is a fair thing to do, and it is what our emergency services have asked for. I commend the bill to the house.

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) incorporated the following:

I rise to make a brief contribution to the Fire Services Property Amendment (Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund) Bill 2025.

We are having yet another winter of unseasonably warm weather, predicted to be the warmest on record – off the back of our two previous warmest winters from last year and the year before. I’m not even sure if we can even keep describing these bizarre record-breaking temperatures as ‘unseasonable’. Climate change is making the word obsolete.

In this Parliament we have had two inquiries that have investigated the impacts of climate change: the inquiry into the 2022 flood event in Victoria – the report of which was tabled last year – and the inquiry into climate resilience, which is currently ongoing.

A key finding of the flood inquiry was that:

... the Victoria State Emergency Service is responding to an increasing number of events over time. Given the link between climate change and increased extreme weather events, this trend will continue.

And we are currently seeing the sort of persistent dry conditions across Victoria, particularly in the south-west, which lead to a greater risk of major bushfires.

The inquiry also found that:

Despite increased funding over time, the Victoria State Emergency Service lacks the appropriate resources to prepare and respond effectively to major emergencies such as flood events.

The flood inquiry recommended increased funding to bolster the state’s capacity to manage and respond to emergencies effectively.

Both inquiries made clear that we are under-resourced to meet the challenges of climate change – to staff our emergency response agencies, to upgrade and maintain equipment, to train our emergency services workers and volunteers.

Adapting to climate change – maintaining the resources needed to keep Victorians safe in the face of increasing natural disasters – is going to require funding, and it is no longer something we can kick down the road.

The bill before us replaces the Fire Services Property Levy, introduced in 2012, with the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund levy.

The ESVF will guarantee funding of 95 per cent of the annual budgets for the SES, Triple Zero Victoria, Emergency Management Victoria and Forest Fire Management Victoria. It will also provide \$250 million in additional support for CFA and SES volunteers.

In the lead up to this debate, we received advocacy from our members, from our constituents and from people all over the state, expressing their objections to this bill. We have met with farmers, with unions and with members of the CFA and the SES and have listened to their concerns.

I will say we had broad misgivings about the levy and the increased financial burden it places on regional Victorians.

We draw some comfort from the house amendments the government has moved, which address some of the concerns of stakeholders.

These amendments clarify how the funding is distributed and used and specifically state that levy funds may only be used for emergency services purposes.

They clarify what funding the Department of Justice and Community Safety Victoria and the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action will receive and where it will be allocated. And they require annual reporting of the fund's expenditure.

Changes to the levy will result in a reduction on the levy farmers pay from the initial government proposal and a consequential increase in the levy paid by people living in metropolitan Melbourne.

To further support farmers, the government is finalising a package of drought assistance, which kicks in after the current one expires on 30 June.

Following consultation with local councils, the government has simplified the administration of the fund for councils. Councils will not be required to manage the rebate for volunteers, and there will be support for councils in transitioning from the Fire Services Property Levy to the new Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund levy.

We are particularly pleased to see that a previous provision that might have resulted in council funding being reduced in situations where levy funds had not been fully collected has been removed.

There is also a commitment of \$10 million per year over the forward estimates to fund a rolling truck fleet program for Fire Rescue Victoria, which matches the commitment made to CFA.

Look, we know that many, many Victorians are at the pointy end of the cost-of-living crisis, particularly in our regions. The very last thing anyone wants is a new tax.

But as climate change continues to bite, we will continue to experience more fires, floods and devastating storms, and we must have a sustainable framework for funding our emergency services into the future. This is a good start, but obviously much more needs to be done in the coming years.

We need to fund our emergency services, and, for that reason, Legalise Cannabis will support this bill.

As I said before, this is not something we can continue to kick down the road.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (22): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Noes (18): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Adem Somyurek, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.*Referral to committee*

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (14:44): I move:

That this house requires the Economy and Infrastructure Committee to inquire into, consider and report, by 30 June 2025, on the Fire Services Property Amendment (Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund) Bill 2025.

It is true that this bill has a lot of discussion and currency in the community, but even today we have seen significant changes proposed by the government, deals done on the side and arrangements put in place that have not been scrutinised. I do not think anyone fully understands the impact of these changes on not just the services – this is of course about the emergency services and their ability to deliver what is a vital set of services for Victoria – but also our community. It is about our farmers, it is about our businesses and it is about the households across the state, all of which are going to face a massive increase in taxation.

Let us call it for what it is: it is a big bad new tax – that is what it is – and it is going to hit businesses, it is going to hit our families. Families that are doing it tough in a cost-of-living crisis have a right to have these bills scrutinised closely and have a right to see what the impact of these new taxes will be. There is no sign that the government has any modelling of what the impact will be, and if this referral occurs, that will be an opportunity to examine what the impact would be. The state's competitiveness is being hit at every turn. We have now had more than 60 new and expanded taxes under this government since it came to power in 2014. The government, before it came to power – it was the opposition at the time – promised there would be no new taxes, and it has promised again, and even Labor's financial statement released in 2022 also promised again there would be no new imposts and taxes. Well, this is a big bad new tax. It is a nasty tax. It hits every single family. If you are a renter, there is no doubt that over time rents will rise to cover the cost. If you are a home owner, there is no doubt that when you get your bill you will look to the bottom of it and you will see a fire services levy there now – you are going to see this emergency services tax, and it is a big bad new tax. It is going to be bigger – much, much bigger – depending on who you are and where you are. If you are on a farm, it is going to cost more. As Mrs Hermans said correctly, this will push up the cost of food and those shopping basket items that people would expect us to be looking to in a cost-of-living crisis. So we are going to push up the costs, push up the costs massively, and do that without proper examination. There has been no examination of what the outcome of this big bad new tax is. We want to refer it. We want to get it properly examined. We want to allow fire services and other emergency services to come and give evidence, we want to enable farmers and everyday households to come and give evidence to explain what the impact of this tax will be and we want to dig down to find the government's modelling on this big new tax and to see what impact that is going to have on families.

Most of us are hearing from people across the state. This is not just a country issue. It is a country issue – it is a very serious country issue – but it is not just an issue for country Victoria. It is an issue for the city as well. Every single landowner and every single home owner is going to feel the impact of this massive expansion in taxation. And are we going to get good benefit for it? Are we going to get the outcomes that we want? Are we going to get better results? Or is it just a way to backfill the government's financial problems – backfill them by funding these agencies and scooping the money out of the agencies and putting it into their big black holes elsewhere in the budget over there. Well, this is the opportunity to look at it. We say it should be referred, we say it is important to refer it and we say that this is some basic democracy that is occurring here. The government is too afraid to go out and meet the community on this. They would not go out on the steps the other day. I say that government members on the committee, the Economy and Infrastructure Committee, would have to hear from the community. They would have to hear the evidence that is put up, they would have to respond to it and they would have the opportunity to talk to the minister and the cabinet and the Premier and say, 'This is wrong. What we're doing here is wrong.' The Labor Party are in their 11th year of government now. The financial mess is their responsibility.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (14:49): Acknowledging, Mr Davis, that you did indicate back in March a view that this should go to a committee, if you were serious about this amendment and referral to a committee, then you would have at least spoken to me or the crossbench.

David Davis: I did speak to the crossbench.

Jaclyn SYMES: Well, you did not speak to the government. I would put to you that if you were serious about this referral motion you probably would have come and spoken to me. You would have come and discussed it with me. I have been having lots of conversations with members of Parliament in particular about this bill. I will just put on record that you did not alert the government that this was your intention, which I would argue means that you actually are not seeking our support for it. There are many issues that you raised in your contribution that will be best dealt with during the committee stage of the bill.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:50): The Libertarian Party will be supporting this referral. I have heard from lots of stakeholders about this bill and their views on it, but with these amendments I have no idea what the community thinks about them. I think that they have a right to have an input into this and to tell us in a public forum like the committee, which is an appropriate forum to do that, what they think of it, because no-one has formed an opinion on these yet except for the government and the Greens, who are supporting them, as far as I can tell.

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (14:51): I too will be supporting it. I am normally not a fan of the referrals we get from time to time, but these amendments of the government came down this morning. We have no idea what effect they have on the overall bill. We do not know if what they negotiated will work or not work, and I think this is a way to find out.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:51): Our job in this house is to be a house of review, and it should not be taken lightly and dismissed, as the Leader of the Government has just done in relation to this important referral to a parliamentary committee to overlook this very serious issue. As Mr Bourman and Mr Limbrick have said, these amendments from the government were provided just a few hours ago, but they do not know the impact and the community does not know the impact. The community have not had a great deal of consultation with the government. This is a serious issue. As Mrs McArthur said, people, sadly, are dying because of the impacts and the pressures that they are facing on their farms and their livelihoods, and their families and their communities are suffering. This is an incredibly important issue. It cannot be dismissed. It should not be dismissed. Ms Symes, I urge you to pull back, to consider the community and to support this referral.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:52): This is a bill of huge consequence. We have heard this morning that since the announcement that this bill is likely to go through there have already been two suicides in the western region. This is a bill of huge consequence. We have also heard that in our Eastern Victoria Region there are five farms that are completely out of water and there are another 30 farms that are about to be completely out of water. Our farmers are suffering, and our people are really, really suffering, and this is you, the Labor government, heaping coals on their heads. In the last week Mr McCracken started an online petition. It has had 14,000 signatures in less than a week; 14,000 people that you are meant to represent are desperately asking for this not to go through.

This is something that has to be looked at properly. We need to hear from the people that this is going to affect most. We cannot afford to have more lives lost, more businesses going under and more farms going broke, and I think it is responsible policymaking to look at all the angles, not to rush through a bill that is potentially going to change lives. We have heard that already, in less than one week, two families have been forever changed, and that will send ripple effects through the whole community. So I am asking members of this chamber, particularly the crossbench, to support this motion so we can look at it properly.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:54): We are the house of review, and we have legislative requirements to do the right thing, to actually review. We have the opportunity in this house. It is not rocket science. It sends legislation off to a committee for assessment. It is enabling various stakeholders to make submissions to the inquiry and present their arguments. There are thousands of questions. We have people from the Municipal Association of Victoria and the councils who are being the debt collectors and are going to be the horrendous bad guys in this scenario. We have Rural Councils Victoria saying that they have not had adequate consultation and conversation. Regional cities are saying to us that they have not had decent conversations about the plethora of questions that this piece of legislation, this new tax, this abomination, will cause to their staff, their regions, both country and city. They need answers, and they need to have a forum in which to expand on these concerns. We saw 500 people on the steps a couple of days ago and many speeches. They do not feel that this is a great tax. CFA does not feel it is a great tax at all. You have got VFBV, the Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, kept in the dark. This is not fair. And the minister is standing there saying, 'I'm speaking to people.' Well, I think for every one person she may have spoken to there are a thousand who have more things to say and more questions to ask. This is the forum by which we can operate. We are members that are elected by the people of Victoria to do this work. The onus is on us to do the right thing. If it is going to be around, as this government wants, ad nauseam, forever, then let us do the investigation now. I fully support this referral to the committee.

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:56): What a dark day in this Parliament; what a despicable day in this Parliament. No-one should ever forget that this was dropped on us, dropped on the people of Victoria, on the eve of Christmas – never, ever let the other side forget that. On the eve of Christmas they overnight said they would double the tax, and as has been said in this place, inside this chamber and outside this chamber, this is all about a blatant, disgusting grab for money. It is all about cash, because they have so mishandled the money, they have spent that money so poorly, that they now must actually dip their hands yet again into the pockets of every Victorian in this state – the same Victorians who are in the middle of a cost-of living-crisis.

That is right – they cannot afford to pay the rent. The farmers cannot afford to pay for the hay, much less afford to pay for the extra water they have to have. This is not going to just affect farmers – farmers, in the order of 189 per cent. If any of those opposite understand what that meant for a second, they would not have the compunction, they would not have the shame, to come into this place. But instead they come into this place and they lecture us about climate change. They want to lecture us about policies. They want to lecture us about ethics. Well, I tell you what, there has been an important ethics lesson in this place today, and that is that there is no limit to the depths this government will go to to get what they want. They will bribe their way there; they will pay off whoever it takes to get what they want. It is a disgusting day in the history of Victoria – we should all remember this.

As for metropolitan Victorians, well, they can expect a doubling on every one of their rates notices – a doubling in the middle of a cost-of living-crisis. Every Victorian has now been slapped by this Labor government with a 100 per cent levy increase. The median charge at the moment is \$171 – so that is nearly 400 bucks. Who has \$400 to spare? Put your hand up if you do. Anyone have \$400 to spare? No-one has \$400 to spare, because to have \$400 to spare, if you are living out in the burbs, if you live in Ringwood, if you live in Mitcham, if you live in Nunawading, if you live in Vermont, Forest Hill – you name it – wherever you live across metropolitan Melbourne, in order to have \$400 you have got to earn \$800. \$800 spare – I do not have \$800 spare. I do not know the constituents in my electorate who do have \$800 spare. Those who want to sit in this chamber and talk about the improvements that are going to come and flow from this extra money – the only thing that is going to come and flow from this extra money is the money in the pockets of those opposite so they can continue to waste it and continue their mismanagement.

And all the while in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne there is not a single aerial appliance when it comes to fighting fires. Just last night they had to rely on an aerial appliance in Richmond to go to a fire – Richmond – and then the back-up appliance came from Oakleigh. So if there is a fire tomorrow

in all these tall towers the other side want to build, they will not have the appliances. I also heard other speakers talk about the Grampians bushfires – the trucks broke down on the way. In my own electorate of Ringwood, when I came back from overseas, the United States – and we had the Palisades fire there – I went straight to my fire station in Ringwood, and guess what, their truck was 28 years old. It had no fire protection whatsoever.

We are here today because of the gross mismanagement of those opposite, and for those opposite to say that they have consulted, and to just snub their noses at this committee, is an absolute disgrace. You should all leave here tonight or tomorrow morning with your heads held low, because you have done no service to the people of Victoria, you have absolutely neglected your own communities year after year after year and subsequently you have now created a crisis. And not only are you creating a crisis in terms of the services we are delivering to the emergency services, you have turned your back on the firefighters. You did not want to meet them on the steps. You did not want to meet the farmers on the steps. You did not want to meet the SES on the steps. You did not want to meet anyone. You did not want to face them, meet them face to face, and explain how your management has so grossly, so poorly left Victorians dry of money and explain that they are now going to have to be taxed in the order of \$400 for every household and 190 per cent for every farmer, sending them to the wall. As we have heard in this place already, this is not just about their livelihoods; this will send people to the wall. It will take them over the brink. If I hear those opposite ever lecturing us again and talking about mental health – there is no consideration for mental health. I will tell you what you are doing to the mental health of Victorians with this: yet again you are taking them to the brink, and some beyond. You will have blood on your hands. When the suicide rates go up, I will look to those opposite and I will look to each and every one of you to explain to me and my constituents what you have done to avert that, because this is not averting it; this is making it monstrously worse. You should be ashamed of yourselves.

I hope you think about what you are doing today, and I hope you take no pride in the fact of what you have done – much less the fact there is no transparency about what those opposite and those on the crossbench are going to receive in this, because we know how those opposite operate; they like to bribe their way there. So what are they getting? We know what they are saying publicly. But as David Davis said, the member here, we do not know. We have to have an inquiry to get to the bottom of this stench, because we know that in the darkness bacteria grows. Bacteria causes disease, and that is exactly what we have in this government – a diseased government – and there is no better typification of that disease than this fact today and this legislation that we are about to look at.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (15:01): I rise to support the referral to a committee. Yesterday we supported a move by the Greens to refer an inquiry about electric vehicles to a committee – we all supported that – and the honest and obvious thing that the crossbench over there should do is actually support this referral to an inquiry. There is so much to be discovered in this that this is the only way we are going to do it. The minister had the gall to suggest that Mr Davis did not consult her about the referral. Well, when were we or the community consulted about these amendments? We have only just learned about them. Out there in voter land, in councils, nobody has any idea about any amendments. We still do not know what the agreement is that Dr Mansfield referred to this morning – no idea. The only way we are going to get to the bottom of this is to have a proper inquiry, as Mr Davis has suggested, which will present its report at the end of June, to make sure that we are doing the right thing by Victorians and that we are doing the right thing by volunteers and the professional firefighters. I thank Mr Marshall, who is in the gallery today, for his support for the farmers and the communities that are so afflicted by this egregious tax.

It is vitally important that we engage with the stakeholders, the councils, the farmers, the organisations – everybody that is involved in keeping us safe. Surely the one thing a government must do for its citizens – and be assured it should do it – is keep them safe. But what they are proposing is to tax individuals to keep themselves safe. That is what they are proposing here. This needs to be

absolutely properly examined, every detail of it, to make sure that we are doing the right thing by the people of Victoria.

I implore the crossbench: we have supported your inquiries that you have demanded, whether it be on cannabis or roadkill, which we are doing one on, electric vehicles or any aspect of what you are interested in; you have been supported to have an inquiry. Mr Ettershank just chaired an inquiry, and it was important – you admitted, Mr Ettershank, how important that inquiry was. And, Dr Mansfield, you said this is what the role of this chamber and this government should be. It should be to carefully and closely examine legislation so that we are doing the right thing by our citizens. I urge you to think very carefully, to think for the people of Victoria, to think for those farmers, those people in rural and regional Victoria who are now so afflicted by the drought and the impending tax that they are taking their own lives. Think carefully about that, and please, I beg you, support this inquiry.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (15:05): I rise to support the referral of this bill to a committee for an inquiry as well. We need to remember that what we do here is we represent the Victorian community. Yes, we are elected to make decisions on their behalf, but it is usually done after a period where we have had time to go out and consult with our communities and where our communities have had time to look at a piece of legislation and come to us if they have any problems with it. It is also a time where we consult with stakeholders, and stakeholders will have a view on the changes to this legislation that we are going through today as well as the legislation itself. It is only right that we delay this bill by sending it to an inquiry to allow the community and the stakeholders to have their say.

It is not right to move amendments in the middle of the night, might I add. In the middle of the night you moved these amendments. At 7 o'clock last night the Greens were not supporting this bill, but by 10:30 they were. This is cloak-and-dagger stuff. It is absolutely appalling the way that the Greens and the government have behaved on this bill. We need to have more transparency. No-one has learned anything from the loss of the seat of Adam Bandt – I do not know why you are still sitting there, Greens. Go home, because none of you will have seats next time around if you do not learn. This is not green, this is extreme. And that is exactly what you have become: an extremist party, not a Greens Party. You need to think about what you are doing to the Victorian community here. The Victorian community want you to stand up for them. They want you to stand up for those who are most vulnerable, for the renters in this community, but this will only drive up the cost of rent for the most vulnerable people in Victoria. I urge all of the crossbench to please support this referral to an inquiry.

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (15:07): I am not going to talk to those opposite, because they do not care. I want to talk to the crossbench. I know that the Greens and the Legalise Cannabis Party in particular campaign very hard on integrity. They campaign on this place being a place of scrutiny. There have been a number of times where we have been able to properly scrutinise legislation through the processes of this place. This is an opportunity for that to happen. This is an opportunity for you guys to enact your values. You have every opportunity with everyone else in here to hear from the community the full impacts that this legislation might actually have, which as we have heard throughout the debate have not fully been explored. I really, truly do urge you to support this bill inquiry because it will allow the scrutiny of this bill to occur for all to see, and you can be a part of it. I really do urge you to support integrity in government as you say that you do.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (15:09): I do not think this chamber fully realises the consequences of this. Mr McGowan spoke quite articulately about the doubling of the fire services levy for people in metropolitan Melbourne and huge increases for rural and regional people. When you introduce a land tax on farmers, which this government has always wanted to do, that means more people will pay more at the check-out. I know that Mr Puglielli – and we have different solutions on how to get there – has spoken a lot about people paying too much at the check-out. But what we will be voting for today is massive increases at the check-out – massive increases. That is what this bill will do. In my community in places like Craigieburn and Wallan when people line up at the check-out they tell me about how they are nervously checking their mobile banking app. It is a crisis out there –

it is a massive crisis out there – and I do not think people voted for the Greens and I definitely do not think people voted for the Legalise Cannabis Party knowing that they were going to double their taxes and they were going to double their fire services levy. People might have thought voting for Legalise Cannabis was a bit of a laugh – ‘I’ll throw my number 1 vote there’ – or maybe they thought ‘I genuinely believe that we should legalise cannabis’, but they did not vote to double the taxes on their fire services levy. The Greens were quite excited about electing their first member in the upper house from a regional electorate. If this bill goes through as it is, I think it will be their last, because the people in Western Victoria Region will not forgive or forget what we are about to see.

I do think we need scrutiny on this bill. We have only just got amendments. The government had the gall to say to us, ‘We didn’t know about this inquiry.’ Well, we have only just got these amendments. We do not know what they mean, and we want to consult with stakeholders to see what they are about. I know some of the crossbench members have articulated that they want that opportunity as well. I think that is a really important point. I ask the chamber to reflect on whether this needs to be done now or we can work together, as we have multiple times this term, to scrutinise this bill, to scrutinise these amendments and to see what they mean for the people of Victoria.

We know this government have always wanted to charge a land tax on farmers – they have always wanted to do it. I thought we had reached a turning point in August last year when Treasurer Tim Pallas said, ‘We’ve reached our limit on new taxes.’ The response from the new Treasurer is, ‘We’re not done yet. They can afford to pay more. Businesses can afford to pay more, landholders can afford to pay more, people struggling during a cost-of-living crisis, struggling to pay their mortgage bill, can afford to pay double.’ Well, I do not think that is right. We need to examine this to give it the proper scrutiny it deserves.

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:12): I also rise in the last 10 seconds to show my support for the importance of actually supporting this referral. I appeal to the crossbench: please – *(Time expired)*

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (15:12): It is very clear that it is a sensible step to refer this. This is a major change. It is a major new tax that is being introduced. It is going to have a very significant impact on country Victoria, but it is also going to have a very significant impact in the city. The importance of this is that the government has not thought through the consequences. They have not thought through what it is going to mean for those families that are doing it very, very tough in the city at the moment, and they certainly have not thought through what it is going to mean for farmers across country Victoria. Those farmers at the moment face terrible situations – a declining position on every turn. To clobber them with this sort of hit – unexamined, not thought through properly – I think is just reprehensible. I think that the simplest way at this point is to refer this to get some real light on what is happening and to see and to examine the impact on families, on businesses and on farms. If we do that, we will be in a position to make some very clear recommendations to the chamber in my humble view.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (18): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Adem Somyurek, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Noes (22): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Motion negatived.

Committed.*Committee*

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Before we begin debate on clause 1, I invite Mr Davis to circulate his amendments and suggested amendments on sheet DD173C to replace his amendments previously circulated on sheet DD169C.

David DAVIS: We will circulate those amendments now, if that is all right. In doing so I will just explain that on the advice of the Clerks, the Legislative Assembly clerks, as is their wont, became agitated about the concept that we might move amendments in the Council. None of the amendments on my sheet raise tax or lower tax; they deal with how the tax is spent. One, for example – and we will talk in detail about this later, no doubt – simply tries to stop the money that is raised being used to fund the department. We do not think this new tax should be used to fund the department itself, and I do not believe that is a taxation measure. Obviously the Council cannot raise taxes or stop taxes or whatever, but this is a measure that is stopping a spending action. The other amendments are reporting amendments and so forth, and in that sense I do not believe even the Assembly Clerks could argue that they are realistically funding or spending initiatives. All they require is that the government report in detail regularly.

I note the government amendments have run to the same issue, and to that extent I know they have been circulated much later in the piece, but I understand why the government had to bring a new set of amendments that were tweaked into the suggested format.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: I now invite Mr Bourman to circulate his suggested amendments on sheet JB92C to replace his amendments previously circulated on sheet JB91C.

Jeff BOURMAN: It is much for the same reasons as Mr Davis: the substance does not change, the style does. Due to the nature of this bill it was felt that the amendments should be suggested amendments. Just a very brief recap on my consultation with the volunteers: it was about whether they did not want it to be construed that they had anything to do with the creation of this bill. My amendments do not change any of the rebates or anything like that. It is really just a change of headings, for the want of a better term.

Clause 1 (15:24)

David DAVIS: It may be convenient to deal with many and most questions on clause 1. Clearly some of these go to high-level matters. I would like to start with perhaps the highest level matter: the format of this tax is that it is collected by councils. It will go onto the bills of every notice that goes from council to individual landowners within the municipality. At the bottom of the form there will be an amount that will be linked to the value of the property and the style of property, the format of the land ownership and so forth. I just want to understand what consultation the government undertook with councils, because every council I have talked to has been pretty unhappy about that and it would be helpful to know what consultation occurred with the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV).

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, I can confirm that I have met with the Municipal Association of Victoria and exchanged various letters in relation to that. They have also been –

David Davis interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes, and individual councils as well on this. But there were a series of exchanges of letters with the MAV with some of the concerns that they raised and us responding to those concerns, and the department have also been engaged with them.

David DAVIS: Did any of the councils support this approach?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, as you would appreciate, the existing fire property services levy is already on rates notices. This is an expansion of the application of the levy. The collection of it being

on rates is not proposed to be changed. I had Alpine shire write to me expressing their support. I would say that the correspondence I have received from other councils is that they support emergency services and they support sustainable funding for emergency services. Not all of them would like it to be on rates notices, no.

David DAVIS: The *Herald Sun* carried a story with the municipal association president Jennifer Anderson saying councils across the state had indicated they were:

... not able to reliably implement these proposed changes.

That would summarise the many conversations I have had with councils, and I am sure Mrs McArthur would have had very similar conversations with councils. I have actually not encountered a council that thinks this is a positive development. I ask from that: has the government modelled or worked through what will happen to councils as they try to collect these rates? They are much increased, some on different classes, but all of them are more than 40 per cent – and some are 100 per cent and some 190 per cent and so forth. This is going to make the collection a lot more difficult. Has the government looked at how that collection is going to operate?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, in relation to the administration, there are some changes, and we are supporting MAV through some administrative funding support that they will provide to councils that require any further assistance in relation to any of the changes. In relation to the mechanism, as you are aware, it is an existing mechanism. In relation to any matters relating to hardship, councils, as they already do with their rates, have a range of options in relation to waiving and deferring payment plans and the like, and this does not change that.

David DAVIS: With respect, I think the minister is wrong in suggesting it does not change that. I think it does change that. I think councils, whether they be in the city or in the country, are going to have many more bad debts. They are going to have much greater collection issues. Are they going to be required to carry that challenge?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, under the current fire services property levy and obviously the potential future Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund, the State Revenue Office does not and will not have any power to penalise councils if ratepayers do not pay their bill. The ESVF is not a taxation law under section 4 of the Taxation Administration Act 1997, meaning the commissioner and the SRO do not have the powers invested through that in collecting ESVF liability directly. So in response to your concern about carriage of unpaid amounts, that is not something that we would be seeking to change either.

David DAVIS: I think the minister is not quite engaging with what will actually happen. We will have much larger bills, with a much larger state government taxation component. This will push some people over the edge. There will be more bad debts, and councils will have to carry even their own component of that bill. So in that sense I am asking the Treasurer if she has examined how councils are going to be able to do that where the non-payment rate goes up and the difficulty of collection increases?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, Department of Treasury and Finance (DTF) are hosting round tables with councils to discuss it. As I said, we are working on an implementation package that involves the MAV. As I indicated in one of my initial answers, most councils do have a policy to assist ratepayers in financial hardship, and they may offer options including payment plans or extensions of time. A lot of those can vary between councils, but to my knowledge most of them have them.

David DAVIS: I am pleased that DTF is actually beginning to engage. It seems like that is the first I have heard of that, but I am –

Jaclyn SYMES: No, they have been.

David DAVIS: Well, the councils have not been saying that. The councils have been indicating that they have not had much engagement. So there is going to be some engagement with DTF, but I think what you still have not really tackled is what happens where the non-payment rate – the arrears, if you want to call it that – grows. That is actually going to affect council revenue as well as state government revenue. So if it goes from 3 per cent to 6 per cent or 10 per cent, that is going to be a significant impact on council finances. I am interested to know whether you have looked at what the impact will be on council finances.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, I have answered your question. We will continue to work with councils. I will put on record that DTF have been engaging with councils and MAV for some time in relation to this, so any suggestion that that has not occurred is incorrect. I personally have met with MAV as well, I can confirm, and so has my office. In relation to the matters that you have outlined, I think I have responded in relation to the financial hardship provisions that would still apply. We are more than happy to continue to work with councils in the implementation and impact of the changes. Engagement will not stop once it is first implemented.

David DAVIS: As I said earlier, this is not just a matter for country councils. This is a representative letter. This is not the only letter. It is not the only council that is expressing concern. This is from the City of Port Phillip in my own area. Their letter is dated 14 May, so it is very recent: ‘Urgent concern for Emergency Services Volunteer Fund legislation’. I am going to quote some of this because I think it is instructive with what we face. It says:

I write to express concerns regarding the proposed changes to the Fire Services Property Levy ... currently before Parliament as the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund ... I support the advocacy campaign led by the Municipal Association ... which has highlighted the administrative, financial, and reputational burdens on local councils and proposes state-administered rebates, simplified funding models, and a state-wide communication strategy to ensure a smooth transition by 1 July 2025. I urge the State Government to work collaboratively with MAV and its partners to find solutions that will protect the financial sustainability of councils and minimise the impact on ratepayers, including a public commitment to support this.

I am just wondering whether the Treasurer will respond to that – whether that model that is proposed there is something the government will support.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, as I have indicated, as a result of advocacy from MAV we were able to confirm that the councils would not be required to administer the exemption for volunteers. That will be done by the Department of Government Services (DGS) through our Service Victoria app. They also were concerned about individual councils’ ability to implement changes, so we have committed to a funding stream to work with MAV to ensure that all councils are given any additional support that they may need to implement any of the changes. As I indicated, there will be round tables with councils to discuss the implementation plan, and I am more than happy for the types of matters raised in the letter to be raised in those round tables or indeed with me directly. I think you said that was dated yesterday. I am not sure; I am just getting it sent to me. I must have got it as well. Of course I will respond.

David DAVIS: The letter goes on:

The levy will raise approximately \$37.7 million in 2025/26, up from \$24 million in 2024/25 – this is in Port Phillip –

a \$13.7 million increase (57%) ...

Again, I think it is actually very important that people understand that this is not just a country hit there, it is a hit on everyone who lives in the City of Port Phillip and all the other municipalities in the city as well. The letter continues:

... much greater than the rates cap imposed by councils of 3 per cent. It is perverse that councils are being tasked with raising and explaining this drastic State government taxation increase when we are managing our own budgets within the cap despite ongoing cost shifting and our base costs rising much higher than this.

I put to the Treasurer directly: isn't this just extraordinary hypocrisy – a rate cap on councils of 3 per cent, but in the case of the municipality, the City of Port Phillip, a 57 per cent increase in the tax clawed out of the municipality?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, the issue of rate capping would be a matter for the Minister for Local Government. But in relation to the City of Port Phillip, they obviously are very well serviced by FRV and indeed SES in relation to storms. So they have very good fire, storm and flood response available to those community members, and that is exactly what the investment that that community is making will go back towards.

David DAVIS: We all appreciate the services provided by our emergency services and support the funding of them, but this is far and beyond what has occurred historically, and I just want to put on record I think the Treasurer has not really engaged with that. The letter goes on:

If the Government does decide to go with the proposed scheme largely in its current form, councils are being set up for failure. Council received a letter from the Treasurer on 13 December 2024, indicating that from 1 July 2025, the FSPL will be replaced by the ESVF. We have received no further communication beyond this letter, leaving very little time for the Council to implement the significant changes required. Council urgently requires clarity on this process.

Treasurer, that is a long time between the communications. You have tried to say that some communications occurred, but this is not what I am hearing in hard print from my local council. So perhaps you would like to explain why the council would suggest you have not communicated since 13 December.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, there has certainly been engagement with councils. One of the specific requests I had of the MAV was in relation to the correspondence that I shared with them. I asked for a commitment that they would disseminate that to their members. I am not sure what might have happened in relation to that correspondence or that advice having potentially skipped this council, but as I have indicated, I have received that letter as well. I can confirm that I have announced support for local councils, and I will let them know about that if they do not know about that already. We will continue to engage and speak to councils, particularly through the MAV, but if people are needing additional information other than what they can obtain from the MAV I am more than happy to provide information direct.

David DAVIS: Mrs McArthur just has a matter on a comment the minister made earlier and its correction.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, can you confirm that you said the Alpine shire supported this tax and the collection of it?

Jaclyn SYMES: I received correspondence from Alpine shire to that effect, yes.

Bev McARTHUR: I have just had confirmation from the mayor, Sarah Nicholas, that they do not support this tax and they do not support the collection of it either. So, Minister, have you misled this Parliament?

Jaclyn SYMES: I am not inclined to single out a council.

Bev McARTHUR: But you just did.

Jaclyn SYMES: I do not want to get into a debate. I received correspondence, and that is what it said. If there is a change in position, then that is what it is. But I have not misled the house. I do not particularly intend to table that correspondence, because I do not think it would be helpful, but I will let you have a look at it, if you like. I am not misleading the house.

Bev McARTHUR: I would certainly like to have a look at the correspondence, because it is in complete contrast to what I have just been informed by the mayor.

David DAVIS: I just want to continue on here. The council goes on:

Furthermore, Council needs confirmation of support to implement this change. Council's financial and rating systems will need extensive reconfiguration to align with the new requirements. Without immediate certainty, we risk missing the deadline to issue rates notices on time in August. The changes will affect all councils across Victoria, stretching system providers like TechnologyOne beyond their existing resource capacity, increasing the likelihood of non-compliance with legislative obligations. Staff training and operational adjustments cannot commence until system updates are completed, further delaying preparedness.

The mayor Cr Louise Crawford goes on to say:

... I urge the Government to reconsider its approach in consultation with the MAV. Should the levy proceed, I hold significant fears it will be impossible to implement successfully given the timeframes, lack of information, and absence of resources.

I ask: will the government reconsider its position? Are the councils being set up for failure?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, as I have explained, the existing fire services property levy that was brought in some time ago under – well, you would have been here – your government at the time is already facilitated via local councils. There will be an update to that should this legislation pass. We have committed to providing administrative and financial support for any of the implementation issues that may arise, acknowledging that the existing mechanism is already there.

David DAVIS: In preparation for this I spent some time going through a number of the annual reports and trying to understand how this new change is going to impact on a number of the agencies that are going to be directly impacted by the change. It seems to me that there are significant issues for a lot of the agencies. I looked at the organisational structure and tried to understand how the payments would be made and what controls there would be. The annual report of the CFA 2023–24 says on page 54:

The Board's responsibilities include:

- approving the CFA's Strategic Plan and Outcomes Framework, which sets out CFA's goals for the medium to long-term and monitoring its implementation
- reviewing annual planning activities, including significant strategic initiatives, to meet the Statement of Expectations from the Minister, and monitoring implementation of these plans
- approving the CFA's annual budget, including financial targets, and monitoring financial performance ...

I am going to come to the remaining dot points in this list of board responsibilities. It seems, though, that the budget-setting process will change under this set of arrangements. The government is going to claw the money from councils through its collection processes, then it will come into some central pot and then the minister will disperse that money. I am going to ask the minister to explain this in a moment. How will that mesh with the board's role, for example, in reviewing its planning activities and approving the CFA's annual budget, including financial targets and monitoring financial performance? Isn't a lot of this going to be taken out of the hands of these organisations through the arrangements that will involve the minister making determinations about what funding the agencies get in this way?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, the Country Fire Authority are already funded by a component of the fire services property levy, so they are quite familiar with that. There is no proposed change in the way of setting their budgets. The ratio will increase for the CFA to 95 per cent, but there will not be any changes to the settings and how they set their budget.

David DAVIS: When will they be told what the budget is? What is the time cycle there?

Jaclyn SYMES: The CFA's budget? I can give you an indication of what their forecasts are. What have I got in front of me here? So in 2023–24 it was \$370 million, 2024–25 was \$436 million, 2025–26 was \$379 million. Their base funding continues to go up each and every year, and then obviously what changes for the CFA is based on emergencies and things that they have to respond to and the bills that

they have got to pay as a result of those. That is information that is, as I understand it, already publicly available, but their budgets are set as part of the normal budget-setting process.

David DAVIS: I am just trying to understand this as I look through the annual reports and try to understand the process for each of these agencies. The money that is collected will then come across, you are saying, to 95 per cent in the case of the CFA. What happens if there are shortfalls in collection?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, at the outset it is important to note that currently and under the proposed changes it is not just this fund that funds emergency services. Consolidated revenue always contributes over and above the levy. The proposal as we have set it out will be 90 per cent of FRV, 95 per cent of CFA and SES, but the others do not have guaranteed minimum funding – the other agencies such as Triple Zero Victoria (TZV) and the like. So what we would do is guarantee the 90 and 95 per cents for those three agencies. You can move it around with the other agencies in relation to the levy, and you would top it up with consolidated revenue.

David DAVIS: Let me try and understand this. So the money has been collected over here and held at Treasury, and then the minister makes a determination that the money will go to these agencies in some formula?

Jaclyn SYMES: Well, it goes through the normal budget process.

David DAVIS: The normal budget process. And there is no issue if there is a shortfall on the collection side, is what you have said?

Jaclyn SYMES: What I am saying is that a shortfall in the levy would not impact the amount going to FRV, CFA or SES, because the proposal in the legislation is to provide a minimum.

David DAVIS: In this case let us just stick with the CFA, for example; we will come to the others in a moment. But at the CFA the money comes across, 95 per cent of it, from the levy. The other 5 per cent is comprised of what?

Jaclyn SYMES: Consolidated revenue.

David DAVIS: Is there any role for charitable contributions? And how is that enmeshed in this process?

Jaclyn SYMES: Charitable donations for the CFA are generally held by individual brigades.

David DAVIS: So there is no central contribution. Okay, I am just understanding that. Then for the expenditure side at the CFA, the board might make decisions, and the levy coming through would pay for some of these things, I would imagine. I look at the consultancy expenditure of the CFA to 30 June: Ernst & Young, provision of financial management advice, \$144,000; Ernst & Young business process improvement project, \$467,000; Ernst & Young procurement support package, \$1.84 million; Cube, operating model, organisational design, \$227,000; Aither Pty Ltd, develop framework for capability and capacity review, \$12,000, nearly \$13,000; Grosvenor Management Consulting, infrastructure services program review, \$200,000; Davidson Executive and Boards, property register development, \$175,000; Summit Consulting Solutions, development of infrastructure services cost-based model, \$156,000; Finity consulting services, actuarial valuation assessment, \$132,000 – I am rounding those figures. All of this adds up to about \$3.356 million. Would the CFA still be able to fund these sorts of consultancy services, or would there be some sort of cap to try and control consultancy expenditure, given it is being raised through a big new tax?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, you are conflating a few issues in relation to how the current system works, and the future proposed system is much the same. The percentage of the total budget of the CFA can be funded directly from the fund. How CFA spend their budget is not a matter for this bill. You have referred to consultancy reductions and the like, and I think I am certainly on the record as indicating that, across government, work is underway to ensure reduced spend on these types of expenses. That is something that I am looking at as Treasurer, as I did in the Department of Justice

and Community Safety as lead minister. There will be no restrictions on how the organisations spend their budget just because it is connected by a levy. It is just connected to the amount of their budget.

David DAVIS: Let us just stick with this example here of the CFA. So the money has come into Treasury, or the minister has made a determination about how much is coming across.

Jaclyn SYMES: She does not, but sure, she asks for it.

David DAVIS: The cabinet subcommittee will make that determination, then. But let us understand what this means compared to the current arrangements. You are going to have a much bigger flow of money into Treasury on this. In the case of Port Phillip you are going to have 57 per cent more flooding in, and it will be similar around the state; it might be bigger in some other places. So you will have a big pool. Then you are going to fund the CFA over here. Previously there would have been more consolidated revenue in that tranche of money moving to the CFA, so you are actually getting a windfall here – more money coming in. So you will be able to transfer it to the CFA without touching, as I would call it, general consolidated revenue from other tax bases. You have actually made a bit of a windfall here as Treasurer, as I see it.

Jaclyn SYMES: That is the intent of the legislation – to raise more money to spend on emergency services.

David DAVIS: Will the money be actually spent on emergency services?

Jaclyn SYMES: Every dollar.

David DAVIS: Every dollar gets spent, but it actually frees up general consolidated revenue – non-fire levy money, non-ESV levy money – to be spent on other matters. That is the truth of the matter, isn't it?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, as a former emergency services minister who would go to the budget and finance committee and seek funding for emergency services, this is what it is going to enable the current minister to do – come and ask for a range of matters that we will be able to fund. Every dollar is going into emergency services – every cent. And I have got an amendment that I will move –

David DAVIS: But it actually frees up non-levy consolidated revenue for other purposes.

Jaclyn SYMES: We will continue to spend consolidated revenue on emergency services.

David DAVIS: But less.

Jaclyn SYMES: The reason that we have the change in the levy is because we are having more severe, more frequent emergencies impacting communities and we want to be able to ensure that we have the funds to prepare, respond and indeed recover. The floods a couple of years ago cost over \$2 billion in recovery. That pales into massive insignificance with what the fire services property levy raised. We use consolidated revenue on emergency services all the time and will continue to do so.

David DAVIS: Actually, in effect you are confirming my suspicion and concern. You are going to have a large revenue flow from this new tax and that is going to fund emergency services, but it is in fact going to free up a large chunk of non-levy consolidated revenue, which will not be spent on emergency services but will be used for other purposes. That is the truth of the matter. The fire services are not going to get their current consolidated revenue allocation plus the new levy, are they?

Jaclyn SYMES: Of course they will, because the legislation is limiting it to 90 per cent of their budgets.

David DAVIS: But in truth you might want to actually tell us the amount of expected windfall in non-levy consolidated revenue – how much will be freed up. How many hundreds of millions of dollars will be freed up?

Jaclyn SYMES: As I just explained, Mr Davis, the cost of emergencies is immense. We want to be able to ensure that when the worst happens, we can provide millions, sometimes billions, of dollars in recovery. To suggest that consolidated revenue will not be directed to emergency services is frankly wrong.

David DAVIS: Nobody is suggesting that none will, but what I am suggesting is a lesser amount will be because the backfill will have occurred from the new –

Jaclyn SYMES: Well, that will mean climate change has gone, won't it?

David DAVIS: Sorry?

Jaclyn SYMES: That will mean that there will not be emergencies.

David DAVIS: No, it will mean you get a windfall to spend elsewhere in the budget to backfill your other problems. That is the truth, isn't it?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, you are verballing me – you are putting back to me things that I am not saying – and I have answered your question.

David DAVIS: If we move to another agency for a moment and look at Triple Zero Victoria, this agency will also be a recipient of funding from this levy. Is that correct?

Jaclyn SYMES: That is the intention of the bill, yes.

David DAVIS: How much of the fire services levy has been used to fund emergency services or Triple Zero or its predecessors?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, the fire services property levy does not currently fund Triple Zero Victoria. That is despite the fact that there are professional firefighters that are located in Triple Zero Victoria. That is despite the fact that when we have to set up control centres, Triple Zero Victoria set up mobile support services at those control centres. But they are currently not funded by the fire services property levy. That is part of the reason that we are seeking to include them in the new levy.

David DAVIS: So in a similar way with Triple Zero Victoria, if the bill is passed, that will now be funded by the new levy, but that will also free up a big backfill of consolidated revenue that is not raised through this levy. That is the truth too, isn't it?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, the cost of emergency services – investment is probably a better term. The investment in emergency services that the government makes far outstrips what is raised by the current levy or will be raised by the future levy.

David DAVIS: With respect, that is not really an exact answer to my question. That is a statement that is beside the point. The point is that, actually, this agency, Triple Zero Victoria, is not funded out of the current levy but will be funded out of the new levy, and that will free up a massive amount of consolidated revenue that is not raised by the levy. I will not labour it; I will just make the point.

The annual report for 2023–24 for Triple Zero says here on one of its early pages, page 4:

We're the critical link between the Victorian community and Victoria's Emergency Service Organisations (ESOs), which include:

- Ambulance Victoria (AV)
- Victoria Police (VP)
- Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV)
- Country Fire Authority (CFA)
- Victorian State Emergency Service (VICSES)

We work with our ESO partners, in particular the frontline emergency workers ...

As you alluded to before, a number of the staff from those other agencies are embedded in Triple Zero – quite appropriately. That it is a matter of –

Jaclyn SYMES: Paramedics, police and fire.

David DAVIS: Yes, correct. Who will pay for them? Will they be paid for at the agency level, or will they be paid for via their parent organisation, if I can call it that?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, that is not part of this bill.

David DAVIS: I am trying to understand where the flows of the new money will go. How will they get to pay for those? Will they be paid –

Jaclyn SYMES: They will pay from out of their budget.

David DAVIS: Out of the Triple Zero budget, not out of their parent agency?

Jaclyn SYMES: I think that is different.

David DAVIS: I am not trying to be difficult; I am just trying to understand.

Jaclyn SYMES: No, you are asking a question that is more appropriate for the Minister for Emergency Services, but fortunately I have got some knowledge in that space. I think there are different arrangements depending on the role that they fill. But irrespective, the percentage of levy that would be going to Triple Zero Victoria is much less than the agencies that we were discussing earlier, so it would be a much smaller amount. So to start attributing it to individual roles when it is probably in the order of \$100 million a year is probably not useful, because it does not really impact on the way that their budget operates. It will just be supplemented in relation to some guaranteed funding from the levy, which is a really good reflection of the value that we place on those Triple Zero call takers and dispatchers.

David DAVIS: I agree with you about the value that we all place on the Triple Zero call workers but also the embedded specialists who are there from a different agency. Perhaps if you do not know the answer now, I am happy, as the committee moves forward, to get an answer –

Jaclyn SYMES: It is not relevant to the bill.

David DAVIS: Well, is it going to come directly via Triple Zero Victoria, or is it going to come via their parent agency?

Jaclyn SYMES: It is not –

David DAVIS: Well, it is going to be funded. You are changing the funding; that is what is happening.

Jaclyn SYMES: No, Mr Davis. The levy does not dictate how agencies spend their money, it just contributes to their overall budget.

David DAVIS: That is actually precisely a line of questioning I want to pursue, and I might conveniently do it now. When the minister makes a determination, the minister could put controls around how that money is spent – the levy money that has come to Treasury and is coming across. This is a change in the funding that is arranged. It is a new source of funding. It is a larger source of funding. I imagine that the Treasurer and possibly the minister too will want to see good value for the money, and they may well put a whole series of requirements and conditions around that. That is precisely one of the things I am getting to here. Is it the intention that there be any change? The minister has a statement of expectations – that is one kind of control mechanism. But it could well be a much greater one when the applications are made to the relevant expenditure committee. There may well be additional requirements put on.

Jaclyn SYMES: No.

David DAVIS: I understand from what you are alluding to here that you are not intending to put in any additional requirements despite having a significant flow of additional money. Is that what you are saying?

Jaclyn SYMES: The bill does not confer any greater powers on the Minister for Emergency Services or indeed the Treasurer. My role is to set the rates. The emergency services minister supports the agencies in putting to government the required funding for their agencies, and we make decisions based on merit and need demonstrated in the budget bid. Never have we in the emergency services space, in the fire space, under the current arrangements, sat there and said, ‘You will do this with the levy and this with consolidated revenue.’ That is not how it works. The budget will be the budget, and then it will be supplemented by the fund. That does not then correlate to some power about how you can spend particular dollars depending on whether it was part of the 90 per cent or the 10 per cent. That is just not something that happens now, and it is just not an issue, Mr Davis.

What I would probably point to – and I think this might give you further clarity – is the amendment that I will move to clause 17, which will insert a new section saying that the proceeds of the levy collected under the act must not exceed the sum of the amounts applied to fund the funding recipients in accordance with the section and the administration costs incurred in the performance of functions under the act. That is somewhat relevant. But we will also be picking up on your amendments, making sure that the transparency and accountability of where the money goes will be made available. So that should allay any of your concerns about funding. I think you are trying to lean into it funding inappropriate things, but that is not my expectation.

David DAVIS: It is in part a concern that it might be funding inappropriate things. I might get Mr McGowan to ask his question in a moment, which he has usefully given to me, but I cannot quite read, so in a moment he should do that. I am also worried that there might be excessive control coming from Treasury or the cabinet committees over the agencies. You are assuring me that is not the case?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, what I can assure you is that the budgets will be developed exactly the same way as they are now.

David DAVIS: In the case of Triple Zero it seems to me in 2024 it made a loss – the comprehensive result was a negative one – so is the new funding going to backfill agencies that are making losses?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, you might appreciate that a lot of our emergency services often run at deficits, based on the fact that they are responding to more and more emergencies time and time again. But the levy allocation is in relation to their budget, not their deficits.

David DAVIS: So the answer is: it will backfill some of these deficits – or not? You did not actually quite answer it.

Jaclyn SYMES: I said the levy will reflect their budgets, not their deficits.

David DAVIS: And agencies that routinely run deficits will have the levy to fall back onto? No?

Jaclyn SYMES: A good example would be FRV, CFA, VICSES in relation to the 90 per cent and 95 per cent guarantee of their funding: that is based on their budget, not adding in their deficits.

David DAVIS: Again, with Triple Zero – and I have been through the annual report and looked at a number of issues that I see there – it seems an agency that is replete with consultancies and consultancy services that have been ordered in. For example, the Altus Advisory ICT assurance services; the Change Solutions ICT assurance services; Clayton Utz, you know, a \$506,000 legal services bill; CyberCX, specialist ICT security services; Deloitte, with ICT and business services; Deloitte, specialist risk services; Ember Advisors; Manja, internal audit assurance services. Some of these I am sure are important, but there just seems a hell of a lot. There is Julius Roe, workforce design services, \$105,000; KPMG, specialist financial services, \$266,000; Lander and Rogers, legals; Maddocks, legals; MinterEllison, legals; Nova Systems, security services, \$78,000; Norton Rose

Fulbright, legal services – huge. It goes on: probity and compliance services, Pinnacle Group, Pitcher Partners. It goes for pages and pages: probity and compliance; PwC, internal audit, \$693,000; RPS AAP Consulting, probity and compliance, \$1.285 million; RSM Bird, \$240,000.

Jaclyn SYMES: I get it, I get it.

David DAVIS: You have got the point I am making here. What controls are going to be in place with a new flow of money, a new source of funds coming into these organisations, to make sure that the money is spent on frontline services, on staff that actually deliver the services, on the vehicles but not on consultancies and a whole raft of wasteful services?

Jaclyn SYMES: Again, Mr Davis, you are conflating issues that are unrelated to the bill. As Treasurer, I would be looking at the annual funding requirements when I am setting the rates. For example, you and I, I think, both agree: despite the fact that your government spent \$360 million on consultancies over four years et cetera, you and I, I think, both are of the view that the limiting of consultants and things within government is something that is good practice. But regarding some of the ones that you listed there in relation to ICT assurance and the like, I can tell you now, having lived through some significant issues at Triple Zero Victoria and having to help that organisation get back on track, they rely very heavily on their ICT systems. It is what enables them to answer the phone, dispatch to emergencies for people who call 000. So I do not think we should have a values judgement based on the types of money that this organisation is spending. When it comes to the responsible management of agencies, that is a matter for responsible ministers, and if that is where you are going with that line of questioning, it is just not relevant to this bill.

David DAVIS: I understand why the minister may get irritated with me asking this question, but let me just –

Jaclyn SYMES: No, I got bored. You kept on going on a bit. That was all.

David DAVIS: All right. I am sorry if I went on a bit. I was trying to make a point that there is a lot of expenditure there that I think you would want to look at pretty damn closely, and you might want to look at the remuneration of some layers of executives too. That would be another point.

Jaclyn SYMES: Why do you hate Triple Zero?

David DAVIS: Well, at some of these agencies; I am not particularly singling Triple Zero out on that. On the related party transactions I see in the annual report, what will change with respect to some of those related payments recognised as expenses – obviously receipts recognised as revenue, payments recognised as expenses, engagement in two directions with some of these agencies: the Department of Justice and Community Services, Ambulance Victoria, Country Fire Authority, Fire Rescue Victoria? How is that going to operate? Triple Zero has traditionally had its funding come from some of these agencies.

Jaclyn SYMES: Nothing will change as a result of this bill in relation to the relationships between our ESOs and how they interact with Triple Zero Victoria. You might want to have this discussion with the Minister for Emergency Services, but this bill will not make any changes.

David DAVIS: But the funding structure of Triple Zero will change somewhat, Minister. As I understand it, there will be direct flows from government. There will be direct flows, as I understand it, of the money from the levy, as opposed to payments from fire and ambulance and so forth.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, the bill only changes the source of the funding, not how it is spent.

David DAVIS: That is exactly the point. There is actually a change here, and it will change the relationship between Triple Zero and those emergency agencies that have traditionally worked closely with it but have been funders of it directly.

Jaclyn SYMES: That will continue.

David DAVIS: But the agency will also be funded primarily, as I understand it, by the money that comes from the levy.

Jaclyn SYMES: No.

David DAVIS: No? How much will come from –

Jaclyn SYMES: About 47 per cent would come from the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund. But, Mr Davis, you are taking me on a journey about how agencies spend their budgets. It is not about the ins and outs in relation to Triple Zero Victoria and how they interact with other agencies. There is not a change proposed here, but they propose an annual budget, and that is considered and funded, and part of that will now come from the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund.

David DAVIS: I understand that, but I put it to you that there will be a change in tone, where the lion's share of the funding will now come from the levy, and the other agencies that have traditionally had a very significant stake in the way Triple Zero is funded or operates will actually have a diminished point of leverage.

Jaclyn SYMES: I take issue with that a little bit. They are partner agencies. I do not necessarily want anybody having leverage over each other in emergency services land. The contractual arrangements or the agreements that they make with emergency service agencies in relation to a range of things are a matter for Triple Zero Victoria in consultation with the minister. It is just not going to change. There is not going to be a change in relationship, and what in fact it does say to Triple Zero Victoria is, 'We value you as an emergency service organisation, just in the way that we do FRV and CFA. You are on the frontline ensuring that our emergency services personnel can do what they need to do.' They are part of the emergency services family, and to be included in the bill I think will not send a negative tone; I think it will send a positive tone.

David DAVIS: We will just leave that I think and note that there is a change, but whether it is a positive or negative will be resolved in the longer haul.

What I want to understand is some of the announcements made in the last few days. Again, I am looking at the 2023–24 annual report of Fire Rescue Victoria. I look at page 13 – it has 'Employees, infrastructure and fleet'. As I understand it, there has been an announcement made about additional trucks. Perhaps if I can reconcile that announcement with the figures inside the annual report. Perhaps this is an instructive way to understand whether the changes will be real or not. In 2023–24 there were 3998 staff listed – firefighters, operations employees in the parlance of the document. Will that number change? Will there be more? Or less? Is there any intention to change that number?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, that is not relevant to the bill.

David DAVIS: So there is no intention to change the number?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, you can ask questions about agencies and their staff from the relevant minister. You are asking about the operation of FRV; this bill is about the funding model for FRV.

David DAVIS: It is about the funding, and I ask, for example, on pumping appliances, fire trucks, which the minister has mentioned herself, this says a hundred –

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes, that will change.

David DAVIS: This is what I want to understand. It is okay to answer that bit of it but it not okay to answer the other bit. If I look at the pumping fire trucks – 151 in 2021–22, 156 in 2022–23, 156 in 2023–24. I am looking for a baseline figure now. Is there a time sequence that we can see? Do you have that?

Jaclyn SYMES: For trucks?

David DAVIS: On pumping vehicles. You have said you will get new trucks. How many will there be year by year into the future? Is that worked out, or is there –

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, what we have announced today is that there will be a \$40 million rolling fleet replacement program for FRV to get new appliances. That is in addition to the fleet that is currently in various stages of delivery. There are a range that are already on the way, effectively. What this is is a minimum amount to ensure that FRV would be well placed to make rolling investment so that it is easier to get their contracts in place and the like, because they know that there is a minimum of \$10 million each year to replace trucks. Different trucks cost different amounts, and the priorities of the fleet replacement would be a matter for FRV.

David DAVIS: Will there be more trucks?

Jaclyn SYMES: The funding is to ensure that there are new appliances added to the fleet.

David DAVIS: So it is purely replacement – there is no increase in the number of vehicles? I am just trying to understand how this money is going to be acquitted – \$10 million a year times four years. That will come, I take it, from the levy too, will it? You might want to answer that. I am getting the impression that there will be not one new additional tanker in number. There might be new shiny ones, which will be very nice, but will there be additional tanker capacity?

Jaclyn SYMES: This is a matter that would be best put to FRV. It will be up to them.

David DAVIS: So some might not be replacements; there might be an additional number of vehicles, pumpers?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, we are funding a rolling fleet fund, effectively, for FRV to build new trucks, so there will be new trucks rolling out. What they do with existing fleet is a matter completely for them. We are adding additional trucks.

Nick McGOWAN: By virtue of its very name, it is a rolling replacement. It is not a rolling addition, it is a rolling replacement program, so it replaces another appliance. Mr Davis's question was: will there be a net increase in the appliances, or will this rolling replacement program, as its name suggests, merely replace a number – albeit very small, given the amount involved – of the appliances currently in operation?

Jaclyn SYMES: This will be a matter for FRV, but Mr McGowan, the advocacy has been for a rolling fleet replacement fund. That is what I am saying was announced today. That will be \$40 million of guaranteed funding which enables FRV to forward plan in relation to their contracts and the delivery of new fire trucks.

Nick McGOWAN: On what basis did you arrive at the \$40 million figure?

Jaclyn SYMES: It matches the investment for CFA.

Nick McGOWAN: And on what basis did you arrive at the figure for the CFA, given the figure for the CFA is 70 or 75? I am not quite sure what is the latest.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, these are guaranteed minimum amounts that have been agreed to in consultation with the Minister for Emergency Services and the chief fire officer.

David DAVIS: Just picking up further on the agencies and Fire Rescue Victoria in 2023–24, I just have a similar question about the deficit there in 2024. Will that be backfilled with this approach?

Jaclyn SYMES: I answered that.

David DAVIS: No, it is a different agency. I am wanting to know: will this money be acquitted to deal with the deficit?

Jaclyn SYMES: I answered this. I actually used FRV as the example when I explained this to you. The levy is calculated based on their annual budget. It does not include their deficit.

David DAVIS: See, the problem with that response is that the agency has an annual budget but it has exceeded its budget and it has gone into deficit, and that is what I am trying to understand. Will it be used –

Jaclyn SYMES: And it will most years, right? That is what is going to happen?

David DAVIS: Well, it will most years – I mean, that worries me. An agency should be able to have its budget set and run very close to budget. We all understand there can be an occasion, especially with a fire agency, where there could be something –

Jaclyn SYMES: Every year?

David DAVIS: No, not every year, but occasionally there can be a problem, I understand. I just note what you have said about the fact that they could get into some trouble on occasion. I have a number of other questions that relate to a number of specific agencies. The operational funding appears to be very narrowly construed in this bill. It does not, for example, in clause 6 list organisations, and I am going to include a number of names here: Shepparton Search and Rescue Squad, Echuca & Moama Search & Rescue Squad, Life Saving Victoria, Marine Search and Rescue, Australian Volunteer Coast Guard, Alpine Search and Rescue Victoria and Bush Search and Rescue Victoria. It is a fact that they are not in this bill and they are not supported in this bill. That is correct, isn't it?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, I have already confirmed that agencies can have an MOU with an emergency service organisation – a good example is Shepparton search and rescue and the SES. They are a great Shepparton organisation, they work very well with the SES and they access their training and the like. By virtue of that MOU they will be included in the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund. In relation to many of the other agencies that you listed, it is not the intention to include them in the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund bill. That is not to suggest that they do not receive government funding.

David DAVIS: So the conclusion is that most of those agencies, with the exception of Shepparton, will not get funding. But Shepparton will not get direct funding, it will get funding via an MOU. Is that what you are saying?

Jaclyn SYMES: No. Just to clarify, the reason that some of the agencies that you mentioned are not included is that they are not statutory authorities, so they will continue to be funded through government consolidated revenue and the different arrangements that we have with some of the ones that you listed – not under this bill. It is not the MOU that facilitates the funding, it is the MOU with SES that makes them SES-like, effectively – I think that is probably the easiest way to say it. They are the equivalent to SES because of their MOU, so they will be able to be included in the funding model for that reason.

David DAVIS: But the other ones will not?

Jaclyn SYMES: No, but particularly in light of Echuca, I think there are discussions underway in relation to whether they could do a similar thing to Shepparton. There are so many organisations, like the Red Cross and St John Ambulance. There are so many people that I know are there when we have emergencies. Where we have drawn the line is statutory authorities, and we will continue to support the range of agencies in another way, not through this levy.

David DAVIS: So what quantum are they likely to be funded? Is there a band or a range for some of these agencies like Shepparton, for example? How much are they going to receive – \$5000 or \$100,000? I do not know. Is there some understanding of how much that might be?

Jaclyn SYMES: I am not aware of their existing funding. It would be a matter for the Minister for Emergency Services. I can get the answer, but the answer is not from the Treasurer. I am looking at my former emergency services minister adviser, who will know the answer. But it is not a question for this bill.

David DAVIS: I will just put on record that it would be helpful to the committee if a list of those is available and we can actually see.

Jaclyn SYMES: It is just Shepparton search and rescue.

David DAVIS: Shepparton is the only one? There is no other?

Jaclyn SYMES: At the moment.

David DAVIS: At the moment. So there is no other intention immediately?

Jaclyn SYMES: As I indicated, Mr Davis, where an organisation has an MOU with an existing statutory agency, they have the same standard operating procedures. That is kind of why they can be included. The reason that we do not want to start naming things like Shepparton search and rescue is that we do not have to name everyone if they meet the same criteria as Shepparton. What I am outlining is the process for agencies that would be included, and there are discussions underway with a couple of others.

David DAVIS: I will perhaps ask: will Echuca and Moama search and rescue also receive funding under the same mechanism, or is that to be left out?

Jaclyn SYMES: As I indicated, I understand that Echuca are in conversations with the SES in relation to a potential MOU.

Melina BATH: The Australian Volunteer Coast Guard are financial and affiliated members of the CFA. Can you confirm that the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard members will be eligible for, first of all, a rebate, as they are a volunteer service, and are they eligible for funds?

Jaclyn SYMES: Sorry, you started off by saying CFA volunteers.

Melina BATH: The Australian Volunteer Coast Guard are financial and affiliated members of the CFA. Is that correct? My question is: will they be included in funding in this legislation? And if they are affiliated members of the CFA, will they therefore be able to receive a rebate in this legislation?

Jaclyn SYMES: Ms Bath, I was having a conversation earlier with Mr Davis about the MOU between Shepparton search and rescue and the SES. That confers a lot of operating procedures and legally binding responsibilities, and they basically become the equivalent of SES in a statutory authority sense. Affiliation does not do the same. I do not have any intention of gazetting anyone other than CFA and VICSES volunteers to be eligible for a rebate under the Emergency Services Volunteer Fund. Similar to my answer to the list that Mr Davis read out, we will continue to work with agencies on their funding requests in the usual way.

Melina BATH: Just to clarify, the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard, even if they do have an affiliation with the CFA and financial membership with the CFA, will not be receiving funding through this legislation, through this levy, and they will not be getting a rebate? I am just confirming that.

Jaclyn SYMES: If they are CFA volunteers, they will be eligible for a rebate.

David DAVIS: Just to understand about the rebates, the list of organisations I read before – will they be eligible for rebates? Do you want me to read them again? Echuca and Moama –

Jaclyn SYMES: As I just said, Mr Davis, it is VICSES and CFA volunteers that will be eligible for a rebate because they are the agencies that will be part of the funding arrangements that we are proposing. Shepparton search and rescue members will also be eligible for a rebate by virtue of the

MOU with the SES. Anybody else that is in a similar situation and has an MOU in the future would be able to consider that as well. In relation to ordinary volunteers across the board, I certainly value the work they do, but this rebate is for dedicated emergency services personnel such as CFA and SES.

David DAVIS: I am just trying to understand: will Life Saving Victoria have the same mechanism for rebates or not?

Jaclyn SYMES: No.

David DAVIS: If it is via the SES to provide funding to be distributed to volunteer organisations, will they have any capacity to do that? Will the SES be able to distribute via the SES to some of these organisations?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, there is nothing in this bill that changes the current funding arrangements for agencies in relation to money going out.

David DAVIS: So Shepparton Search and Rescue Squad will be eligible, but the Echuca & Moama Search & Rescue Squad will not – is that right? Am I correct there?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, that is my information at this time. I have answered this several times. Shepparton have an MOU with SES, and I understand Echuca are engaged in conversations.

David DAVIS: So not at the moment?

Jaclyn SYMES: Do you want me to say it 10 times?

David DAVIS: Is there any mechanism then for Life Saving Victoria to get these vouchers, these volunteer rebates, these arrangements? Is there any mechanism that is linked to the bill?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, Life Saving Victoria are not included in the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund.

David DAVIS: Just to round this off, I guess the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard, Alpine search and rescue, Bush Search and Rescue Victoria and Marine Search and Rescue – none of those will be eligible for the rebates.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, for about the fifth time, the people who are eligible for a rebate are volunteers at CFA, VICSES and volunteer agencies that have an MOU as I have described to you.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Just in terms of the rebates then, in rural communities where we have smaller CFAs, from what I understand of what you have said, they will not be eligible for rebates either if they are smaller CFAs in rural communities or remote communities of Victoria.

Jaclyn SYMES: No, that is not correct.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Because you mentioned that they are all small organisations – I just wanted to make sure that all CFAs –

Jaclyn SYMES: Every CFA volunteer is eligible, regardless of the size of their town.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Minister, a number of the farming community are extremely distressed, as you can imagine, with the additional tax and the implications that it has for them. On the potential for rebates in this bill for struggling farmers who are barely making a living, will there be some sort of provision for them as well where they will be able to apply for a rebate if they are struggling to actually even make an income from their farm?

Jaclyn SYMES: Whilst again not directly related to the bill, I would like to give you some information in relation to some announcements and some considerations that the government has taken in response to advocacy from farmers. What I was able to confirm this morning is that when I set the rates, which is outside of the bill, we will be reducing what we had proposed to apply to primary

production land. That will go from the proposed 83 cents per \$1000 capital improved value to 78.1 cents. What we have also announced today – and the Minister for Agriculture will be backing this in in her consideration of support for drought-impacted farmers – is that if a farmer is in an LGA that is eligible for the drought package because there is an existing drought package out or because there is an expansion in the number of eligible LGAs, any farmers in those regions will be able to access a rebate, which will mean that there is no increase in their Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund levy compared to what they paid the previous year for their fire services property levy.

Nick McGOWAN: Treasurer, is there any guarantee in this bill that any of the budgets for the CFA, the SES and the FRV will not be cut?

Jaclyn SYMES: The budgets will continue to be set in the normal budget process. There is nothing in this bill that dictates a separate budget process.

Nick McGOWAN: So just to be clear, there is nothing in this bill that guarantees the people of Victoria that any one of those budgets cannot be cut in the future, either in your next budget to be delivered next week or in any other future budget?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, the amendments that I am proposing will ensure that the percentage of the entity's budget will be confirmed. For Fire Rescue Victoria that is 90 per cent, for the CFA and SES 95 per cent. This is literally just to guarantee that level of funding as opposed to their budget. This does not set their budgets. As I was just describing to Mr Davis, that is a matter for the agencies to come to government and explain their budgets, supported by the relevant minister.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Minister, communities have been contacting me, and they are concerned that they do not have easy access to information on where the money will be going exactly. How transparent, accountable and detailed will the government's breakdown be in telling us where the emergency services levy is going? They actually want to see the details in a way that is easily understood by local rural communities. Will that be possible, Minister?

Jaclyn SYMES: I too have certainly heard that, and I know we want to provide as much detail as possible. I have been at pains to stress that every single dollar will be spent on emergency services. I understand that people want us to be able to prove that, so that is why as part of my proposed amendments there is a requirement for the government to lay out the estimate of the levy to be collected and what it will be spent on, and we are proposing to make that as user friendly and as clear as possible.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: I do have more questions here. In terms of the CFA promise you mentioned a number of trucks in a deal that has been made with the crossbench and that there would be an additional truck for Chelsea. I could not help but note that places like Dandenong, Frankston and the like have some of the highest call-outs, certainly for the FRV. How is one additional new truck going to meet the needs with this extensive levy that will be hitting areas, including the metropolitan region which I represent? How is one truck in Chelsea going to actually meet the needs of some of the highest hit areas that require callouts from our emergency services, like Dandenong and Frankston? I know Skye, for instance, is still waiting on a new truck. It had a truck given to it, and then that truck was recalled for another area. It still has an outdoor section on one of its trucks, and some of its trucks remain not fit for purpose. So that is my question: if you are only going to provide one truck for Chelsea, how is that going to meet the needs with this levy for the regional areas in the south-east?

Jaclyn SYMES: First of all, your characterisation of the question is wrong. I announced the rolling fleet for VICSES and CFA as the former emergency services minister last year. What I announced today was where those assets would be going. You mentioned Chelsea. They will be one of the first to receive a VICSES medium rescue truck. You have detailed a number of needs you have identified in your community. Supporting this bill will mean more trucks for communities just like yours.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, I want to go back to the Alpine shire. While we are here, do you think you could produce that letter you said you have from the Alpine shire which you indicated supports this approach to funding emergency services?

Jaclyn SYMES: I will take that on notice, Mrs McArthur, and have my office have a look for the correspondence that I referred to. But as you have received direct intel from the mayor, I will take you at your word that she would like it noted that she does not support it. I am more than happy with that.

Bev McARTHUR: But will you be able to provide this while we are here now? Can you organise to get the information while we are asking further questions? Because I have got a newspaper report which goes totally contrary to what you suggested the Alpine shire position was. I think it is very important that if you are going to allege that a council supports this extraordinary new tax you can verify it while we are in this process.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, I have just said I am more than happy to put on record and not disagree with your information that the Alpine shire mayor would like it noted that they do not support the legislation. I think that should deal with the matter.

Bev McARTHUR: But had we not got this confirmation, it would be left suggested in this chamber that a council had said something when they had not. I hope there is no more misleading in the committee stages. Can I ask: has the government and the Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) come to an agreement on the rate in the dollar of the valuation for the proposed levy on primary production land?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, I have engaged with the VFF, I have met with the VFF, and I have advised the VFF of the change.

Bev McARTHUR: What change?

Jaclyn SYMES: The change I just outlined to Mrs Hermans.

Bev McARTHUR: Going back, Minister, to the Alpine shire, why did you make the statement in the first place if it was not accurate?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, the advice that I had was that I had received correspondence. As I have said to you, you have received direct correspondence. I probably should not have said they wrote to me. One did. I thought it was Alpine shire; maybe it was not. Now, given the conversation that we are having, I would be reluctant to identify the council that did write to me because of the way this conversation is going. I thought it was Alpine; I still actually think it is. But I am very much not intending to mislead the house. I think for absolute clarity, let us all agree Alpine shire do not support the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund in one way, shape or form. I am sure they support emergency services, though.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, now we have clarified that. I hope there are no other misleading references. Dr Mansfield referred this morning in her contribution to assurances you had given her. I think we should know: what assurances have you given Dr Mansfield?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, unlike many members of the chamber, I have had constructive conversations with the Greens, who raised a number of concerns with the bill. In terms of those conversations, I was able to explain what the government's intention was, so the information that the Greens have been given is probably more thorough than some others, because they asked questions and I answered them.

Bev McARTHUR: Can you outline to us what the assurances are that you have given Dr Mansfield and others who have now agreed to support this legislation?

Jaclyn SYMES: What I can say, Mrs McArthur, is that I have had a range of conversations with members of the crossbench. I have had conversations with MAV, the VFF and range of other stakeholders that have had similar concerns. I do not want to necessarily attribute some of the changes

to individuals, because a lot of them have similar concerns. That is why we have reduced the farmer rate. That is why we have a rebate. That is why we have announced rolling stock for FRV. It is why we have amendments to make it very, very clear that this is not about funding bureaucrats, it is about funding frontline emergency services. All of my amendments are as a result of conversations with not just the Greens and other members of this chamber but a broad range of stakeholders that brought things to my attention.

Bev McARTHUR: But if you say you are not funding bureaucrats – you have included government departments, effectively, in this legislation, haven't you? Or are you withdrawing all those?

Jaclyn SYMES: We can go through this when we go through my amendments, Mrs McArthur. But as I have tried to explain, the Secretary for the Department of Justice and Community Safety, for example, will be responsible for the contract for the radios that go out to our volunteers. That is just how the system works. It is ensuring that expenditure that can be applied to agencies can be demonstrated to be for emergency services response. I think in particular there are a lot of firefighters in Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic), so we thought it was appropriate to include them in this levy.

Bev McARTHUR: But these government departments were funded out of consolidated revenue previously. Why are they not still being funded out of consolidated revenue?

Jaclyn SYMES: They are.

Sarah MANSFIELD: I have a series of questions that may assist Mrs McArthur with her previous line of questioning.

Members interjecting.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Well, it may be a bit more specific, so that might be helpful. Minister, councils are concerned about having to determine the difference between primary and secondary residences. That is not data that is readily available to them but it is to the State Revenue Office. What is being done to assist councils with this aspect of the levy?

Jaclyn SYMES: The bill contains amendments enabling the State Revenue Office to share information held regarding principal places of residence, including principal place of residence exemptions from land tax, with councils for the purpose of administering the PPR concession. But as the chamber would be aware, that change is being delayed by a year to allow smooth implementation.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Many councils have also raised concerns with me about the financial risk this levy poses for them when people do not pay and councils have to carry the debt. Some rural councils, as you would be aware, are already in a financially precarious position, and the result will potentially be flow-on cuts that they will have to make. Will the government provide assurances that they will not make councils carry this debt?

Jaclyn SYMES: I think Mr Davis had a similar line of questioning earlier. But under the current fire services property levy and potential of this legislation, the SRO does not and will not have any power to penalise councils if ratepayers do not pay their bill. The Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund is not a taxation law under section 4 of the taxation act, meaning that the commissioner and the SRO do not have the powers invested through it to collect the ESVF liability directly in the fire services property levy legislation and any changes. The only power invested in the SRO and the commissioner is under section 48, and that is to receive levy amounts and levy interest collected by a collection agency and pay them into consolidated fund; monitor the performance of council and other functions conferred on the commissioner under the act – this refers to paying councils fees for collecting the rates on behalf of the state; and oversight measures to ensure that councils that have collected the levy pass it on to the state. Dr Mansfield, what I would like to confirm is that the State Revenue Office have never pursued or penalised a council for a bill not paid by a ratepayer under the fire property service levy, and I do not anticipate any changes to that.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Also within the context of this bill, concerns were raised with members of this house about an intention of government to remove safe firefighter staffing levels. Obviously this raises concerns about what impact this would have on firefighters' ability to respond when called on. Can I please seek clarification on whether it is in fact an intention of the government to remove these staffing levels?

Jaclyn SYMES: I welcome the question, Dr Mansfield, because I was also a bit concerned that there were communications around this bill or the government more broadly having plans to reduce firefighter staffing levels. I was equally worried about that, and I cannot quite understand how it got connected to this bill. But for that purpose I think it would be good to be quite clear on it: there is absolutely nothing in this bill that would have any impact on safe firefighter staffing levels, and I am referring specifically to FRV firefighters. As I have said many times, this further provides certainty of funding for FRV at a slightly higher level than has previously been the case. There is no ability for that to translate into negatively impacting on staffing levels. We have also announced the fleet, so the benefits of this bill are positive for FRV firefighters, not negative. On a broader point, I want to assure you and the house that there is absolutely no intention of the government, through this bill or any other measure, to remove safe firefighter staffing levels. These are protected in the enterprise agreement for a reason, and they have been crafted in a way to ensure that our firefighters are as safe as possible on the ground when they are carrying out the vital work that they do.

Bev McARTHUR: Rural Councils Victoria issued a statement in February, saying that they were disappointed with both a lack of consultation and the changes themselves, which are 'unfair on rural councils and rural communities'. They said they have written to relevant Victorian government ministers to strongly state this view and seek clarity on how the ESVF can be delivered fairly and equitably without any unintended consequences for councils or volunteer management. Have you given them a guarantee there will be no unintended consequences for councils and volunteer management?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, you are referring to unintended consequences. Do you want to be a little more specific?

Bev McARTHUR: Sorry, I did not hear that. Can you repeat it, Minister?

Jaclyn SYMES: You have asked me to give a guarantee against unintended consequences. Do you want to give me a flavour of the consequences you are referring to? I do not understand what you are getting at.

Bev McARTHUR: I am referring to the statement from Rural Councils Victoria, who have asked, I imagine, you particularly but other ministers. They were seeking clarity from you of how the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund can be delivered fairly and equitably – and I am quoting their statement – without any unintended consequences for councils or volunteer management. You will have got their request to confirm that. I am asking you: have you confirmed to Rural Councils Victoria – which are 38 councils in Victoria, I might add – that there are no unintended consequences for councils or volunteer management?

Jaclyn SYMES: As I indicated earlier, there will be an implementation package that we are working through with the MAV to support councils in relation to any of the implementation issues that are known or do come up.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, let us go to the MAV now. They have called on the Victorian government to review and reform the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund by – and I will go through them point by point; you can answer each one – transferring the levy collection to the state.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, I have answered this question already to one of your colleagues, but the current fire services property levy is part of council rates, and we are continuing that practice.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, there is the first issue where you will be at odds with the MAV. We will go further. They ‘strongly call on the Victorian government to reassess its decision to designate councils as collection agents for the ESVF’, so you are clearly totally disregarding that call.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, it was the Liberal government that brought in the fire services property levy and decided that the right mechanism was via council rates. It makes sense in relation to home owners receiving letters from council and reducing duplication. I have spoken to a lot of councils about this. It is our intention to keep the current practice, which was introduced by your side of politics.

Bev McARTHUR: The fire services levy as it was originally intended bears no relation to this tax that you have applied to the citizens of Victoria, not in any shape or form. This is a new tax. The MAV, who represent 79 councils in Victoria, obviously strongly disagree that they should be collecting this and ask why it is not the State Revenue Office, which would be a far more efficient operation to do it and a centralised process, given that you probably know how many lavatories we have got these days, you are so busy taxing property. Although Mr McGowan cannot seem to get a lavatory for Ringwood train station. Putting that aside, this is a core issue for the councils of Victoria. This is not the same tax; this is not the fire services levy. This is a new tax. You are now saying to all of these municipalities that you totally disregard their position, which is for the State Revenue Office to collect it.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, I have answered your question. The cost of collection is dramatically reduced by using rates notices, as it is much simpler for ratepayers. In relation to MAV and their advocacy, one of the issues that they were most concerned about early on – and I have responded to their satisfaction – was having to determine the eligibility for volunteers to access the rebate. We certainly have made it very clear that government services will take on that role. There have been some constructive conversations with MAV, but our policy of continuing the practice that was implemented for the fire property services levy is where we have landed.

Bev McARTHUR: Why is it more efficient for councils, especially small rural councils, to be collecting your tax than the SRO?

Jaclyn SYMES: As I said, Mrs McArthur, they are already doing it.

Bev McARTHUR: Another issue that they have is reducing the levy burden for all Victorian residents to ensure that the levy is equitably structured and does not disproportionately burden rural communities or primary producers, yet the vast increases in this tax go to exactly that issue. They disproportionately burden rural communities and primary producers – do you agree?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, the vast majority of the proceeds of the levy will be raised from metropolitan Melbourne. I have, after consultation with the VFF and other advocates, made changes to the proposed primary production land settings. Those settings are outside of this bill. The bill sets up the framework for the gazettal. I am more than aware that the impact of natural disasters is felt heavily in regional Victoria, and we are trying to find the best balance in relation to apportioning how we raise revenue. But around 73 per cent of the revenue for this will be raised from properties in metropolitan Melbourne. It will be 27 per cent that comes from regional Victoria. But when it comes to the experience of where disasters generally hit, it is the regional Victoria communities that I know will see the benefit of the investment, because unfortunately they are often the casualties.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, that will be an abhorrent statement to those people in rural communities who actually go out and fight the fires and deal with emergencies, including the SES, on a regular basis for no return of income – often obviously in their own time, using their own equipment – when they are severely impacted themselves. So saying that the greatest problems are out in the rural communities –

Jaclyn SYMES: I would not describe it like that.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, that is what you said.

Jaclyn SYMES: No, I did not.

Bev McARTHUR: The emergencies frequently occur outside, so therefore, ipso facto, they should pay a much higher premium. That is what you are saying. A 189 per cent higher premium – isn't that what you are alleging? That country people should pay a gross amount more than anybody else?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, I would kindly request that you refrain from telling me what you think I said, because you are misquoting me. It is unhelpful for those people that might be watching at home or reading *Hansard* to be misled by your characterisation of my answers. I would prefer my answers to stand on their own. As I indicated, 73 per cent of the revenue will be raised from properties in metropolitan Melbourne; 27 per cent therefore will come from regional Victoria and 10 per cent will come from primary production land. It might be a little bit less now actually given the announcements that I made previously and in response to Mrs Hermans's questions about reductions on primary production land. Following feedback, we are reducing what we had proposed. We are also bringing in a pause for drought-impacted farmers.

Bev McARTHUR: Do you not agree that the rate you are setting is much higher for primary producers than anybody else – significantly higher, almost three times higher? Why are you so penalising primary producers?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, as I have indicated, the levy is calculated based on the value of property and has a varying rate depending on the type of property. In relation to your comments about country communities and farmers turning out to protect their communities, I would remind you that all active and eligible CFA volunteers will be eligible for an exemption and rebate in relation to the levy. That is a recognition of the fact that we know particularly many farmers are also members of their CFA. So that was a direct acknowledgement, knowing that there is that crossover time and time again. When it comes to farming properties, as I have indicated, we are certainly aware of the drought impacts. That is why that pause has been announced. That is why there is a drought package out there. There are a range of other measures that we consider when we are looking at primary production land, such as the exemption from land tax. Subsequent to the question that Mr Davis asked me in question time today, certainly there is no intention to change that.

Georgie CROZIER: I just want to follow on from Mrs McArthur's questions around primary producers. Often they might be regarded as asset rich but cash poor, and you are basing this levy on the value of land. What consideration was taken into account in relation to those farming families who may be running their properties but do not have a lot of cash flow. What exemptions might they be able to have, given their situations?

Jaclyn SYMES: The impact on a medium farm will be around \$10.40 a week.

Georgie CROZIER: What is a medium farm?

Jaclyn SYMES: \$1.233 million. That is the land value, not the operation of the farm. There has been, obviously, consideration of farmers that might be experiencing hardship. We are having conversations with councils about their existing hardship provisions. As was announced today – and the Minister for Agriculture will have more to say – there will be no increase from the current levy. If this new levy applies, we will pause that in relation to farmers that live in impacted LGAs.

Georgie CROZIER: There are a few questions in that answer. But before I get to that I just want to follow on from Mrs McArthur's question too around exemptions and the crossovers, you said, for volunteers. How will those exemptions be applied for volunteers? In terms looking at the number of volunteers that are currently in the state with the agencies of CFA, lifesaving and SES, how will those exemptions actually be applied?

Jaclyn SYMES: It will be a rebate system. We have worked with the CFA and SES. They will be ensuring that volunteers that are eligible – and I released some detail about the eligibility today, which was basically just confirming what I have been saying. But just to put it beyond doubt, it says:

Eligible volunteers include all active VICSES and CFA operational and support volunteers. To be eligible for the rebate, volunteers will need to have served at least 12 months, have passed probation, and not be suspended on disciplinary grounds or have taken leave of absence for the entire duration of the preceding 12 months.

CFA and SES will be giving volunteer ID numbers to individual members, so it will be up to them to make sure that the rebate is being made available. They will also be responsible for any disputes around people. It will be easier to be in, to be frank. We are not trying to make this onerous. If you are a volunteer or a life member, the local units and brigades know who you are. You will be able to access the rebate. You will get onto the government services app and be able to access a rebate by putting in your rates notice and your number. Again, we will have more information on how to do that. I am sure electorate officers and the like would be interested in case they need to help anybody with that.

Georgie CROZIER: Just from that answer, the onus will be back on the volunteer organisations to provide the IDs and to assess who is eligible, who has been 12 months working in a voluntary capacity. So the onus is going to fall back on the voluntary organisations, who are already stretched.

Jaclyn SYMES: No. They already know who the people are.

Georgie CROZIER: I know, but if people are moving around – that just is extraordinary, that the voluntary organisations are going to have that burden placed upon them. And how are there checks and balances? Somebody might say, ‘Oh, yeah, we’ll just sign you off and get the rebate.’ Who is doing the checks and balances about who is actually eligible for this? Dare I say it, there is no oversight to ensure that those that are saying they are volunteers are actually volunteers.

Jaclyn SYMES: Ms Crozier, the organisations know who their volunteers are. They want to ensure that they are supportive of the rebate. They want to see their members take up this benefit. Some members have told me they will not take up the benefit because they do not consider that they need a rebate in order to promote their volunteerism. But I expect that a lot will, and I would encourage them to do so. The onus is not on the organisation. The volunteer claiming the rebate needs to provide the evidence by using the Service Victoria app. It will just be SES and CFA being able to provide you with a number that is basically confirming that you are a volunteer. That is information that they already hold. And to be clear, too, both agencies are expecting volunteer numbers to go up as a result of this policy.

Georgie CROZIER: Are you concerned that the scheme could be rorted?

Jaclyn SYMES: I am not. Could a few people try and get through? Balancing up, I want to make it the least onerous on volunteers possible. I want it to be easier for volunteers; I do not want it to be difficult. If that results in a couple of people rorting, then I would prefer that than making it too hard for people to access.

Georgie CROZIER: There are many, many volunteers who give their time for the community, as we all know, and they do a tremendous job each and every day, I have to say. When they are signing up – and you are saying you hope those numbers go up. There are many volunteers who have been in organisations. They might have administrative roles rather than more active roles. Again, I am curious, because it could openly be exploited. If the organisations themselves have to do this administrative work and sign off, what happens if somebody is rorting the system, if there is somebody who is signing off people to allow them to be deemed to be a volunteer so that they are eligible for the rebate? How is that going to be overseen, and what consideration around any penalties for that aspect has the government considered?

Jaclyn SYMES: I outlined the core criteria that they need to meet.

Georgie CROZIER: But they could be signed off.

Jaclyn SYMES: Well, there are existing laws for fraud and theft. We are not proposing to introduce any new laws or penalties in relation to that matter. I have spoken to both the CFA and the SES in relation to their role in this, and they are not expressing the concerns that you are.

Georgie CROZIER: Given you said you expect the numbers of volunteers to increase, have you done any modelling? What is the government's expectation in each of those different agencies of seeing an increase in volunteers?

Jaclyn SYMES: Like your colleagues, you put something to me that I did not say. I said that the advice of SES and CFA is that they expect increases in volunteers. That is what their advice is.

Georgie CROZIER: Surely you were interested in that assertion by them. What was their prediction for an increase in volunteer numbers? Did you ask, or did you just leave it?

Jaclyn SYMES: I probably would have had further conversations as the Minister for Emergency Services. That would be a matter for the Minister for Emergency Services, not the Treasurer.

Georgie CROZIER: I am well aware that you were the Minister for Emergency Services. You were also the Minister for Agriculture and Minister for Regional Development, and now you are the Treasurer.

Jaclyn SYMES: I have still got regional development.

Georgie CROZIER: And you have still got regional development, as you said. I just want to go back to the issue around exemptions. To apply for the exemption when this tax comes on board – those rates notices come through quarterly, so they have got to pay up-front. You are saying no. Could you just explain then how the rebate would work in terms of, when the bill comes in, how the Victorian taxpayer is getting that rebate? And how long will it take for that rebate to fall back into the volunteer's bank account?

Jaclyn SYMES: Ms Crozier, you will be able to apply for a rebate when you get your rates notice, because the requirement will be to upload your rates notice and put in your material identifying that you are a volunteer. You can apply for your rebate at any time, whether you have paid it or not. I am not proposing to suggest how people would pay their rates. Lots of people pay them in instalments and the like. None of that is going to change.

Georgie CROZIER: But how long would it take to get the rebate back into the bank account for the volunteer?

Jaclyn SYMES: Ms Crozier, the advice is that ordinarily it would be instant, because it will just match up and it will go through. But if there is any confusion around names, identification, that kind of thing – basically, if it is not automatic – it will take longer because there is an issue to follow up.

Georgie CROZIER: Just to make it clear – and others might have this more clarified than I have – the ratepayer gets their rate notice with the new levy attached, and they have got a period of whatever it is to pay, but you said you have got to upload the rate notice with your ID to say that you are eligible for the rebate. So then does it automatically take off that bottom line?

Jaclyn SYMES: No, that is why it is a rebate, not an exemption.

Georgie CROZIER: But don't you have to pay and then get the rebate?

Jaclyn SYMES: It is probably best if you do, but it is not a requirement to access the rebate. We just need evidence of your rates notice and that you have a liability to pay the levy. We give you a rebate to the equivalent of the levy. We are not going to be checking what day you paid your bill. You just have to show the liability.

Georgie CROZIER: I am just saying if people are very cash-strapped and they have got the bill, they cannot pay the bill, but they cannot get the rebate –

Jaclyn SYMES: You can get the rebate before you pay the bill.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Today I had the opportunity, Minister, to meet and speak with a few of the farmers, and I had a particular farmer say to me that she had applied to be a member of the CFA, and the process had already taken more than six months just to get through the beginning stage of the test. Somebody else that she knew had applied 12 months ago, and the process is taking a long time. People in regional Victoria that wish to volunteer with the CFA are finding that the process is taking a long time, which means that this rebate that they may so desperately need and the CFA volunteers that they so desperately need are not going to be fast-tracked. You are anticipating that through this there is going to be an increase in people wanting to volunteer to be with CFA. So have you actually taken this into consideration or put anything in place in order to fast-track the process that enables people to volunteer with the CFA?

Jaclyn SYMES: The issues that you raise are a matter for the CFA, but what I would say is that the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund is all about raising more money to spend on our fire services and emergency services, including the CFA, so you would imagine that with additional funding they could look at some of their training provisions.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: You did mention also when you were speaking in response to both Ms Crozier and Mrs McArthur medium farms being \$1.233 million in terms of land value. Some of the regional people again asked this particular question: they want to know why this levy is being based on capital improved value when land value has nothing to do with income or cash flow. Their concern of course is, as everybody has been raising in various forms today, that it will be extremely difficult for regional Victorians that do not have the cash flow. They may have the land. It may be valued at a certain amount. You may have decided it is a medium farm. Let me say that in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region we still have people that are primary producers in terms of growing vegetables; that still takes place in the south-east. Their land is extremely valuable because of the sprawl of growth in the area. However, their produce is exactly the same, and in some cases their capacity has even been reduced. I am just asking this question on behalf of them: why have you based it in this way that will actually disadvantage these particular areas where the value of their land has gone up because of things beyond their control in terms of the suburban sprawl, if you like –

David Davis interjected.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Yes, the things around them. But you have actually made this particular levy in such a way that it will disadvantage them, and they do not have additional cash flow coming through.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs Hermans, this is how the fire services property levy has been applied. That was introduced by a Liberal government. We are proposing to continue that practice in relation to this levy. But in relation to some of the issues you raised in terms of capital value and production and the like, these are not connected to the bill but are the topic of conversations that I am having with the VFF.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: In terms of hardship provisions, I know you have mentioned that there will be a drop from 83 to 71 – a reduction in costings that you are now going to be factoring in. What hardship provisions will be provided for those beyond that measure, for those who do not have the cash flow, for those whose land value has increased and who do not have the additional income? What hardship provisions, in addition to this, will this government be providing with this new tax?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs Hermans, we will continue to work with local councils. In terms of hardship assistance many people can already apply by contacting councils and using the details in relation to what is on their rates. There may be additional options – payment plans, deferrals and the like. As I have said in some previous answers, which you have acknowledged, there is the reduction but also the

exclusion of an increase for those in the drought-impacted LGAs. There is capacity for councils to waive payments in relation to certain matters. Most of them have policies, and we will continue to work with them on the implementation phase. As I have indicated, there will be funding available through the MAV to look at all of these implementation issues. I know hardship is something that a lot of people are interested in, and it is certainly a conversation that is ongoing.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: I want to just labour this point a little bit more, because some of these people are already on payment plans. If they are already on payment plans and they are already struggling to pay what is required of them in terms of these land taxes, how are they supposed to find additional funds with the 189 per cent increase? I know you have said that the councils do not have the ability to enforce this, but it seems to me that these particular groups that are already on payment plans and are already struggling are going to be so significantly disadvantaged that you are basically taking their livelihood, forcing them to sell what little they have and be reduced to nothing. Will there be some additional support or some additional way of supporting those who are already on payment plans for this tax as it exists today?

Jaclyn SYMES: As I indicated, we will be happy to have further conversations with councils in relation to their hardship policies. That is also why we have made announcements that will be backed in by the Minister for Agriculture in relation to those in drought-impacted LGAs not receiving an increase on their levy whilst they are in drought.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Just to labour this point, Minister, some of these people are not necessarily in drought-impacted areas, and they are on these payment plans already because the taxes have been too high.

David Davis: Is it green wedge zones?

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Yes, that is right. I am just asking on behalf of a number of people who are already in this position. It seems to me that the government has not actually thought this through. It has not actually done the consultation. The word that we are receiving is that these people have not been asked and that they are already in that position and struggling. What level of consultation in this area of capacity to be able to produce the finances for this tax has this government taken when it comes to primary producers for this state?

Jaclyn SYMES: We have consulted with MAV and the VFF. As I indicated in my earlier answer, we will be working on an implementation plan supported by funding with MAV for local governments. We can look at some of those issues at that time, because a lot of them already have their own hardship arrangements. We will be seeking to support them in that way.

David DAVIS: Just on the matter of rebates, and just perhaps a little lateral question, do career firefighters qualify for a rebate? No. Some may be volunteers, and they would then get it if they are volunteers. They may be members of co-located volunteer brigades, for example, or even another brigade. They would get it then?

Jaclyn SYMES: Irrespective of your paid employment, if you are a volunteer for SES or CFA and meet the eligibility, then you will be eligible for the rebate, Mr Davis.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, has the government estimated the delinquency rate of people paying the levy?

Jaclyn SYMES: Similar to the conversations I have been having with Mrs Hermans, we will work with councils on the implementation of this and support them, and some of those issues will –

Bev McARTHUR: Sorry, Minister, can you speak up?

Jaclyn SYMES: We will continue to consult with councils in relation to the implementation, and some of those matters may very well come up.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, can you confirm you said farmers can afford to pay this tax?

Jaclyn SYMES: Again, I am not quite sure why it is the practice of opposition members to continually try and tell me what I have said. Mrs McArthur, the very reason that we have announced, as part of drought considerations, ensuring that there is no increase on farmers that are experiencing drought – I am very conscious that there are a lot of farmers that are doing it tough right now. I speak to a lot of people through work and through personal activities. You would have these conversations. We talk about the fact that it has not rained constantly. I know that there are some farmers that are doing it tough; it is why we have made some of these arrangements, and the Minister for Agriculture will have more to say in the coming days. The reason that we would reduce the farmer rate is based on feedback, and a pause in relation to some of those worst hit areas is a direct reflection of the fact that we, and I as Treasurer, acknowledge that this will be difficult for some farmers. That is why we are pausing.

Bev McARTHUR: Do you deny you said farmers can afford to pay?

Jaclyn SYMES: When and in what context?

Bev McARTHUR: You were reported as saying, and I think the Premier was reported as saying, that farmers could afford to pay.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, I do not think I said that statement.

Bev McARTHUR: Do you agree then that farmers cannot afford to pay?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, I have just acknowledged that there are variable rates that apply to different types of landholdings. There are a range of exemptions for primary producers of land; we do not apply land tax, for instance. There are a range of other concessions in relation to changing of property ownership, whether you can get exemptions and the like. An acknowledgement that there are farmers that are doing it tough is certainly reflected in some of the announcements that I have made today, and further detail will be provided by the Minister for Agriculture.

Bev McARTHUR: Do you agree that farmers are – by and large, whether there is a drought or not – asset rich and cash poor?

Jaclyn SYMES: There are a range of farm businesses. I will not reflect on them as one homogenous group.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, you do not have any understanding of the primary production industry and farmers in this state, obviously. But I want to go to the MAV, which you keep referring to having had discussions with. They are moving a motion tomorrow at their state council, and one of the points is to:

Delay and Adjust Implementation of the ESVF Changes:

Delay the implementation of the Principal Place of Residence ... obligation under the ESVF beyond 1 July 2026 to allow for a more practical, cost-effective, and consistent verification process.

Are you open to agreeing to that?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, I have met with the MAV. The Minister for Local Government has met with the MAV. My office have met with FinPro and the Revenue Management Association, together with the MAV. DTF have subsequently met with MAV. I appreciate their constructive feedback. We have made some adjustments based on their advocacy. In relation to their outstanding matters, I will be happy to continue discussing with them, but it is our intention to implement this legislation as announced.

Bev McARTHUR: Further to that point that they are going to debate tomorrow and that they want you to change, they want you to:

Explore alternative approaches to PPR verification, such as leveraging existing State Government data, to minimize duplication and inefficiency.

Are you open to that?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, we will be having further conversations with the MAV.

Bev McARTHUR: We are here debating this egregious tax today. We cannot wait for your further discussions; we need your answers now, and the MAV clearly did not get answers that they wanted or found acceptable from you. So to just say to this audience now that you are going to have further discussions with people when you have had months to get this sorted out and when the MAV, that is 79 councils in Victoria, clearly do not agree with how you are approaching this issue – we should not have to accept your assurance that you are having more discussions with people. That is totally unacceptable.

Another point they want to take up with you is conducting an economic impact assessment. They want you to:

Undertake an economic impact study evaluating how levy increases will affect residents, local businesses, and overall community well-being.

Are you open to that?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, we have announced funding. We are working with MAV on an implementation package. There are some changes that do not come in until after a delay of 12 months, to make sure that there is time to work through some of those implementation issues.

Bev McARTHUR: Going back to the rebate – which seems an odd name, I agree – if an individual property can get a rebate before paying why do they need to apply? Why doesn't the government just pay all the volunteers their rebate to assist them to pay their rates notice?

Jaclyn SYMES: Well, not every volunteer is seeking an exemption from the levy. In fact I have had a cohort of volunteers who believe that it is not in the spirit of why they volunteer. I think that people who give up their time should access this rebate, and I will be encouraging people to do so. One of the things that we heard loud and clear from volunteers who are also farmers that might have a principal place of residence in town was the ability to apply it to their farm property. What we are facilitating is a process that I hope can be as straightforward as possible. You upload the rates notice of your choice, you put in your ID number and your bank details, and it should be facilitated that way. We think this is a good method. The Service Victoria app already deals with some rebates, and it is a straightforward platform that we believe is the right platform to deliver people's rebates if they choose.

Nick McGOWAN: Treasurer, just following on from that, is it correct to say that the rebate only applies to one rateable property?

Jaclyn SYMES: A volunteer, if they have multiple properties, can choose the rebate to apply to one. If you own multiple properties, you can choose which property you apply the rebate to. I would assume that when your rebate for a principal place of residence is worth around \$250 but your farm rebate is worth \$4000, you are probably going to use your farm rate notice.

Georgie CROZIER: Treasurer, just going on from the uploading, what about those Victorians and some of these volunteers who might not be active on the front line but they are still volunteers in their communities – they might have an admin role with the CFA or do some other thing. What if they do not have the capacity to upload – they are not technologically savvy? What do those people do that do not have that capacity? Many farmers do not have proper internet connection. There are black holes all over Victoria. It is just a disgrace in 2025 that farmers all over Victoria cannot access basic telecommunication services like other parts of Victoria can. What do those Victorians do?

Jaclyn SYMES: I anticipate a range of measures to help people access this rebate. I think our electorate offices would be quite well placed to help people, just as they helped with the power saving bonus, for instance, and libraries. I would expect BASOs and the like – brigade administration support officers – at the CFA would be able to provide some information for their members. They are very good at helping them do those types of things. We will be making sure everyone knows that you can access a rebate, and if we identify any kind of challenges to people accessing it then we will take action, whether it is through a community house or something like that. As I said, I want to make this easy and accessible for people who want to access it.

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: Well, what is the alternative – not provide a rebate?

Nick McGOWAN: I just want to pick up on where member Crozier I think was headed some time ago in respect to the enforcement of the rebates, because your answer in respect to the reason why the SRO was not doing the job of collecting it themselves was because of course they are not a collection agency. What is the lawful basis for the enforcement of the rebate program?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, Service Victoria, which holds the platform that you would apply for your rebate on, can check and validate your material in much the same way as for people who apply for solar panel rebates and the like. They are used to checking information. If information comes to light about somebody being fraudulent and the like, in theory you could refer these matters to Victoria Police. But as I said, this is a system that we want to be as easy as possible, and we are not overly focused on enforcement of people doing the wrong thing; we are more focused on ensuring that it is not difficult for those that deserve it.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you, Treasurer, for that answer, because that does go to member Crozier's point. It appears from the answer you have just given that in fact no-one is responsible for enforcement of the rebate program, because there is no lawful basis for it other than, as you said, as a last recourse that someone should actually lodge a complaint with the police should they ever go down that path.

Jaclyn SYMES: The chances of this occurring are pretty slim, because CFA and VICSES already have the centralised data available of who their members are. They have to first provide the individual with verification that they are a volunteer. So unless we are going to see multiple parties colluding, it is going to be pretty difficult to falsify.

Nick McGOWAN: Where the rates notice is in two names, because very often people's property is obviously in two names, not just one name, is that a partial rebate or is it a full rebate depending on whether both people are volunteers or just one?

Jaclyn SYMES: It is a full rebate for the volunteer. So notice, put in your ID, get your rebate. You do not get two rebates for one property.

David Davis: But do you get half a rebate? If George and Mildred have the house and Mildred is a volunteer and George is not –

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes, I understand the question. No, you can get the full rebate if you are one of the people named.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. So just to be clear, notwithstanding the fact that the rates notice is in two names and only one of the individuals is a volunteer, that rates notice is applicable for a full rebate of the entire sum, notwithstanding the 50 per cent ownership, presumably, of the other person or persons or however many other names are on that rates notice.

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes.

Nick McGOWAN: Can you help me understand the logic for excluding professional firefighters? I appreciate you might respond that it is part of their enterprise bargaining. Nonetheless firefighters, as we know, on the way to work or on the way home and throughout the course of their daily life also volunteer. You read about this repeatedly in the media. We see instances of this quite frequently. What is the logic in excluding professional firefighters from the rebate?

Jaclyn SYMES: The decision is to provide a rebate for volunteers, not paid emergency services personnel, regardless of whether they are firefighters or sit at Triple Zero Victoria or in the State Control Centre, unless of course they are also an SES or CFA volunteer.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, what happens then if Mildred and Fred have got a second property and they are both volunteers? Can one claim the rebate on the second property and one on the first? How are Mildred and Fred going to handle this?

Jaclyn SYMES: In the example that you have provided, if you have two names on a rates notice and you have two properties, one is a PPR and one is a farm, one person could take the rebate for the farm, and the other person could take the rebate for the principal place of residence. But it is only the farm where you get to choose whether it is your principal place of residence or a farm. If you own a holiday house and have a principal place of residence, you can only apply for the rebate on your principal place of residence.

Bev McARTHUR: What if Mildred and Fred have got four children and there are four property titles in the enterprise and they all actually work on the farm? Can Susie, James, Jane and Sally apply for a rebate? They are volunteers. Can they apply for the rebate on the other four property titles?

Jaclyn SYMES: I am reluctant to give individual advice when it comes to different farming arrangements and the like, but we have ensured that it can apply to a range of farming interests and trust arrangements and the like. So I do not want to say yes, because it might vary depending on the way that the arrangements are made. But yes, one person can apply if they are eligible.

Bev McARTHUR: Now let us go to the trust situation. So the property is in trust and there are multiple volunteers living on the property, which is a trust. How does that work? They all are entitled to a share of the dividends of that trust received from that property. Can the trust members apply for a rebate if they are volunteers?

Jaclyn SYMES: Again, Mrs McArthur, the rebate can only be claimed once for a particular type of property per –

Bev McARTHUR: The trust might have multiple owners.

Jaclyn SYMES: Well, yes, but without knowing the details of the trust and the ownership arrangements, I am reluctant. We have made it that it applies to a range of ownership arrangements and have tried to be as fair as possible in relation to that, but I cannot comment on individual circumstances.

Bev McARTHUR: But if you have worked through all these scenarios, where there are trusts, multiple titles, multiple companies, multiple volunteers, surely you have the information that you can provide the committee at this stage.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, I think probably answering it rather than applying it to specific examples would be best. So if you are a beneficiary of a trust that owns the property, you can receive the rebate. Let us go with that.

David DAVIS: A shareholder in a company?

Jaclyn SYMES: It has got to be an owner of the property.

Nick McGOWAN: When lenders determine the debt-to-income ratio for properties, they will be required to take into consideration this new tax, because they will not factor in the automatic

assumption – and it is an assumption – that that person will continue to be a volunteer. So isn't it a fact that this will actually make it harder for people to be able to get a loan, whether it be for a house, whether it be for a farm, whether it be for any enterprise where this tax is applicable?

Jaclyn SYMES: That is not the advice I have, Mr McGowan, and it is outside the bill.

Nick McGOWAN: I am sorry, Treasurer, I am just a bit intrigued by your answer. I missed part of it. The advice you received is that is not the case? How could it not be the case that, factually speaking, when you have a greater debt to service, because the debt is a regular, predictable, measurable, certain thing, because it is a tax from the government, and the banks know this so they factor that in, according to your property value and the financial year, that somehow does not have a bearing on the debt-to-income ratio?

Jaclyn SYMES: The second part of my answer, Mr McGowan, was that it is not directly related to this bill. But what might be of interest or what might be useful is that for a median house, for example, it is just over an extra dollar a week.

Nick McGOWAN: You raise an interesting question, Treasurer. It is over an extra dollar a week for the median house. The median price, as I understand it, is \$171 as I stand here, and you propose to increase it by 100 per cent. That is closer to \$400. What is your understanding of the median price that home owners who are not exempt or not entitled to a rebate will now be paying under this tax? In metropolitan Melbourne, I am talking.

Jaclyn SYMES: You keep talking about a 100 per cent increase. It is not a 100 per cent increase on the amount that you will be paying. The median house is \$680,000. If you own a median house, you will be paying around an extra \$65 under the changes, not 100 per cent more.

Nick McGOWAN: To reiterate member Davis's question: from what to what? What is your expectation of what the median cost is to each household in the metropolitan area?

Jaclyn SYMES: Going from \$191 to \$256 is the proposal.

David DAVIS: Just to pick up a couple of points there and then to maybe move to a couple of new points, residential renters – you are a volunteer, you are a renter, you pay for the levy via your rent. The landlord passes it through – of course they do. Is there any recognition in that circumstance?

Jaclyn SYMES: It will be available to property owners.

David DAVIS: In the same way as you looked at the median house price, we had a long discussion earlier about the City of Port Phillip and their views and their correspondence to a number of MPs over recent days. They said the new levy will raise approximately \$37.7 million in 2025–26, up from \$24 million in 2024–25, a \$13.7 million increase – 57 per cent. If I look at other municipalities in my area, for example, the City of Boroondara, what is the current collection of the levy out of the City of Boroondara?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, I do not have that information to hand.

David DAVIS: Could you get it for the committee? You might want to see if we can get it for the 79 municipalities – the current collection rate out of the municipalities.

Jaclyn Symes interjected.

David DAVIS: Yes, you can.

Jaclyn SYMES: I can check with the Minister for Local Government, but I think you have obtained that information directly from the council. Councils might be well placed to provide that information.

David DAVIS: I am using Boroondara; these are municipalities in my own area, but this would apply to Glen Eira, Monash and all the other councils in my area. The government, through the SRO,

must know the amount that is collected. You must have that available, and you must have estimates of how much is going to be collected in each council subsequently. I would actually seek that from you, and you may not be able to get it immediately. We have got a bit of time. We will have a dinner break in about 20 minutes. It might just be possible to get that. I would have thought that was easily obtainable: in the first instance the current amount that is taken out of each municipality by the current arrangements, and then the second thing is what the estimated amount is. I would have thought if you are modelling this you will know pretty much what the estimates are for each and every municipality.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, that is not the way that material is presented to me in relation to the existing levy. I take on notice your question without being able to be sure that I have that information readily available. As I said, it is not something that is presented in that format to me.

David DAVIS: We will have a bit of time over the dinner break. Just to be clear, the municipalities now collect, and therefore the amount must come in from them to the SRO, so the amount per municipality now must be quite easily –

Jaclyn SYMES: I understand what you have asked for. I have said I will have a look at it.

David DAVIS: I am just making the subsequent point that there must have been modelling to understand what you could put in the budget. You must have modelled that up to put it in the midyear update in December when the announcement was –

Jaclyn SYMES: That is what I mean: I have got the total; I have not broken it down.

David DAVIS: You have got the total, but to get the total there must be a breakdown.

Jaclyn SYMES: I do not know the answer to that.

David DAVIS: That would be much appreciated.

Jaclyn SYMES: What do you want it for?

David DAVIS: I want to know how much it is going to cost each municipality and what the breakdown is so we can see the difference in each municipality.

Jaclyn SYMES: The reason I was having a conversation with Mr Davis about some of this information is that certainly with some of the country communities that I have been speaking to their view is, ‘Well, if we’re going to pay this levy, how can we be confident that we’re going to see something for it?’ I have been having those conversations with communities, and I think that is why it is important to identify where the money is spent so that communities can see the benefit of what they are paying for. That is something that communities have raised with me.

David DAVIS: I agree with the essence of what you are saying. One thing that is in my mind here is: where will that money be spent? Will it be hypothecated to the municipalities in which it is collected? Will there be an upgrade in facilities? Or will it be a further sort of tax on certain municipalities that then goes into a big pool and then goes somewhere else? That is one thing I am interested in too.

Jaclyn SYMES: I have been asked this a bit. No, there will not be a direct hypothecation, because that does not really reflect the reality of emergency services. Emergency services respond to where the incident is. For instance, the communities that have been impacted by fire and floods will receive well in advance of anything that they contribute in relation to the emergency services fund just by virtue of the recovery costs and the like. In one sense you want to make sure that you can protect the communities that are hardest hit, but I am also quite conscious that communities do want to see, particularly regional communities – but I do take your point about the communities you have raised – the investment in the trucks, in the fire stations and in upgrades. They visibly want to see what they are contributing to. Again, this is straying outside the bill, but I think in consultation with the Minister for Emergency Services and the agencies, they advise where they need investment. We are very

conscious of making sure that all communities benefit from funds when it comes to this particular one that we are talking about today.

Melina BATH: Minister, with the high increases in the rate notices – and clearly there has been a change in the system from the current system to the greater impost – there is a greater administrative impost on councils. What are you doing and what modelling have you done to be able to support those councils – particularly small councils with a low rate base – to deal with this additional impost?

Jaclyn SYMES: Ms Bath, I do appreciate that you have been out of the chamber –

Melina BATH: No, I have been here for a long time.

Jaclyn SYMES: Have you been here for the whole time?

Melina BATH: Except for 10 minutes.

Jaclyn SYMES: I have gone through the answer to your question in detail more than a couple of times. I have answered your question.

Melina BATH: Minister, with elevated rate notices we are going to have distressed people coming into council offices in a distressed state. What are you going to do to support those front-of-house council staff with their mental health and wellbeing when there is such anger and distress at this additional tax?

Jaclyn SYMES: We are working with MAV and councils in relation to implementation issues and providing funding to support those issues. Councils have certainly indicated to me that they will make it clear to their ratepayers that this is a state government levy, and we are certainly not shying away from that.

Melina BATH: You just said that you will be working with them and there will be some additional funding. What will that look like? What quantum will that look like? How will it be administered? What is the government doing in that space?

Jaclyn SYMES: Ms Bath, the MAV have been advocating for a bucket of money to assist them to assist councils. I can confirm that we will provide significant funding; I just have not confirmed it to them yet, but it is in the order of \$4 million.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Minister, you mentioned earlier that 73 per cent of the levy money was anticipated to come from metropolitan areas and 27 per cent from regional Victoria, of which, until you had to make some recent changes, 10 per cent was expected to be from primary production land. There are a few questions in that. If the government is not able to enforce the collection of these funds, do you anticipate that there may be a shortfall in that breakdown?

Jaclyn SYMES: I think I can answer that along the lines of, 'I've answered it before.' There is, obviously, existing experience in delayed payment and the like, so that would have been factored into the estimates of what the fund will bring in. But again, we will come back to the provisions that councils have to deal with hardship and provide payment options for their residents.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: This is a question that comes from a farmer. Has the government modelled the impact this levy will have on food production and food prices if it forces farmers to scale back or walk away?

Jaclyn SYMES: Sorry, Mrs Hermans, I was just following up on your previous answer. What was your question?

Ann-Marie HERMANS: If the minister has any additional information on the previous question, I am happy to take that and then ask this question if that is permitted.

Jaclyn SYMES: I was just double-checking whether there is anything I should offer you in response, and I was told I had covered it – that is all.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: The question was – and as I said, this comes from a farmer and it is in terms of the impact on food production: has the government modelled the impact this levy will have on food production and food prices if it forces farmers to scale back or walk away?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs Hermans, there are a range of factors in relation to the viability of farmers and none more impactful right now than drought conditions. We know that certain farmers are making really challenging decisions. That is why we have a drought package that is currently available, and as I said, the Minister for Agriculture will have more to say off the back of the announcements that I have made. AgVic will be working very closely, providing a range of services to farmers in need.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: I just want to labour this point a little bit more, with a little bit more understanding, because the reality is it is drought today, it might be flood tomorrow, it might be fire next year. This is, as we all know the great southern land, and it is well known, as I have said before, for its fires, its floods and its droughts. Droughts might be impacting one farmer in one part of Victoria while a flood might be impacting another, and not long after that there might be fires in a particular area, so this is not simply about the drought-affected people of today. But the question remains: has the government modelled the impact that this levy will have on food production and food prices if it forces farmers to scale back or walk away?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs Hermans, you have articulated the very sense of reality that people are facing. There are more frequent, more severe emergencies, whether it is storms, floods or fires, impacting communities. That is disproportionately impacting regional Victoria. We want to make sure that they are well supported, whether they live in a regional town or live on a farm, and make sure that our emergency services are best equipped to respond. We also want to help people prepare for and mitigate natural disasters, and there is certainly work in that space. We want to help farmers address emissions and the like. There are lots of programs and a lot of really smart farmers giving advice to government on some of the programs that they think should work in that space.

When disasters occur they do have a large impact on fruit and vegetable prices. The emergency services fund will contribute to disaster mitigation and recovery so that we can help farmers that produce our food recover as quickly as possible. The 2022 floods cost the Victorian economy \$900 million, and that was just in direct support; that does not account for lost revenue and the like. But the impact was significant on the agricultural sector. And the support that went into that was 10 times the total annual emergency services volunteer liability for primary production land, which is estimated to be quite a bit less than that. The levy as a percentage of the operating costs of the average farm is small. I acknowledge that people will notice it – I do – and I know that it could be difficult for some people. I also acknowledge that people do not like paying more for their rates, for their bills. I cannot find anyone that says, ‘Yes, I’d like to pay more on my bill.’ It just does not happen. But for this levy we can demonstrate what it is going to be spent on, and when it comes to farmers we want to make sure that we can be there to help them respond and recover.

When it comes to the average increase on a farm it is equal to around 0.6 per cent of the value of the agricultural production – say, for a beef farmer, it is less than probably two steers at market. We are having those conversations, particularly through this debate, about making sure that there are a range of measures that we are looking at for farmers. We do value them. We recognise that they feed us. We want to make sure that we can be there with them in the good times and, unfortunately, as it is right now, some of those harder times.

Bev McARTHUR: It is just a bit hard to hear. What did you say in relation to a beef farmer?

Jaclyn SYMES: The advice that I have in relation to a beef farmer and what I said was that the levy as a percentage of operating costs of an average farm is very small. The average increase on a farm is equal to about –

Bev McARTHUR: What is an average farm?

Jaclyn SYMES: I have gone through this before, Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: So what is an average beef farm, Minister?

Jaclyn SYMES: I do not have the advice in front of me about an average beef farm, Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Can you find it?

Jaclyn SYMES: It is not part of the bill.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: If farmers are forced to scale back or walk away, can you tell us what modelling the government has done on the impact that this levy will have on food production and food prices? I still have not had an answer to that question about modelling the impact on food production and food prices if farmers are forced to walk away.

Jaclyn SYMES: I answered that, Mrs Hermans. The impact on fruit and vegetable prices when a disaster hits is significant. We want to make sure that we are well resourced to ensure that farmers can recover when the worst happens to them, and that is part of the intention of this levy.

Ann-Marie Hermans: On a point of order, Deputy President, the question is actually on the government's modelling in terms of the impact this levy will have for those farmers that have to scale back or walk away. Obviously if they scale back and walk away, they will be paying less. Has the government done the modelling on food production and food prices and the impact that this will have on farmers that do have to walk away or reduce their farms and their stock?

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: I do not think that was a point of order. I think you have just repeated and clarified the question.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs Hermans, unfortunately, you cannot simplify the decision of a farmer to walk away or destock and attribute it to this levy. Right now farmers are seeking advice from Agriculture Victoria in relation to making decisions about their stock and the like because of the drought. There are a range of factors for farmers to make informed decisions about their businesses and their personal circumstances.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Treasurer, I am actually trying to understand the modelling that the government has done in terms of food prices and food production. Could you please help us to understand the modelling that the government has done in terms of the impact that this will have if areas are no longer farming areas now and they are being reduced – regardless of how. I do not want to hear about the drought again. I am not asking that question, in all due respect. The question is about the modelling that the government has done on food production and food prices. If farmers are producing less, what modelling has the government done on the impact of this levy, if it has that effect?

Jaclyn SYMES: With respect, Mrs Hermans, I have answered your question.

Sitting suspended 6:29 pm until 7:32 pm.

David DAVIS: I am conscious that we have had a short break and we are back into it. I want to start on a slightly new topic within the bill on clause 1. This is the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee report, and SARC has had quite a bit to say. Clause 2 of the bill provides when it comes into operation. It broadens the purposes of the Fire Services Property Levy Act 2012 (FSPL act) and inserts definitions including 'farm land', 'single farm enterprise', 'funding recipients' and so forth. It repeals section 9A of the Fire Services Property Levy Act 2012, which provides that a person could apply for an exemption in relation to a single farm enterprise in certain circumstances. I see when I look at the statement of finances in chapter 5, table 5.2, page 186, of the budget last year the fire services property levy exemption for municipal single farm enterprises – and this was an exemption from the current levy – was \$9 million a year. It seems that this disappears. One question I have is: what happens to the \$9 million? Then I want to understand which group we are talking about there.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, you were referencing clause 2, which is where I got stuck looking for what you were talking about.

David DAVIS: I am doing this straight out of the SARC report too, so I am just interested to understand some of these points. I thought it was worth covering the SARC report in the main clause.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, can I ask you to break your question down? We are having trouble deciphering exactly what you are after.

David DAVIS: If I just take it from the SARC report on page 10 of the *Alert Digest* No. 4, March 2025, it repeals section 9A of the FSPL act, which provides that a person could apply for an exemption in relation to a single farm enterprise in certain circumstances. I am trying to understand what group that is, who that is, how many of them there are, where they are – that is my first set of questions.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, I would bring your attention to clause 15, which inserts new section 20A, which replicates that provision. It has been transferred to the new bill by virtue of section 20A. So it is not repealed, it is moved.

David DAVIS: So it is replaced?

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes.

David DAVIS: So which group of people are we talking about there? What is the –

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, again, it says it there in the section. Do you want me to read the section to you? Okay:

- (1) A person is entitled, on application to the relevant collection agency, to an exemption from the liability to pay the fixed charge part of the levy amount in respect of a parcel of leviable land if –
 - (a) the parcel is one of 2 or more parcels of land that constitute a single farm enterprise; and
 - (b) an exemption is not claimed in respect of at least one of those parcels; and
 - (c) in the case of a single farm enterprise which is occupied by more than one person, an exemption is not claimed in respect of more than one principal place of residence.

David DAVIS: How many are there – how many people, how many circumstances that fit that description?

Jaclyn SYMES: I do not have those details on me.

David DAVIS: Are you able to take it on notice? We are just interested to know exactly how many there are and how much the exemption is intended to cost.

Jaclyn SYMES: It is just the same as it currently is, Mr Davis.

David DAVIS: I just wanted to hear that. And I just want to talk about the section 85 that is inserted. Why did the government feel it necessary to insert a section 85, removing a well-established set of rights under the Victorian constitution? What is the administrative reason? Why are we removing rights against decision-making?

Jaclyn SYMES: Government have made a policy decision and applied a similar approach to similar pieces of legislation.

David DAVIS: Did the government have any estimates of how many cases it was likely to encounter, how many times people were to appeal to the Supreme Court or the like?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, I can just confirm that it is intended to continue as it has under the previous system.

David DAVIS: But actually, Treasurer, we have now got a vastly expanded tax that is going to be much more impactful, and the concern I would have is that for incorrect decisions, honest errors or

capricious decisions made on these matters, taxpayers will not have the ability to appeal to the courts – that is the truth, isn't it?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, I will take that as a statement, but this limitation is necessary. As I explained in similar types of government policy, it is around ensuring efficiency, allowing government to efficiently determine and collect revenue. It would not be the case if the Treasurer's annual determination were reviewable. This is pretty common practice in relation to legislation such as this.

David DAVIS: If an error is made in the determination or in the assessments that are made for people, what steps does that taxpayer have? What steps or remedies does that taxpayer have?

Jaclyn SYMES: For what?

David DAVIS: If a decision is made and there is some difficulty with the decision, do taxpayers have some legal recourse to review the decision?

Jaclyn SYMES: Taxpayers can challenge the valuation but not the rates that I set.

David DAVIS: And how will you set the rates? What steps will you take in setting the rates? How will you decide what rate is to be set?

Jaclyn SYMES: We have forecast our expectation in relation to the gazettal of rates. But as I have explained today, following consultation with VFF and others, the rates for primary producers are being reduced in line with the feedback we have received.

David DAVIS: It is true, Treasurer, isn't it, that in the financial cycle next year you could just simply decide on a very high rate for one or another category?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, you are straying outside of the bill, because rate setting is not covered by the bill. Like a number of responsibilities of the Treasurer and indeed other ministers, I am required to consider matters like the annual funding requirements of each of the funding recipients and such matters. But that is not a matter that is contained in the bill.

David DAVIS: Notwithstanding that, this bill contemplates a much higher rate of taxation than has hitherto been the case.

Jaclyn SYMES: The bill does not.

David DAVIS: Well, I am just saying that is the reality of what is going on here. You are putting out a very high rate. Now, perhaps you would like to explain exactly how you have arrived at those rates. That would be my question. How did you arrive at these particular rates, and how can that be reviewed, if at all?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, this line of questioning is outside of the bill. I would encourage you to come back to the contents of the bill. That is the purpose of the committee stage. The Treasurer has always set the rates in relation to the existing levy, and that will be transferred to the new one.

David DAVIS: With respect, the section 85 aspect is in the bill. It is part of the bill.

Jaclyn SYMES: I have explained that.

David DAVIS: You have. I am just saying you have set rates, but how does one challenge those? In this model –

Jaclyn SYMES: It is the same model.

David DAVIS: But this model is contemplating a much higher rate of taxation. That is what you are introducing – a higher rate of taxation. How did you arrive at those new rates? How did they come around? Did you just dream them up? Who invented them? Was it like the Ten Commandments and you found them in the desert? How did you arrive at these numbers?

Jaclyn SYMES: To answer within the confines of the bill, my house amendments go to the issues that you are referring to in the fact that the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund cannot raise more than what the emergency services need, for instance. But in relation to the setting of the rates, that is not a matter for this bill except for the section that we have discussed. I have answered your questions in relation to that section.

David DAVIS: With respect, it is a matter in this bill in the sense that the decisions that are made are not reviewable, are not able to be challenged. That is the whole purpose of the section 85. It removes the ancient rights in our constitution to seek a review of decisions, in this case a minister's decision, in the Supreme Court of Victoria. Now, the section 85 crushes that right. That is what it does – it removes the right to challenge that decision.

Jaclyn SYMES: The right did not exist. So I am removing it?

David DAVIS: No. But I am just saying now you have got a new situation coming where there will still be no right to challenge because this new legislation has that approach, but you are contemplating a much heavier burden of taxation. So you have got a minister making heavy decisions, and there is no review. These are much heavier taxation levels, and there are differences in how this has been struck. Now, I am just asking a simple question: how did you arrive at these decisions? Was it some sort of dream, or was it tablets on Mount Sinai? What was the thing that enabled you to come to the new rates that you are proposing to strike? I note you have said today you are going to tweak some of the farm rates, but this actually raises the question even further: how are these rates derived?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, there is a lot of advice that goes into these types of decisions. As has been revealed in the draft rates that were released by the former Treasurer, the average house is seeing an increase of around \$1.25 a week. We are certainly looking at the farmer rate, as I have indicated, and taking feedback in relation to that. There are a range of considerations that go into these matters, but I am not going to have further conversations about something that is outside of the bill. I have answered your questions.

David DAVIS: Let us be very clear here. A set of decisions has been made on rates. We have tweaked one of the rates in the last 24 hours, so leaving that aside – and any reduction is welcome, but it is a very modest movement as I understand it – this bill crushes the right to review your decision.

Jaclyn SYMES: No, it does not. It replicates the former bill.

David DAVIS: No, but this is actually what it does. No-one can challenge your decision at law. No-one can say that you have made a wrongful decision for capricious reasons, in error. I do not know if you know the *Oswestry* case in Britain many years ago. This was about a decision-maker who made a set of decisions that no reasonable minister could make or could be seen to make. So there is actually case law on this sort of decision-making. But this of course crushes the right of anyone to appeal against your decision, your allocation of these capricious rates. These are new, they have been struck higher, and my question is: why? What is the basis for the particular rates that have been struck? We know that they can be unstruck now and changed –

Bev McArthur: And how did you come to that decision?

David DAVIS: That is another question. There has got to be some answer to how you arrived at these decisions. For example, let me be clear here: you must have had a brief or some advice from the department. I do not actually think you dreamed it up, and I do not actually –

Jaclyn SYMES: I was not the Treasurer at the time.

David DAVIS: Okay. So a different Treasurer made these decisions and you have stuck with them. You have just modified this one a little. Can we see the brief on which he made that decision to strike a rate which is now going to be put into law? Can we see that brief, please?

Jaclyn SYMES: No, Mr Davis. Executive privilege and the protection of frank and fearless advice would be consistent that I would –

David Davis interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: I would refer you to the new divisions of the bill that set out some of the things that would be considered in relation to the emergencies and volunteer funding levy – the annual charge, the things that must be considered. I think if you look at that, you will see some of the issues that the government would be getting advice on and considering in relation to levy setting. Clause 13, for example, goes through the fact that you should look at the annual funding requirements of the funding recipients in the levy year in which the determination is made, any likely changes to the funding requirements for the funding recipients in the following levy year, any surplus financial assets for the funding recipients, any shortfall in the collection of the levy, the administrative costs of collection agencies in performing functions and any other matter that the minister considers relevant to the proper determination of the levy rates. So that would give you an indication of some of the material that would be presented to me, or any Treasurer, in relation to determining the rates.

David DAVIS: I thank the Treasurer for shedding some light on some of the matters that were considered, and I would ask the question: were those matters considered in this case by the former Treasurer? Can you answer that?

Jaclyn SYMES: Absolutely, because he sought that advice from the then Minister for Emergency Services.

David DAVIS: Can we see that advice from the emergency services minister on this matter?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, I will not be furnishing documents as to the nature of what you have requested. I have taken you through the considerations, and some of it is on the public record in relation to the budgets of the agencies. You actually read them out to me right at the start of the debate, so a lot of that information is already at hand.

David DAVIS: I am just still very concerned that we have got a new taxation regime, a heavier burden. Rates have been struck, as we have heard now, by a former Treasurer and modified today by the current Treasurer in relation to one class of property, but we still have no formal notes or information about exactly how that decision was arrived at. For example, we could be nervous that it might have been a weak budgetary position that drove the decision of the then Treasurer to strike this rate. Can the Treasurer rule that out or indicate if there was another matter that was involved?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund is proposed to 100 per cent go to emergency services. I cannot be any clearer than that.

David DAVIS: We understand the destination of the money that will be raised from a range of taxpayers across the country – every piece of land in the state of Victoria, all 79 councils and probably French Island, which I do not think is in a municipality, so there will be another zone there. Right across the state the rates have been struck, and what you are actually arguing here, Treasurer, is that the taxpayers and the Parliament are in some way not entitled to see the minister's decision here. These are massive new rates, and the taxpayers of Victoria are not entitled to see the reasons and decisions that the then Treasurer made. That is not satisfactory in my view. You may wish to comment on that. Perhaps you can tell us whether you think it is satisfactory for a new and high tax to be levied without an explanation for how that rate has been struck.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, when items are gazetted these are the types of questions that would generally be addressed. I think, as I have indicated, the scheme is designed to not have a huge impost on ordinary home owners – those people that have a mortgage and have their one house and do not have investment properties and the like. We are trying to be as fair as possible across the board in relation to capacity to pay. That is why I have taken feedback in relation to farmers and their concerns that the rate was too high. That is why I have forecast a change to that. But, Mr Davis, there is nothing

different in the rate setting under this proposed model that was not in existence in the previous model, and it will be my responsibility to explain the rates to the public when they are set.

David DAVIS: Sorry, are you saying that you do not need to explain the rates?

Jaclyn SYMES: No, I said I will.

David DAVIS: You will. But we have already had some determinations, and we have not had that explanation as to how that has been set. You are pointing to future conduct, and I would welcome that if that is true. But I do not think we have that information now.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, I was taking you through some of the considerations in rate setting. It is exactly what I was doing, and I would again point to the fact that this is a matter that happens outside of the bill. At the time of gazettal I am sure that people will ask for an explanation, and I will be able to answer that then, not in the context of this bill.

David DAVIS: These rates have been set for this period, and even though you have now listed some of the matters to be considered, what we do not know is: were those matters considered? Were they determinative? Was it another set of things that drove the decision? We just simply do not know that answer. I think it is wholly unsatisfactory, and I am happy to put that on the record. I think capricious decisions made by the former Treasurer do not fill me with confidence. It is a bit like his penchant for doing Treasurer's advances. He blew it up to \$12 billion in Treasurer's advances. We all know that –

Jaclyn Symes: On a point of order, Deputy President, Mr Davis is providing a lot of commentary. We are here to take questions on the clauses of the bill, and if we can stick to the bill, I would appreciate that. We are just getting some thoughts and feelings from Mr Davis, and I would appreciate it if we could come back to questions on the bill.

David DAVIS: In response, as I was saying, I am at the point on this where I have asked the questions and the answers are unsatisfactory in my humble view, and I am putting that on the record. I am not intending to pursue it any further, as I was indicating a moment ago. But I think this is a major flaw in the process. I think a section 85 statement removes the capacity of a taxpayer or a class of taxpayers to challenge the determination or decision of the Treasurer in this matter. If that is the case, I just think that is a troubling outcome. I know your point is there was a similar section 85 statement previously, and the truth is there are section 85 statements in other pieces of legislation, but I do not think it is regarded as best practice at all. I think this is materially different because of the scale of the new tax take and the clobbering of certain classes of taxpayer.

Nick McGOWAN: Just to aid my understanding, is it correct to say that concession card holders will not be entitled to either a rebate or a reduction in the tax of any kind?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, concessions for the rebate – sorry, can you be clearer?

Nick McGOWAN: Concession card holders – would they be eligible?

Jaclyn SYMES: Would they be eligible if they are accessing and they are a volunteer?

Nick McGOWAN: I heard you state earlier 'if they were a concession card holder'.

Jaclyn SYMES: Accessing the rebate as a volunteer?

Nick McGOWAN: Just because they are a concession card holder.

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes, concession card holders will still be eligible, as they are under the existing framework.

Nick McGOWAN: Just to be clear, is that under the hardship provisions or is that under a separate exemption model?

Jaclyn SYMES: It is not a hardship provision, it is a concession provision that already exists.

Nick McGOWAN: Just to assist in my understanding, because rates obviously can be paid either in one instalment or in multiple instalments, does the government receive its payment, its tax, in the first instalment and therefore is it not relevant whether there are multiple instalments or one?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, my advice is that if the local council received payments in instalments, they can pass it to the state in instalments also.

Nick McGOWAN: Treasurer, could you also assist me in terms of the inputs that arrive at the calculation of \$1.25 per week?

Jaclyn SYMES: I went through this earlier when I was explaining that the current rate of \$191 is proposed to increase by \$65 a year. If you divide that by the weeks of the year, you get around \$1.25.

Nick McGOWAN: The reason I ask is that on the State Revenue Office website, if you use the calculator at the moment, it would appear, is it not correct, that they have already updated their website as though this bill had already become an act? Is that your understanding?

Jaclyn SYMES: I have not been on the SRO website for a little while, so I do not know the answer to that. I would suggest that when you are on the website they have a range of calculators that enable you to plan and the like, so there could be some forecasting assumptions there to help people plan and the like. They have got some useful tools on there; I suspect that is what that would be.

Nick McGOWAN: I also assume, because I think the figure you gave earlier on was \$650,000 – is that not correct?

Jaclyn SYMES: Can I just clarify? I just received some advice. The website is not pre-empting the outcome of the bill, and the calculator is not currently usable for the 2025–26 rate. I have had some people with fast fingers just check that.

Nick McGOWAN: While we are checking figures, I am just curious – and further to member Davis's points – how did you arrive at the 95 per cent figure for the CFA?

Jaclyn SYMES: It was just based on consultation and feedback and advice in the normal way that government determine policy.

Nick McGOWAN: Treasurer, it seems like a very vague response, with all due respect. I know that from time to time when I have worked in government – it has been a while, admittedly – there is, as Mr Davis pointed out before, a great number of details, a number of briefs that go into making these considerations, unless of course they are completely random and they are completely made up. Ninety-five seems to be quite strange. Nonetheless, what was the basis for the decision to make the Victorian SES 95 per cent?

Jaclyn SYMES: I will see if there is anything to add other than what I have already said.

Mr McGowan, the whole purpose of the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund and the levy is about funding our emergency services, and in relation to the CFA and SES, giving them a guarantee of 95 per cent of their funding is representation of a sustainable funding model. They cannot drop below that in relation to allocations from the levy, so it is futureproofing these organisations and giving them the confidence of the sustainable funding model. That is the purpose of the legislation and why those rates are set relatively high.

Nick McGOWAN: That would be true, Minister, were it not for the fact that this is not actually guaranteeing their funding at all. All this guarantees is the proportion of funding, as you have illustrated and pointed out to us earlier this evening. That is to say, it is up to individual ministers to determine, in conjunction with the Treasurer and the Premier, their relevant budgets. So it does not actually guarantee anything. All it guarantees is that whatever that budget is, 90 or 95 per cent of it will come from a certain source as opposed to consolidated revenue.

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes, Mr McGowan, you are not wrong. It would be good if we could futureproof these agencies. They have been subjected to Liberal government cuts in the past. We believe that the 95 per cent levy is a good way of discouraging that type of behaviour.

Nick McGOWAN: I suppose it begs the obvious question: why not 100 per cent for all?

Jaclyn SYMES: Why wouldn't it be?

Nick McGOWAN: Yes.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, it was never contemplated to be 100 per cent to ensure contributions from consolidated revenue remain.

Nick McGOWAN: That leads me nicely on to Triple Zero at 47 per cent. Poor Triple Zero – why were they so lowly in the sights of this government? What did they do wrong?

Jaclyn SYMES: Sorry, I was giving an indication of how the fund could be allocated. The only legislative requirement is in respect to the SES, FRV and CFA. There is no legislated percentage requirement in the bill for the other agencies. I was just earlier forecasting a spread of around 47 per cent that could be allocated to the others that would accommodate the legislative requirements for the first three.

Nick McGOWAN: So, to use your phraseology, Triple Zero has no guarantee of any funding level whatsoever from this new levy?

Jaclyn SYMES: What has been important to many of the stakeholders is that the intention is that the funding is dedicated to frontline service support. It is not intended to be the entire budget of an agency such as TZV. It can be up to 95 per cent of ERV and TZV, but it has not got a minimum requirement.

Nick McGOWAN: I want to take a step back for a moment, because some of the preamble, certainly from this afternoon or this evening, related to the increasing need. If I look at the SES incidents – because part of the rationale for this great big new tax of course is not only climate change but the draw on the volunteers and so forth – the SES incidents are actually down 20 per cent over the last three years, according to the annual reports. In 2021–22 there were 36,975 incidents, in 2022–23 there were 32,985 incidents and in 2023–24 there were 31,512 incidents. Doesn't that make it very difficult to justify the rationale that more is needed if we are doing less, notwithstanding we cannot necessarily generalise about the incidents themselves?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, it is without a doubt that the requirements on VICSES volunteers have increased. If you visit any SES station, they will tell you that. If you attend any local SES, they will tell you how busy their call-outs are. Between 2009 and 2013 VICSES averaged around 20,000 call-outs a year. Over the last three years they have averaged around 35,000 call-outs a year. You would appreciate that there would be a spike in turnouts during a flood event, and the commitment and work of the SES volunteers during the floods was phenomenal right across the state where all of those impacts were. We had floods and storms literally on the same day. We have had SES volunteers turning out any time of night, and that is certainly the motivation for the government to support and recognise VICSES which really started off this whole conversation about a new levy. I am very proud to support the Victorian SES, and I am very proud to give them recognition in legislation that has been reserved just for our fire services. They are just as valued, and I think expanding this to them is something that everyone should get behind.

Nick McGOWAN: I agree. We find some common ground at least in respect to how proud we are of our SES services and the job they do. No-one is questioning that for a moment. But you have just quoted back to me the average of I think you said 35,000 over the last three years. Now, that is not borne out in the annual reports from the SES themselves, and I have just quoted those last three years,

with the highest being in the order of 37,000, the lowest being 32,000. I was never great at maths, but my quick maths tells me it is certainly not 35, no matter which way you cut that pie.

Jaclyn SYMES: My advice is that it is. But nonetheless, Mr McGowan, when you are talking to SES volunteers that are responding to floods and storms, they attend incidents with other emergency services in terms of supporting road closures and the like, and a lot of units are also turning out as road crash rescue units in relation to their expertise in relation to that. I do not question the amount of work that they are putting in as unpaid volunteers.

Nick McGOWAN: Well, as we speak, some 33 brigades have decided to go off line, so I think certainly in respect to the CFA that speaks volumes. Minister, your amendments may well take care of what I am about to ask you, but do you still intend for this bill to cover the cost of the emergency management commissioner?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, the bill goes through the funding recipients and has a definition of who is covered, and it includes the emergency management commissioner and Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) and indeed some roles of the State Control Centre, which is obviously also in the remit of the commissioner. It also is, in relation to those general related activities, looking at Emergency Recovery Victoria, the emergency alert program and the emergency management operational communication program, which is also known as EM-COP.

Bev McARTHUR: Treasurer, I will just go to unintended consequences of this egregious tax bill – some might say totally predictable consequences. Right now I am reliably informed that three-quarters of Victoria is unprotected; 130 brigades are off line, and the rest are likely to go off soon. Volunteers that you are saying you are supporting have walked. Do you accept and have you factored in this unintended consequence of the fact that CFA brigades are now putting down their tools and are no longer servicing the role that they have so generously and bravely served for so long as a consequence of your actions today?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, I understand that there are questions and concerns around the bill, and I think that is what we are trying to work through the evening. As I have indicated, this is about providing increased funding for our CFA brigades. This is about supporting our volunteers. We value our volunteers. This is about respecting them, and I maintain that is the purpose of this bill. In relation to the crossover with farmer concerns, I acknowledge and have listened to those concerns, and we have responded in relation to some changes. I acknowledge that people would like to see further reductions, but it is also why we have announced some drought measures, with more information in relation to that to come.

Bev McARTHUR: It has gone up. There are now 160 brigades off line, and it is rising. So what are you going to do about that, Minister?

Jaclyn SYMES: I appreciate your representations, Mrs McArthur, and I do not mean in any way to make light of or dismiss them, but it is not relevant to the bill, nor is it relevant to my role as Treasurer. We will continue to have conversations with people who will be beneficiaries of this legislation about changes in relation to the increased funding, the new trucks, the additional training and the like, and I am sure the matters that you have referred to will be a matter for the CFA and the minister. But there is no advice that I have in relation to those matters that are connected to the bill that I can share with you at this time.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, that is most disingenuous. These firefighters – volunteer firefighters – are also largely farmers. That is why they are laying down their tools, because you have imposed this egregious tax on them. But what are you going to do? If the volunteers walk off the job, what are you going to do to keep Victoria safe?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, I have spent a lot of time with volunteers across a lot of agencies, including the CFA, and what motivates them to turn out and volunteer is commitment to their

communities and wanting to protect them. As you have indicated, there are farmers who are also CFA volunteers that I think you are suggesting are potentially the ones that are acting in the manner that you have suggested. That is why we have provided exemptions for farmers who are also CFA volunteers. We are very much aware of the amount of time and effort that farmers in particular go to in protecting their communities, because there are very often a large cohort of CFA volunteers who are farmers. That has been something that has been front of mind in the development of this policy, and it is what brought about the exemption in the first place, the particular consideration of farmers who are also CFA volunteers.

Bev McARTHUR: I do not think you get it, Minister. These volunteers, whether they are farmers, tradespeople, people in towns or wherever they are, are walking in unison in opposition to this tax. And not only the volunteers but the professional firefighters as well are furious about what you are doing in this space. You have not told us what you are actually going to do to keep Victoria safe. When the volunteer brigades are no longer in operation, are the professional firefighters going to be able to pick up the load of the volunteer firefighters as they walk off the job?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, I have answered your question, but I will just reconfirm that the funding that would be raised in relation to changes that we are proposing will be about funding new trucks, new technology, ensuring that people have the latest radios, equipment, uniforms and the like. That is the intention of raising the funds, so that we can support our emergency services.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, it is appalling, quite frankly, that you think you can buy people off by saying they can get a new uniform or a new truck, and that is what you are doing to ensure that we keep Victoria safe. You just do not get the picture. But I will go to another aspect of it. We have now got wives of farmers at home making sure they get the guns out of the gun cupboard and store them somewhere else, such is the state of concern in many of these rural communities. What are you going to do to keep everybody safe, actually, but particularly the people that are most egregiously affected by this tax, two of whom have already taken their lives this week? What are you doing with this tax, which is compounded by the state of the economy and, in rural Victoria, the drought and the cost rises that have been incurred exponentially in so many areas, largely brought about by everything that happens in this city? There are now people that are very concerned about their own personal safety and the safety of their loved ones. Exactly what are you going to do? Are you just going to continue to charge ahead and make sure these people pay this tax or are billed for this tax, regardless of what the circumstances are? And saying that you have reduced the farm rate by some tiddling amount is disingenuous as well. I mean, how did you come up with that figure? But really – what are you going to do for the families that are now very concerned about their own safety and that of their loved ones?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, as someone who grew up in regional Victoria, most of the funerals that I attended before I turned 30 were people who were under 30 who had either committed suicide, many of them farmers or children of farmers, or died in car accidents. I am fully aware of the mental health impacts in many regional areas. That is why we have a range of measures as a government that is always looking at mental health support, suicide prevention and the like. That is outside of my responsibility, but you referenced the impact of drought on people's mental health. As part of any drought package you always have programs that ensure that people who are struggling know where to get assistance. I am wanting to respond to that because you raised it. Of course I want to respond to that, but it is technically outside the scope of the bill. But I did want to give you the courtesy of responding.

Nick McGOWAN: I want to take us back to earlier this evening when Dr Mansfield asked you a question with respect to the numbers of firefighters, the firefighters ratio. Minister, perhaps I got the impression from you that you are not sure where this came from – certainly that is the impression I was left with. Yet here I have a copy of a Fair Work Commission document; I am happy to table it and provide it to the house. It is from the government's lawyers – I am sure you are familiar with it,

Treasurer – and in this they specifically include as part of their discussions and part of the negotiations clause 5, which says:

Clauses setting out minimum staffing numbers and/or incorporating Schedule 1 which sets out the Minimum Staffing Charts.

This document is dated 17 November 2023, so this is something I am sure you are aware of. That, I would suggest to you strongly, is where it commenced, if not some time before that, in fact. Is it the fact that this government has now – I trust – walked away from any attack on professional firefighters and their staffing ratios?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, my confusion was that I was unclear as to how anyone could surmise from the bill that there was any intention to reduce minimum firefighter numbers in relation to FRV. I just cannot see the connection between that and this bill. The response that I provided to Dr Mansfield was because I had heard commentary about the connection, I wanted to make it very, very, clear that that is not what the bill is doing, and more broadly there is no intention from the government to reduce firefighter numbers.

Nick McGOWAN: Well, it would be logical, would it not, Treasurer, given that this bill, as you say, actually allows for the guaranteed funding of FRV now up to 90 per cent? I know it was less than that yesterday, but it is now up to 90 per cent. And it would be fair to say that professional firefighters, the United Firefighters Union and the community generally, extrapolate that if you are providing that guarantee, then of course it is relevant to the staffing ratios, because staffing ratios go a long way to determining the budget, as you well know.

Jaclyn SYMES: No, Mr McGowan. In relation to FRV's funding, it is a flat 90 per cent. But again I am more than happy to put on record that there is no intention of the government through this bill or any other mechanism to remove safe firefighter staffing levels. It is just not something that we have contemplated.

Nick McGOWAN: Treasurer, you may also be well aware that with the Fair Work Commission, the evidence from the FRV themselves – not the union, but the FRV themselves – is that they are actually receiving less than they require in terms of their budget. That is, their budget is insufficient. This goes to my point earlier on that if a minister – not you, but a minister in conjunction with you perhaps and in conjunction with the Premier and the other subcommittees of cabinet – decides that the budget will be reduced, you may be funding it by 90 per cent, but that 90 per cent may still be a reduced budget which is insufficient for that organisation to run efficiently or properly.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, you and I have had a conversation on this topic, but the FRV budget is not part of the contents of this bill – only the contribution to the budget, not the setting of the budget.

Nick McGOWAN: I spoke a little earlier about the emergency management commissioner. What is the wage of the emergency management commissioner?

Jaclyn SYMES: Again, that is not relevant to this bill, and I do not have that at hand.

Nick McGOWAN: I fail to see how the emergency management commissioner is not relevant to this bill given that his or her title is specifically mentioned and his or her wage is specifically allowed by this bill. It is entirely relevant to this bill, I would suggest to the house.

Jaclyn SYMES: Their wage is not relevant, Mr McGowan.

Nick McGOWAN: Perhaps you misunderstand. I am not interested in the individual concerned – that is, the person's name and their identity. This is a position of appointment. The scales themselves exist, as you and I both know, in terms of the schedules that exist. All I am simply asking – and I am sure it is something that is publicly available; it should certainly be in the briefing notes – is what that

wage bracket is for the emergency management commissioner, given that you are proposing that this bill, should it become an act, will fund that position.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, I am sure that it is publicly available information. I do not have it to hand, and I do not consider it relevant to the clauses of the bill.

Nick McGOWAN: Treasurer, that is sort of like saying it is not relevant to any of this, the extent to which we are debating any of this. It is entirely relevant when you are asking the people of Victoria, through this bill, to fund this position and your justification for that is because it is somehow integral to emergency services.

Jaclyn SYMES: But it does not fund 100 per cent, so what relevance is the actual quantum?

Nick McGOWAN: Well, it is 100 per cent. The quantum is 100 per cent, because it does not differentiate. We know that already. What we do not know is the actual the quantum of it. We know it is 100 per cent in terms of the proportion. We do not know the quantum.

Jaclyn SYMES: I will look it up for you. Let us google it and see what comes up.

Nick McGOWAN: Please do, Minister. While you are doing that, Minister, you might also look up my previous questions: the chief executive of Emergency Management Victoria and of course the Secretary of the Department of Justice and Community Safety.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, I was going to be helpful and google it for you. I might leave you to do that for the wages of the people that you are interested in. The ESVF is not funding the positions. It puts a proportion of funding from the fund to go into the agencies that I have listed and that are clear to see in the bill under the funding recipients.

Nick McGOWAN: Minister, perhaps we are just not understanding each other, but this bill clearly funds, as you have said – funds, because they are listed as recipients, as you rightly say – these three positions. It is entirely appropriate, I would say – indeed it would be prudent – to share with this committee the value. We know that there is no differential in terms of whether it is a percentage, because it is the full 100 per cent, so all we are asking is for you to share and be transparent with the Victorian people as to the quantum – that is, how much are the Victorian people now going to be paying an emergency management commissioner? Regardless, it is not a question of their identity, their personal identity, the chief executive to Emergency Management Victoria and the secretary of the department. I also ask this in the context of earlier today, when in response to a different question you told us this was not about funding the bureaucrats, and yet here we are funding the chief bureaucrat for the Department of Justice and Community Safety.

Jaclyn SYMES: No, we are not.

Nick McGOWAN: I will read the words to you:

...the Secretary to the Department of Justice and Community Safety to the extent that the Secretary is performing functions in relation to emergency management ...

What does that mean, Minister?

Jaclyn SYMES: As I explained earlier, the Secretary of the Department of Justice and Community Safety has a range of roles that can be performing functions in relation to emergency management. The example that I gave is that in terms of procuring equipment such as radios, that would go through her office. We have committed to providing a detailed breakdown of how these funds will be attributed if the bill is passed. We are not funding the salary of the secretary of the department of justice. In relation to your questions about individual salaries, I do not have them at hand. They are all publicly available material, because executive band salaries are on the public record.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: I acknowledge that we have a former member of the Council in the gallery. I would like to welcome Daniel Young, who is now a councillor with the Macedon Ranges

shire, and also acknowledge that we have the mayor of the Macedon Ranges shire, Cr Dom Bonanno, with us as well. Thank you for being here.

Nick McGOWAN: Treasurer, what is the estimated monetary value of all the exemptions?

Jaclyn SYMES: Of the rebates?

Nick McGOWAN: Correct.

Jaclyn SYMES: I take your point on the rebates. Let me just triple check.

Mr McGowan, if you would like to move to another question, we are just verifying the numbers, and I will provide that for you. We have the information.

Nick McGOWAN: Treasurer, how many Victorian households will pay the new tax?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, the same amount of houses that do now.

Nick McGOWAN: We can make it Melbourne metro if that makes it easier.

Jaclyn SYMES: Let me find out.

Mr McGowan, sorry to circle back, but we are estimating \$26 million in rebates, and in relation to the number of Victorian residential properties I will just get a figure on that as well. They are just looking that up.

Nick McGOWAN: Is it \$26 million per annum?

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes, it is.

Nick McGOWAN: Just to clarify, earlier there was a \$4 million figure you gave; was that \$1 million for each of the four years? That was in respect to the council support fund.

Jaclyn SYMES: That is an initial \$4 million to work through the implementation plan, and I have committed to having ongoing conversations if anything further is required.

Nick McGOWAN: Just to be clear on that, that is \$4 million, one would guess, in this coming budget as a one-off with no further payments in the outlying years thus far. Is that correct?

Jaclyn SYMES: Councils are already paid administration fees for the collection. The \$4 million is in addition and above that, for implementation issues.

Nick McGOWAN: I would like to understand more about the appliances. You listed today the appliances for the CFA. I wonder whether you can also list where the appliances for the FRV will go.

Jaclyn SYMES: I am not in a position to provide that information, Mr McGowan. You might want to consult with the Minister for Emergency Services, who would seek that advice from FRV.

Nick McGOWAN: Treasurer, you do disappoint me on this one, I must say, if I am being very frank. How is it that we can tell the CFA precisely where their tankers and other appliances will be, yet when it comes to our professional firefighters, who are in dire need of new vehicles, new appliances, we cannot tell them where one of their appliances will be?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, we have received advice from CFA and SES in relation to the first locations that they would be allocating vehicles to. We have not yet received that advice from FRV.

Nick McGOWAN: Treasurer, can you outline for the house when the CFA vehicles will actually be put into commission – that is, up and going, not ordered?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, that is not a matter for me, it is a matter for the Minister for Emergency Services. This bill will facilitate the funding, but I can assure you that in relation to the CFA there are trucks being built at the moment from previous allocations of funding. What is good

about this, if this bill passes, is this is a minimum amount for the three agencies to create a rolling fleet strategy so that they can ensure that their contracts and procurement are best value. But in relation to the details, that is not a matter for the Treasurer, it is a matter for the agencies in conjunction with the minister.

Nick McGOWAN: Well, while the people of Victoria are funding these new vehicles for the CFA, I proffer to suggest to you that it is a fact that not one of these appliances will actually be delivered before the next election is due, and that is the end of next year given the timelines, given where the chassis have to go, given the fit-out, and that no Victorian will see even one of these new appliances until well after the next election at the end of next year.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, as I have indicated, there are currently trucks being assembled. I have visited the –

Nick McGOWAN: Yes, but they have been pre-ordered, Minister. What about the ones we are talking about funding now with this new funding?

Jaclyn SYMES: Well, they do not even have the funding yet, Mr McGowan.

Nick McGOWAN: That is right. So my presumption is correct, isn't it, Minister?

Jaclyn SYMES: What I was asked for in consultation with a lot of communities, particularly country communities, was a bit of evidence in relation to, if there are going to be new trucks, where they will go. So we asked the agencies where their first priorities would be. But what will hopefully happen as a result of this funding, if the bill is passed, is that, because we will have a greater ability to lock in contracts and have ongoing procurement, that might speed up some of the processes for us. But there are trucks currently in construction, and in addition, if this bill passes, there will be guaranteed more.

Nick McGOWAN: I would not want any Victorian thinking they are having more of anything coming off the production line anytime soon because of this bill or the funding that you are now providing in addition to that that exists.

Jaclyn SYMES: We have not even passed the bill yet.

Nick McGOWAN: So my point is correct, Minister. I think we are in furious agreement, one might call it. Can you tell me what or how many appliances the new \$40 million for the FRV will acquire? I am sure you know that, having just ticked off on the \$40 million.

Jaclyn SYMES: Different trucks and different appliances cost different amounts of money. As I have indicated, hopefully a benefit of having the guaranteed minimum yearly fund is it will enable procurement practices to be better value for a dollar when you know that you can do that. But again, this is not a matter for me; it is a matter for the Minister for Emergency Services. I obviously just have some experience in this regard.

Nick McGOWAN: Treasurer, I appreciate your answer, but nonetheless if I came to you with an ambit claim for \$40 million and was not quite prepared to tell you what I was going to get for that \$40 million, I am sure you would be encouraging of me or maybe you would give me a pat on the back and say, 'Good try, Nick.' I am sure that in coming to this decision your advisers, before you ticked off \$40 million over four years, told you how many appliances, notwithstanding they have a different value and some may be different units. But I am sure someone has a calculator in the department of treasury. How many appliances have you been told or advised you will be able to purchase for that \$40 million?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, it would be a matter for FRV to decide what orders they would want to make.

Melina BATH: Treasurer, you just mentioned \$4 million that is to go to the support for councils. By my calculation that is about \$50,000 per council if everyone takes it up. I find that a very paltry amount, first of all. Secondly, you made a comment that there are admin fees – councils can collect admin fees from the government. How many councils, or what proportion of councils, have taken up that admin fee so far?

Jaclyn SYMES: All 79 do.

Melina BATH: All 79 collect the fees from the government – compensation for taking up the fire property services levy now. Is that your response?

Jaclyn SYMES: That is my advice. Because they collect the fee, there is an admin cost that is passed on to the state and paid. That is what I am told. I think in relation to the \$4 million, as I indicated, that is a guaranteed initial amount MAV have suggested. Perhaps closer to \$7 million is what they would be requesting, and I am happy to have further conversations with them.

Melina BATH: Will that \$4 million be in the budget papers next week, or is it still to be announced at some later stage?

Jaclyn SYMES: I am just getting advice in relation to the money that we have attributed to MAV. As I said, I have given you an indication of those conversations and the results of those conversations. But I will be talking to them about what they need, and that money will be made available.

Melina BATH: Local governments provide essential emergency services and disaster response services. We have seen it in terms of the bushfires, and we have certainly seen it in terms of floods. Did the government, the Treasurer, you as the former emergency services minister, make any comment about why local governments would receive some portion of this new tax in terms of receiving their share as emergency and disaster response providers?

Jaclyn SYMES: I certainly recognise the role that local governments play in relation to disaster management. Also, it is certainly one of the first requirements and asks of a council when they have experienced an emergency to seek funding for recovery offices, and that is something that has been fairly common practice, at least in my time anyway. There is funding that is often provided to local governments in emergency contexts. In the context of emergency services and their roles, they are not included in the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund, but that does not mean they cannot receive money from the government for emergency services related roles.

Melina BATH: But that quantum of money and proportion et cetera would be sporadic and not locked in. You yourself, I think, were talking about, in defence of the SES – and we all defend the SES – the increase in demand, but at no time did you think to apportion any of this new fund, this new tax, to local government disaster and emergency services.

Jaclyn SYMES: No-one has advocated for that to my knowledge, Ms Bath, either. But again, we are in conversations with MAV. We are talking about funding for them in their work with councils, and as I have indicated, there is strong evidence of many councils receiving funding from government in relation to emergency management activities, particularly in recovery.

Melina BATH: Minister, when this levy, and it was introduced in about 2012 under a very different scheme from what we are seeing tonight –

David Davis interjected.

Melina BATH: Exactly. There was a reduction, a rebate for pensioners that was 50 per cent. Some time a little while ago, under the Andrews government at the time, it became a \$50 concession for pensioners. Is that still going to exist, or is it going to go back to a 50 per cent reduction?

Jaclyn SYMES: Ms Bath, my advice is that you are incorrect and that it is always been \$50.

Melina BATH: I will not argue the point, but is it going to remain only at \$50?

Jaclyn SYMES: We are replicating the concession rate from the existing scheme.

Melina BATH: Even though the actual fee is much greater, and the capacity of pensioners is not necessarily increasing to cope with that rate – that is a statement. My next question is: Treasurer, can you just provide some context? I have done a little bit of research on what you spoke about when I was out of the house for a few minutes earlier on. If a pensioner cannot find that full amount of money, they cannot pay that, they pay a proportion of their rates plus this tax. How is that divided between the state government, as the collection point, and the council? How is that proportioned?

Jaclyn SYMES: I have answered this in a previous question, I think, but proportionately.

Melina BATH: By ‘proportionately’, do you mean two-thirds to one-third? What does that look like? Can you explain that to the house?

Jaclyn SYMES: Ms Bath, the definition of ‘proportionality’, I guess, is what applies here. If they pay half the total, we would get half of our ESVF and they would keep half of their rates.

Melina BATH: Does the government pay the levy on its Crown land?

Jaclyn SYMES: Ms Bath, I have just been advised that when the fire services property levy came in, to ensure a contribution from the state’s consolidated revenue to fire, that was deemed to be in lieu of exempting Crown land from being applicable for the government to pay the levy against. We have not changed that.

Melina BATH: We know that 77.5 per cent is the current levy proportion for the CFA budget and 87.5 – and that is on the website; it is all very clear – and it is going to go up to 95 per cent for the CFA budget. So there is an increase through this new tax of 17.5 per cent. Will that be passed on in full in this year’s coming budget? There is an increase. Will that 17.5 per cent be passed on in full?

Jaclyn SYMES: Ms Bath, just to be clear, this legislation will not be in effect by next week. We have got to raise the funds before it can flow.

Melina BATH: Minister, will the CFA receive that 17.5 per cent increase to its budget then in the first year of the new levy’s operation, or will the government simply reduce the contribution from consolidated revenue?

Jaclyn SYMES: No, we will be passing on the funds from the levy. I have made that very clear.

Melina BATH: In relation to that, what happens then if there are a whole lot of people all over this state who cannot actually afford to pay the full quantum of this tax and therefore the government only receives 75 per cent? What happens then? How is that going to be attributed? Will the CFA, for example, still get the full quantum of that 17.5 per cent increase?

Jaclyn SYMES: It is a rather hypothetical question that you are putting, Ms Bath, but the percentages will be set in legislation. The agencies will receive 100 per cent of their budget. Any shortfalls of any nature would be made up by consolidated revenue.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Is it possible that some of this money that is going to be taken from this fire levy is going to be spent on engaging lawyers to remove mandatory or legally enforceable fire and emergency protection in any areas in Victoria?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs Hermans, I have gone through this extensively with Mr Davis in relation to how the funds are provided to fund agencies. We have got reporting requirements that will be part of the amendments that I will move. But in short, to answer your question, the answer is no. I think I explained how it would be reported to Mr Davis.

Nick McGOWAN: Treasurer, in the same way your government compels state schools to spend money they might have in the bank, what guarantee do the SES and the CFA have that those charitable

contributions they have received will not be subject to a spend order before they receive funding from the state government under this legislation?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, that is not directly part of this bill, but what I can say is that brigades and units will continue to raise funds. We have heard from the SES in particular that they would like to spend a little bit less time raising funds, and we are certainly hoping that that is an outcome of this legislation. But what is always an incentive for communities to continue to provide charitable donations if they are able to is the ability for brigades and units to access the volunteer emergency services equipment program grants. VESEP grants are a two-for-one grant program. They are oversubscribed each and every time we open them. They are for the CFA, SES and Life Saving Victoria, who will continue to be eligible for VESEP. They can apply for funding with that ratio, and they get things like chainsaws, vehicles, upgrades to facilities and the like. We would always encourage that continued practice.

Nick McGOWAN: I suppose that leads us on to the obvious question: would those grants, should they receive them, then form part of the compulsory component? That is, would those grants form part of the 95 per cent?

Jaclyn SYMES: No. It is a separate commitment to funding double the current VESEP grants round. It is separate to the budget of the organisations. It is a government funding bucket.

Nick McGOWAN: One of the concerns held by the SES and the CFA of course is, however, that it will be increasingly difficult for them to do fundraising given that the public will now be well aware that 95 per cent of their budget is provided for by the state government. Is that not a very real fear?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, you are asking me for an opinion. In relation to the funding of these agencies, we want to be in a position to provide them more funding so that they can spend more time on the tasks and arguably not having to do as much fundraising. Therefore it would be an obvious consequence that there might be less money coming in through fundraising. We are hoping to plug that with the funds from the ESVF so that they can concentrate on the things that they want to rather than too many sausage sizzles.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Given that earlier, Minister, you mentioned that 73 per cent of the funds would be coming from the metropolitan region and 27 per cent from regional Victoria, meaning that the majority is likely to be coming, I would say, from Fire Rescue Victoria, is the government confident that FRV will be able to maintain their minimum firefighting safe staffing levels to perform their duties in a way that they are required to do by law and through their agreements with the government and meet their key performance indicators with this additional expense?

Jaclyn SYMES: Very clearly asked and answered.

Bev McARTHUR: I have just received information from the captain of my local CFA brigade, who has told me that they are currently in talks about taking their tanker off line, directly affecting my family and our property. You would be aware that out in our area it is tinder dry; it is ready for fire at any stage. So, when you have finished discussing with the box, what are you going to do now to keep our property and all the properties under the Bookaar fire brigade safe, given that that brigade is going offline? I have got an update for you as well, Minister: it is 200 brigades that are off line now, increasing by the minute. These brigades are off line, not available to provide services for us, and we are in an extraordinary situation of dryness and fire-prone influences at the moment. So what are you going to do to keep us all safe?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, the advice that you are putting to the chamber is not the advice that I have from CFA, nor is it confirmed by the CAD system.

Bev McARTHUR: Are you saying that the CFA brigades that have registered to be off line are not off line? Is that what you are saying? Is the CFA head office misleading you?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, you are stating something that is not the advice I have. CFA is monitoring and responding, as is required, and as I said, the advice that you are putting to the chamber is not consistent with the advice that I have received as recently as a couple of minutes ago.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, can you please table the advice you have received on this matter?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, you are the one that is making the claims. Would you like to table the information that you have in relation to the brigades? And I can have it verified.

Bev McARTHUR: Absolutely.

Nick McGOWAN: Treasurer, if it assists the house, what I understand is occurring is that headquarters, CFA headquarters, are trying to put them online, and they are taking themselves offline. So it is somewhat of a tennis match. So the advice you received, while technically correct, is incorrect because of course they are taking themselves offline before headquarters can insist they come back online.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, it was the figures that Mrs McArthur was using. I was not disputing that there are some that are off line. It was the numbers that she was saying, and CFA are monitoring and responding as required. I would ask members to come back to the content of the bill, please.

Richard WELCH: Treasurer, a number of times in this process you have made the statement that the purpose and the reason for this bill is to fund new technology, new radios, new vehicles and new uniforms. There is still a chance that this bill will not be passed. So are you saying that if this bill does not pass these things will not be funded?

Jaclyn SYMES: No, I am not saying that, Mr Welch. What we currently have – and this would be reflecting on my experience as the former Minister for Emergency Services – is that the current fund brings in an amount of money, and we have always gone over and beyond from consolidated revenue. We will continue to do that whether this bill passes or not. If it does, we will have additional funding to do some of the things that we have mentioned are our top priorities more quickly.

Richard WELCH: So if this bill does not pass, these things will still be funded?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Welch, we will have to make some reassessments in relation to what would be able to be funded and when. It is fair to say that the fund will assist with more trucks, more equipment and more training. Obviously it brings in the SES for the first time. If it does not pass, we will revert to what we are currently doing. I would always like to do more. This is what this bill will enable us to do.

Richard WELCH: So what I discern from that is that there is not enough money in general revenue to fund the same quantum of assets and investment.

Jaclyn SYMES: Correct.

Richard WELCH: So, why isn't there?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Welch, again you are asking me to have a discussion which is outside the bill. Coming back to the bill, the bill is a way of ensuring a sustainable funding model for emergency services as the pressure on them continues to grow and grow. I have been on the ground where we have to assist people, we have to make their houses safe, we have to provide temporary accommodation. That has a cost to the state, that has a cost to taxpayers. In relation to having a dedicated way of raising funds that can be attributed to these efforts, we can do more, because we need to do more.

Richard WELCH: So if this bill does not pass, those things will not be funded?

Jaclyn SYMES: Asked and answered.

Richard WELCH: I would just like to ask a couple of questions on the ratios, and I am sort of struggling with the figures around it. The funding formula now is around 95 per cent of budget, 90 per cent of budget et cetera. So these are fixed ratios, but the budget itself of course is a variable. But you must fund to the ratio. This overlaps a little bit with what member Bath mentioned, but I wanted to clarify further. So, should budgets go up, and –

Jaclyn Symes: On a point of order, Deputy President, I am very sorry to do this to you, Mr Welch, but you are asking the identical question to Mr McGowan. Mr McGowan, you can confirm that. I am not going to answer questions that I have already answered, because we will be here forever if everyone just gets to repeat questions that I have already answered.

Richard WELCH: Apologies if I was straying into duplicated territory.

Jaclyn Symes: Sorry, others have done it as well, so I did not mean to pick on you.

Richard WELCH: I will go to several questions that would have followed on from where I was starting. It seems to me that if you are pegged to the ratio, and you must fund to the ratio, when we now have a land tax mechanism to levy tax for that purpose, what in the bill prevents the government from migrating other functions that are traditionally drawn from general revenue, rebranding them, reclassifying them as emergency services and progressively migrating them out of general revenue, out of that column and into the emergency services column? It would give the government licence to increase the levy further, because it is under the heading of 95 per cent and you must meet the ratio.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Welch, I think it is quite difficult to rebrand frontline services in the manner in which you have suggested. The bill is entirely about supporting emergency services. We are certainly not planning on just calling things emergency services roles to be able to pay for them from the fund. We will always be spending more than what the levy brings in on emergency services. We will always be drawing on consolidated revenue, and we will be drawing more when there are events that happen, because of the recovery cost. But in addition to that, we are making amendments that are obligating the government, and any future government, to outline what the levy has paid for.

Richard WELCH: So, for example, the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) spend a lot of money and do a lot of activity in the area of bushfire prevention. Were you confirming that bushfire prevention or other ancillary functions of that nature would never go under this category?

Jaclyn SYMES: We are proposing to fund parts of FFMVic, but it is only the emergency management functions that fall within emergency management that we would be proposing. I would put to you that this is very clearly outlined in the bill.

Richard WELCH: I would like to ask a couple of questions about exemptions. We have covered them, but I do have a slightly different angle to pursue. If I start to repeat, please pull me up. Under the regulation the minister will have the ability to exempt other land through the regulations. I would like to clarify a few of those. Does the minister intend to exempt Scouts and Guides from the tax?

Jaclyn SYMES: The categories are based on the valuer-general's categorisation of the land, not who owns the land.

Richard WELCH: Yes, but your capacity to exempt remains.

Jaclyn SYMES: Do you mean the land or the exemption from the rebate?

Richard WELCH: The minister has the power to exempt certain land from the tax.

Jaclyn SYMES: Can I get you to bring me to the clause that you are referring to so we can go through that?

Richard WELCH: I believe it is 10(1)(d) of the principal act. The minister can exempt:

... any other land exempted by the regulations.

Jaclyn SYMES: Where in the bill do you want to take me to?

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Sorry, I am a bit lost as to where we are now.

Jaclyn SYMES: I was asking if I could have a bill reference just so I can be very clear about the question that I am being asked. I was just asking for a bill reference so that I can check the clause that he was seeking clarification on, that was all.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Perhaps we will go to a question from Mr McGowan while Mr Welch finds his references.

Nick McGOWAN: I have a question here from a firefighter, and I will call the person firefighter H so I do not disclose his or her identity. In the October–December quarter FRV spent over \$1 million in legal fees. Most if not all of those funds were spent on external lawyers engaged by FRV to litigate FRV firefighters. The Victorian government is currently attempting to remove any say firefighters have over their uniform, their equipment, their OH&S practices, their safe work systems and work on the fireground. The Victorian government is funding the litigation to remove the mandatory fire protection that every community protected by FRV has. The government is on the record about this. This is the government's position as put by the now Treasurer's lawyers when she was Minister for Emergency Services. Will the funds from this levy continue to finance this litigation to remove these conditions that Victorian firefighters have?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr McGowan, in a similar vein to Mr Welch, can you bring me to the clause that you are seeking to ask this question about?

Richard WELCH: The reference pertained to the principal act, the Fire Services Property Levy Act 2012. It is section 10(1)(d) of that act, in which the minister has the power to exempt land. I guess the precursor question is: does this power continue?

Jaclyn SYMES: I appreciate that, Mr Welch. That was helpful. I can confirm that there is no change, and that remains.

Richard WELCH: On that basis, does the minister intend to exempt golf clubs from the tax?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Welch, I do not have any representations in relation to those matters. In consideration of any requests, I would take advice. I have not received that question.

Richard WELCH: Does the minister intend to exempt private caravan parks from this tax?

Jaclyn SYMES: Similarly, Mr Welch, I am not in a position to give you answers to questions such as this, because they have not been sought. It is certainly not something that has been brought to my attention. If the bill is passed, I can seek some advice in relation to any of the past exemptions. It has not been a consideration.

Richard WELCH: There are a number of other entities that I think would be falling into this sort of ambiguous state. I can mention some of them rather than go through them one by one: agricultural societies, racecourses, churches, RSLs, Buddhist temples, Sikh temples, Hindu temples, any other faith buildings, universities, independent schools, unions, Indigenous corporations with large landholdings, solar and wind farms, forest plantations –

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Welch, if I could interrupt, there is a public benefit category of land that some of the things that you listed may fall under. In relation to you continuing with further examples, my answer to your previous questions will be the same for the list that you are reading out.

Richard WELCH: Then the question would be: in any of these cases – some may be in, some may be out – has there been any modelling on the forgone revenue of excluding this large number of potentially exempt entities?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Welch, it is not my advice that there is currently exempted land by the section that you are referring to, so we have not made any regulations that I have been advised of in relation to that section.

Richard WELCH: Will there be any mechanism by which organisations of this nature will be able to apply for those exemptions?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Welch, as I said, I have not received any representations on this matter. I can consider future requests at a future time.

Richard WELCH: Just in relation to council invoicing – I know I am late to the game and there have been a number of questions in that territory that have been covered, but I again have a slightly different question on some of them – is there any requirement for councils to invoice residents for this tax in unison with rates and other levy notices, or may they do it separately?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Welch, it is currently in the act that it has to be as part of the rates notice; I just do not have the section on me.

Richard WELCH: For those who cannot afford this tax, if a scheme of arrangement is made with the taxpayer, is the scheme of arrangement with the local council or will it be with the government?

Jaclyn SYMES: Sorry, was that in relation to hardship provisions of councils?

Richard WELCH: Yes. Well, I guess hardship provisions, inability to pay, default – any of those where a scheme of arrangement may be entered into for it. Is the scheme of arrangement with the government or with the council?

Jaclyn SYMES: With the council. Councils have existing hardship provisions, delayed payment plans, the ability to waive. There are slightly different arrangements across councils, but they would be responsible for that.

Richard WELCH: Now on to a separate subject around the impact on business: what modelling was done on the impact on businesses' working capital ratios arising from this tax?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Welch, obviously the bill was subject to development by the Department of Treasury and Finance, who provided a range of advice in relation to the development of that bill. That was considered before cabinet consideration.

Richard WELCH: Did that modelling take into account different kinds of businesses which operate to different kinds of financial cycles? For example, primary producers are often seasonal, and sometimes that season is actually not annual; it is every three years, even though the tax is yearly. What is the government's modelling or provision around these realities?

Jaclyn SYMES: As I said in previous answers, rates and the current property levy can be applied annually. They can be paid in instalments, and like many tax requirements, whether they are federal or state, they are done on an annual basis.

Richard WELCH: I think there is no argument that working capital and cash flow is limited for many businesses – farmers and other businesses alike. Will you have any objection to farmers borrowing money in order to pay the tax until their financial cycles and seasonal cycles provide cash flow for funding?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Welch, as you would be aware, this is a levy that is calculated based on land value. As we went through before, councils have a range of measures in relation to payment plans or

indeed delayed payment and waivers and the like and would be well versed in dealing with these issues with their local farmers.

Richard WELCH: That may be so, but there will be instances when those arrangements themselves cannot be met. Would you have an objection to farmers borrowing to meet their obligations in this regard?

Jaclyn SYMES: With respect, Mr Welch, what business decisions people make is not something that is the subject of this bill. I think I have answered your question with some of the flexibility provisions that we have been made aware of that the councils have. In relation to support for the implementation, we are providing funding for MAV to work through a range of issues as these changes come into effect.

Richard WELCH: In the event that a business cannot meet their overall tax burden, state and federal, should they pay the ATO first or should they pay the state government first?

Jaclyn SYMES: I will not be drawn on giving advice on individual matters, Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: But under law, which takes precedence?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Welch, this is about a framework setting up a new Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund. In relation to the decisions that people make, that will be a matter for them.

Richard WELCH: Because in essence land tax is an appropriation of working capital from business, it is very pertinent to the application of the tax and it is a very foreseeable consequence of the tax. In examining the bill it is a very, very relevant question to ask about what happens to businesses' working capital. When a business runs out of working capital it then starts eating into cash flow, and when it runs out of cash flow it becomes insolvent. So it is a very relevant question. In the event of a business insolvency – there will be cases where this tax leads to insolvency – where in the creditors queue will the government be for the payment of unpaid land tax, and will it be ahead of other creditors?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Welch, this is not relevant to the bill, and I am not giving advice about business decisions.

Richard WELCH: With respect, that is not a business decision, that is a state revenue decision that would be governed by your laws. Do you take precedence over other creditors in claiming unpaid levy under this tax?

Jaclyn SYMES: We have already established that councils will be responsible for management of this, Mr Welch. We are getting a little bit repetitive.

Gaelle BROAD: I know that this tax raises over \$2 billion over the next three years. It is going to have a significant impact on households right across Victoria, particularly – more so – in regional areas. Was consideration given to alternative funding models or reducing major projects like the Suburban Rail Loop, which still remains unfunded?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs Broad, I just take issue with the reference to regional areas being impacted more. Not to dispute that there is an increase on primary production land, which has been the subject of conversation, but just to be very clear, in relation to properties it is on the value of the property. In fact there are a lot of regional houses that are valued a lot less than city houses, so therefore the amount owing on some regional houses is relatively small compared to some city houses, for example. It is based on land value. I just wanted to make sure that was clear.

In relation to how this has come about, I think I have been very clear. I have been on the record about this. This is about asking for a contribution from the community to ensure that we can adequately and sustainably fund our emergency services. That is what the purpose of the funding will be – 100 per cent of the funding – which will be the base funding or core funding, which will then obviously always

include consolidated revenue on top of that. This is about ensuring that we can do more than we currently are in relation to supporting our amazing emergency services.

Gaelle BROAD: Obviously you are still planning to go ahead with the Suburban Rail Loop, but was consideration given to putting money that would be going into some of these major projects into funding emergency services?

Jaclyn SYMES: You are conflating capital funding with service funding, Mrs Broad, and your line of questioning is outside the bill.

Gaelle BROAD: I think it is very relevant, because this is a massive new tax. Priorities are very important in this place, and it is important that we are also a house of review in this process. Looking at the model that was chosen over other options, I understand Victoria's rates have been set higher than other states. Can you explain why?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs Broad, the rates are set not by the bill, they are set by gazettal, so outside this bill. I have actually been quite generous in conversations about rate setting despite the fact that it is outside the bill, but I will pull it up considering I have answered numerous questions on that.

Gaelle BROAD: Treasurer, I would just like to talk about the timeline. This bill is effective from 1 July. Councils issue rates notices in August for payment in September, or it could be later depending on when someone decides to pay it. Given your plan is for this new tax to apply this year, when will councils be advised of primary residences by the State Revenue Office?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs Broad, I think what you are getting at is non-principal place of residence changes. That is not proposed to change until July next year, because we are acknowledging that that is different to the current setting arrangements. The first 12 months will be basically just the rollover of the change in the fire property services levy to the emergency services property levy. The change that requires some information from the SRO is in relation to the following year, and we will continue to work with councils on the implementation of any of those changes. But we are of the understanding that the SRO will be able to share with councils in time to meet any of the information they need, because the bill gives them the power to do that.

Gaelle BROAD: I just want to understand: councils will be responsible for calculating the levy?

Jaclyn SYMES: Their systems already do.

Gaelle BROAD: It is a very different system given that this has exemptions in it which relate to someone having their primary residence exempt or something else that they choose.

Jaclyn SYMES: No, the exemptions are the same and the concessions are the same. It is the rebate that is different. Councils were very clear that they did not want the administration of that, which is why government services will be doing that.

Gaelle BROAD: You mentioned earlier – and I do not want to put words in your mouth, so please explain if required – that people could upload their ID and get the rebate straightaway. Can you explain who actually pays the rebate? Is that the government?

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes, the rebate will be paid from the government. Just to be clear, it is not uploading your drivers licence; you will be entering a volunteer ID number that will be provided to you by either the CFA or the SES.

Gaelle BROAD: You mentioned that the rebate would be paid straightaway, but if someone is actually – I guess I am trying to think of what else. I will go to another question. Earlier you mentioned you anticipated about 40,000 exemptions. Is that correct?

Jaclyn SYMES: The box is nodding. That is what I said, yes.

Gaelle BROAD: I understand there are about 51,000 CFA volunteers and 5000 SES volunteers, so can you explain that discrepancy?

Jaclyn SYMES: Because you have to be a home owner.

Gaelle BROAD: If someone receives a rates notice with a levy amount and they do not agree or they think there is an error, what is the process for handling that complaint?

Jaclyn SYMES: Nothing in the bill changes that.

Gaelle BROAD: Sorry, what is the process?

Jaclyn SYMES: Querying your rates notice – there is nothing in the bill that changes that. Particularly if you are wanting to question the valuation of your land, for example, this bill has no impact on that.

Gaelle BROAD: You mentioned prior to the dinner break that there will be a pause for LGAs experiencing drought. Can you please list those LGAs and how long you expect this pause to apply?

Jaclyn SYMES: That will be a matter that the Minister for Agriculture will address.

Gaelle BROAD: You mentioned that some matters were delayed. Can you advise what they are? You mentioned earlier that there are some issues that would be delayed, but it was not explained as to what.

Jaclyn SYMES: I do not know what you are talking about.

Gaelle BROAD: I will go to another question. Why are large-scale solar and wind energy facilities classified under the lower public benefit rate category, while primary producers face high rates?

Jaclyn SYMES: That is a decision that was made by the previous Treasurer. My understanding of his rationale is in relation to ensuring that we are doing everything in our power to reduce the impacts of climate change. Reducing emissions is one of those measures, so it is consistent with the purposes of the bill.

Gaelle BROAD: You mentioned levy exemptions for active emergency services volunteers – and I have read your release, and you mentioned members and life members – but I have heard from CFAs where life memberships do not exist because they have always had that agreement in place. So if someone has been volunteering for 30, 40 or 50 years but they are no longer active or they are not a life member, what does this mean for them?

Jaclyn SYMES: Are you referring to people that in effect are life members but just have not been recognised as such? I can certainly speak to the CFA or SES in relation to that. Again, I confirm it is not our intention to be mean-spirited in relation to people's access to the rebate if you are a genuine volunteer or have given the service such as you have described.

Gaelle BROAD: My understanding is you get the rebate straightaway, but can someone then choose not to pay the levy or their rates notice? What happens then?

Jaclyn SYMES: I think I have addressed this, Mrs Broad. What I was indicating was that for ease of access to the rebate we will be requiring people to demonstrate that they have the liability. You will just have to show your rates notice and correlate it with your volunteer number. That is how the rebate system will work, and it does not change what actions you take next.

Gaelle BROAD: I will move to another question. What concurrent advice are you giving to councils about their rate cap this year? Because I know in December last year the state government put a 3 per cent cap on council rates, whereas this will increase dramatically. Will there be this new levy plus a further increase on rates?

Jaclyn SYMES: Not a matter for me and not in the bill.

Melina BATH: Many of the councils, Treasurer, have written to us, as you know, and they have probably written to you. There are some specifics from my area, the likes of South Gippsland, Wellington and Baw Baw, and those councils are going to have a \$5 million increase in addition to costs on their communities with this tax. You are the Treasurer and you also have the honour of being Minister for Regional Development. What measures will the government take to prevent economic decline in our regions? If we consider right across the state, you are looking at millions upon millions of dollars not being in the coffers of our local businesses and communities, because they are going into your state revenue.

Jaclyn SYMES: Ms Bath, as was explained, the levy will require the average residential property to pay about \$1.25 a week. This will be a particularly relevant figure for regional areas because of the property prices. That \$1.25 a week will go to investment into emergency services that will flow back to communities such as the ones you have listed.

Melina BATH: I read from Rural Councils Victoria, saying that \$139,025,000 extra will be taken out of rural communities each year. You can quantify it down to a dollar, but the actual reality is, when we have got a cost-of-living crisis, when we have got drought in many parts of the area, you are still ripping millions of dollars out of these regional areas. What will you do to ensure that these regional areas are not suffering by a redirection of your funds?

Jaclyn SYMES: Ms Bath, it is country communities that unfortunately bear the brunt of a lot of emergencies and natural disasters. Not only do we want to ensure that the existing emergency services personnel and volunteers can respond; the expectation of communities is, rightly, that state governments are there to support their recovery. That recovery is becoming more and more frequently called on and is incredibly expensive. We want to make sure that we can be there over and above where we currently are as we continue to experience more and more of these tragedies that are happening to communities. A lot of country communities, unfortunately, will be the recipients of a lot of the generous funding because it will be in response to events that happen in their communities.

Gaelle BROAD: Treasurer, can you please advise the house of the operating budget for the State Control Centre, Emergency Recovery Victoria, Emergency Management Victoria and forest fire management, and what percentage of that operating budget will be covered by the levy in the next financial year?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs Broad, I do not have all of those figures in my folder. They all are publicly available material. The only organisations that will have minimum percentages of their entity budgets guaranteed are Fire Rescue Victoria at 90 per cent, CFA at 95 per cent and the SES at 95 per cent. There is no minimum requirement in relation to the other agencies that you have listed.

Gaelle BROAD: The operating budget for the next year is not publicly available. Are you able to share it or find it?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs Broad, I am not in a position to give that information to you right at this moment, but I think it goes in conjunction with the amendments that I am seeking to put later in the committee stage about ensuring that there is accountability and transparency in relation to where the funds go.

Melina BATH: Treasurer, you said earlier, I think in response to a question from Mr Davis, that when you were emergency services minister and when the former Treasurer was the Treasurer, that Treasurer consulted with you in regard to the setting of the rates for this Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund. Can you expand on what you meant by that? In doing that, you should be potentially able to share with the house the budgets for each of the agencies in this 2025–26 budget, if you had already been discussing with the former Treasurer the setting of these rates.

Jaclyn SYMES: I have just answered that question previously. What I was interested in as the former Minister for Emergency Services was ensuring that SES would be included. SES spoke to me

about wanting to fund training and wanting to fund trucks; CFA were interested in trucks. That is the type of information that I fed into the development of this policy.

Melina BATH: So when you were having a discussion with the former Treasurer, and you were discussing CFA and FRV and VICSES, you did not actually discuss anything to do with Triple Zero, with EMV, with Forest Fire Management Victoria. You just consolidated your conversations around that, or did you have any discussion around Triple Zero and the other core government services?

Jaclyn SYMES: Well, yes, of course, Ms Bath; all of that was discussed in the development of the policy and indeed was taken to cabinet as the Minister for Emergency Services, who had been involved in regular budget discussions over several years. As a minister you always want to get more money for your portfolio, so I was all interested in the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund and the benefits that it would provide to the agencies that I was responsible for at the time.

Melina BATH: If you know if there is a projected cost in the forward budget for this next year, \$610 million, you should be able to provide to this house a breakdown of what those other agencies will be allocated.

Jaclyn SYMES: We will be reporting that; I have said that.

Gaelle BROAD: Treasurer, we received an opposition briefing and had questions on notice come back, and it talks about the variety of different farming structures and gives some examples. It talks about a farm that is owned by a company with four shareholders, a couple and their two adult children, who all work on the farm – all four family members are eligible CFA volunteers. The farm has a combined investment value of \$20 million made up of four titles, properties with separate valuations worth \$5 million each. In this case where a company holds several land parcels and has multiple shareholders who are eligible volunteers, each volunteer can claim the rebate for a different property if the property has a separate valuation. Because each family member has an indirect ownership interest in the four properties, the rebate cannot be claimed more than once for the same property. Now, it goes on with lots of different examples. It seems quite complex to me, but when people such as that example are putting in multiple applications for exemptions as CFA volunteers, who is responsible for auditing or compliance?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs Broad, in a similar vein to Mr Welch, I have answered this exact question, and I do not think it benefits the house to be repetitive.

Business interrupted pursuant to standing orders.

Jaclyn SYMES: As the Deputy President has made the call that it is 10 pm, pursuant to standing order 4.08, I declare this sitting be extended by up to 1 hour.

Melina BATH: You spoke in relation to those other services that have been funded in core revenue coming in and being funded through this tax. I am interested to understand what improvements you think that you will achieve in terms of forest fire management and the outcomes to benefit both the environment and Victorians by reallocating these funds. What improved services do you expect?

Jaclyn SYMES: Ms Bath, if you ask that question of Minister Dimopoulos, I am sure he would be delighted to tell you about his agency and the work that they do.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, can you confirm that you will be collecting \$610 million next year from this new tax?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, that is what has been forecast at the budget update.

Bev McARTHUR: Can you also confirm that that is basically the cost of getting out of the Commonwealth Games that are now being funded by Australia in Scotland?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, that is not relevant to the bill.

Bev McARTHUR: Treasurer, it is very relevant because it is exactly the same amount, it appears, that you are going to extract from farmers and people across Victoria paying this tax, which probably should be funded out of consolidated revenue as a whole anyway. But you have wasted that \$610 million because you stupidly mismanaged a Commonwealth Games project, and we are all being taxed because you failed to manage a Commonwealth Games project. It is absolutely appalling that now we are all paying an extra tax because you could not manage that. It is the same amount of money. Don't you find that egregious, Minister?

Jaclyn SYMES: I have answered a similar line of questioning. This is funding that will go 100 per cent back into emergency services and is not related to the commentary that you have taken us through.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, you will be lucky to have any volunteer brigades left at the rate you are going, at the rate they are deciding to abandon their stations tonight. I understand the Geelong brigade is off line. Imagine a regional city like Geelong, the second-biggest city in the state – that is now off line. We clearly are not being kept safe in this state as we speak, are we, Minister?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, in relation to the line of questioning that you are saying, I can give you some information. Again it is outside of the bill, but I can tell you that in relation to these matters I have received some advice that the pagers of those brigades and neighbouring brigades would still be paged, and they anticipate for an actual fire incident that it is likely that those volunteers would respond. We are also preparing a message to ensure that –

Bev McARTHUR: So we are all going to be kept safe?

Jaclyn SYMES: No, apologies. I will stick with my former advice that I gave you. I am a little unclear. I am sorry, I could not decipher that message, but that is the advice that I have been given. But in relation to this bill, Mrs McArthur, I would be happy to come back to the clauses.

Melina BATH: Treasurer, I have a pager from the CFA. There is one from Hume division, from Gippsland division, from Loddon Mallee division, from Loddon Mallee, Loddon Mallee again, south-west division, south-west division – and it goes on. We have got districts 24, 09, 18, 20, 02, 07, 06, 05, 04, 22 and 23 all off line in protest of this tax. They are all off line, Minister. It is actually happening now.

Jaclyn SYMES: There was no question.

Gaelle BROAD: Treasurer, will there be periodic reviews of the ESVF to assess its effectiveness and fairness, and will stakeholders have input in these reviews?

Jaclyn SYMES: I appreciate the question, Mrs Broad. Not formally, but it is something that I always think is prudent for government to keep an eye on. Obviously, because the Treasurer has to set the rates every year it is an opportunity to consider feedback and look at how it is working, so it is kind of a yes to the question that you asked. I am sure that people will be happy to provide me feedback on this if it rolls out.

Gaelle BROAD: And with such a review, what stakeholders would you seek to engage?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs Broad, I do not think you listened to what I said. I did not announce a formal review, I announced a process. I thought it was pretty clear.

Bev McARTHUR: Treasurer, I have been informed now that the state duty officer has been instructed not to talk to anyone. Can you confirm that the state duty officer has been gagged?

Ryan Batchelor: On a point of order, Deputy President, I am not entirely sure this line of questioning is relevant to the clauses of the bill.

David Davis: Further to the point of order, Deputy President, clearly Mrs McArthur earlier brought to the chamber's attention the matter of a series of brigades stepping out of action, and this was very clearly a consequence of this bill – a direct consequence of the steps –

Ryan Batchelor: The bill has not passed. How can there be a consequence of the bill if the bill is not law, Mr Davis?

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Mr Davis has the call.

David Davis: They are a consequence because they are in protest. The fact is there has been a rolling discussion for some time as this situation has worsened, and now Mrs McArthur has got information that the state officer has been gagged. This is extraordinary stuff. This is a government that is trying to close down this organisation in a very serious way if it is gagging the chief officer like that.

Jaclyn SYMES: What might be useful to the house on behalf of the Minister for Emergency Services, who has sent me these, are comments from the CFA acting chief officer Garry Cook:

CFA is aware that a number of brigades are currently off line this evening due to a lack of crewing.

This can happen for a variety of reasons and this can change rapidly, with brigades going back online as well.

We are continuing to monitor the situation to ensure brigades are notified of emergencies in their communities and additional brigades are responded.

Under the operational systems in place, when any brigade is offline, neighbouring brigades are notified and can respond, ensuring our communities are protected.

We expect that our brigades will turn out to protect their communities as they always have done in their time of need.

Those are the CFA acting chief officer's comments, which may be of assistance to the house. I would ask members to come back to the bill.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you for confirming that the brigades are off line. They are off line not through a lack of crewing in particular but because of what you are actually doing to them now. It is totally disingenuous to say that in the event of an emergency you are confident they will all be back on the job. I am sure they would be pleased to hear that, Minister.

Jaclyn SYMES: I read out a statement from the acting chief. It was not my statement.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Mrs McArthur has the call.

Bev McARTHUR: It is totally disingenuous. Minister, I have got a letter here from Commerce Ballarat and the Victorian Regional Chamber Alliance, who say no to the emergency services levy. These are two organisations – Commerce Ballarat is a large organisation representing all the businesses of Ballarat, and the Victorian Regional Chamber Alliance represents regional chambers from the whole of Victoria – and they say no to it. We have got this situation here with the chambers of commerce, the MAV and Rural Councils Victoria, and I will go through the list of councils that have written to me who are saying no, and we will wait to see what the MAV resolution is when it happens tomorrow. Do you not accept that all these organisations have some justification for saying that you have got this horribly wrong, or do you just totally disregard their concerns, Minister?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, I have received correspondence and engaged with many councils and stakeholders and taken on board their feedback.

Bev McARTHUR: Clearly you have not taken anything on board. I will go to the Moyne shire, who have asked for a call to action in regard to this tax. Many of them have similar concerns. They have asked to:

Develop a fairer funding model that does not disproportionately burden rural communities.

Shift levy collection responsibilities to the State Government.

Compensate councils for administrative costs if collection duties remain.

And that paltry \$4 million you talked about, which Ms Bath concluded was \$50,000 per council, would not fund a junior administrative officer to cope with the problems. Also, the problems that are going to occur when very concerned, frustrated –

Jaclyn Symes: On a point of order, Deputy President, this is getting very repetitive, and I would ask the member to ask a question rather than read out correspondence which is everything that has already been brought to my attention.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Mrs McArthur, is this new information?

Bev McARTHUR: Yes, it absolutely is. I will go through a list of councils that have expressed concerns. I want you to confirm that you reject all their propositions.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Perhaps if you could come to the question.

Bev McARTHUR: The Moyne Shire Council, as I have said, have expressed their concerns, their opposition –

Jaclyn Symes: On a point of order, Deputy President, I have received correspondence from a variety of councils and also the MAV, and I have responded to all of those pieces of correspondence. Mrs McArthur, if you are going to read out letters that I have already responded to, I would put to you that that is not a good use of the chamber's time. It is also canvassing issues that have been well discussed throughout the evening.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Mrs McArthur, perhaps if you could just phrase them in questions.

Bev McARTHUR: I would like to know what exactly you told the Southern Grampians shire, Corangamite shire, South Gippsland Shire Council, the City of Greater Geelong, the City of Ballarat, Loddon shire, Mansfield shire, Mount Alexander shire – and the list goes on. What exactly did you say to them in response to the concerns that they have raised?

Jaclyn SYMES: Asked and answered.

Melina BATH: In relation to the budget update from December, which estimates that \$610 million extra will be raised in 2025–26 and rises to \$765 million in the following two years, is this based on land value increases or projected increases in the respective rates?

Jaclyn SYMES: No, Ms Bath. That is based on the increased fixed charge for the non-principal places of residence, which is being delayed by a year for implementation.

Gaelle BROAD: Treasurer, you mentioned earlier that all councils are paid currently for collecting the levy – and I do not want to put words in your mouth. My understanding is that the state government does impose particular requirements, and if a council do not meet those reporting requirements they do not receive any funding. I just want the Treasurer to confirm if that is the case, that all councils receive payment if they collect the current levy, and if the same approach will apply in this case or if there will be ones that miss out, as they currently do, even though a council can collect the levy and return it to the state government.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs Broad, a council needs to collect the funding in order to be reimbursed or paid for by the state in relation to the administration costs. There is no change in this bill to the current practice in relation to that.

Gaelle BROAD: I would be interested to know how many councils have actually been paid for dispensing the fire services levy out of the 79.

Jaclyn SYMES: Since 2016–17, 17 have missed out on some of the funding for not meeting certain requirements. But if councils meet the requirements, then the funding flows; that is my understanding. If you have got a particular council that you would like me to have a look at, you can give me some information, perhaps, outside the chamber, and I can have a look at it.

Gaelle BROAD: So 17 councils have actually collected the revenue and given it to the government, but they have not received any payment for doing so.

Jaclyn SYMES: I do not have the specifics of what led to the administration costs not being passed on. It might be a different reason for different councils, but it is from 17 occasions. They are only obliged to report on what they have collected to be paid fees. They are basically integrity and accountability measures that they are asked to comply with.

Gaelle BROAD: Can you please provide the list of the 16 or 17 councils to the chamber?

Jaclyn SYMES: I do not have that at hand.

Melina BATH: Minister, what is the quantum of the savings to consolidated revenue with the removal of the costs for Triple Zero, FFMV and all of those other major entities now being funded through this tax? What is that quantum of savings?

Jaclyn SYMES: Ms Bath, this is not a transfer of consolidated revenue to the fund. Consolidated revenue will continue to contribute to our emergency services. I answered this question when I was talking to Mr Davis.

Melina BATH: Is it the fact that you know but do not want to share with the house that Treasury has done these costings but does not want to share it, or is it the fact that you really have no idea of how much these savings to this consolidated revenue will be because of that removal of funding from this tax?

Jaclyn SYMES: Ms Bath, this is all about ensuring that we are providing more funding to our emergency services.

Melina BATH: Minister, can you confirm what the new rate for the primary producers will be? You mentioned a new rate, but I just want to understand. I thought it was around 71 cents. Could you please confirm that?

Jaclyn SYMES: The proposal, as I have indicated, following consultation and feedback from others, is to reduce it from 83 cents to 71.8 cents.

Melina BATH: So from 83 cents down to 71.8, and I am assuming, with a quick bit of maths, we are looking at from a 189 per cent increase to a 150 per cent increase. How is that going to make farmers better off, when really that is just a little chip out of a very big wedge of impost that they are now going to bear in the thousands and thousands?

Jaclyn SYMES: I will take that as a statement, Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: On what basis was this reduction made – this per cent or two short? On what basis was that change made, Treasurer?

Jaclyn SYMES: Asked and answered.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, in the *Herald Sun* on 19 March you are reported as saying that rental providers ‘can afford to pay more’; they ‘generally have a higher capacity to pay’. Do you confirm that that is what you said?

Jaclyn SYMES: Mrs McArthur, what I said in relation to that question about the different rates is that generally – and I did not say always – people that have investment properties and holiday houses et cetera are in a better position to be able to afford more than somebody that has one home. That is generally the case but may not always be the case. I used the term ‘generally’.

Bev McARTHUR: But if these people are landlords – rental providers – they cannot actually increase the rent to compensate them for land tax and potentially this tax, so won’t that limit the number of rental properties that you need, that the Greens consistently ask for?

Jaclyn SYMES: As I have indicated, Mrs McArthur, the increase to a median home – so not talking about apartments and units that are commonly on the rental market – is \$1.25 a week.

Bev McARTHUR: For all the rural properties and farmers who simply will not be able to afford to pay this – many have actually left the CFA because they can no longer afford to even be involved in that; they cannot afford to pay this tax – how are you going to go after them to get the money, or are you just going to leave it to councils to try and be the debt collectors for your tax?

Jaclyn SYMES: I have answered this question.

Bev McARTHUR: If somebody cannot pay, are you going to force them to go into liquidation, insolvency?

Jaclyn SYMES: I have answered these questions.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, we take it that you are. So many people have written, so many people are concerned; they are stressed out. Here is an example:

Our business (family) paid \$3214.50 last year the Fire Services levy, the expected rise of 189% for primary producers will see the new Emergency Services Levy increase to \$9289.9.

Why do you think that is acceptable, and how do you think somebody is going to be able to afford to pay that, even without the drought, in the current circumstances? How do you actually expect farmers to be able to pay these increases?

Jaclyn SYMES: Continued repetition. I have answered these questions.

Melina BATH: Treasurer, I know we were talking about the CFA volunteers exemption being capped at \$5 million. I just want to understand if there is the same cap for SES volunteer properties. Is that correct? There is no differential between a CFA volunteer and an SES volunteer? That is all right. I just wanted to clarify that.

Jaclyn SYMES: No difference.

Richard WELCH: In clause 17 the bill amends section 62 of the principal act to insert the words ‘or the responsible entity’ after the word ‘Commissioner’. I am just seeking clarification as to why anyone but the commissioner of taxation would be raising these funds.

Jaclyn SYMES: My guess is – I probably should not guess, but I think it is in reference to DGS, because they will be administering the rebate. Does that make sense? Yes, ‘or the responsible entity’ would be referring to government services.

Jeff BOURMAN: I move:

1. **Suggested amendment to the Legislative Assembly –**
Clause 1, line 6, omit “and volunteers”.

I was contacted by Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, and I have also had this comment made by quite some number of the volunteer fires that I have dealt with. They feel that, of all things, the title is unfair and that it makes them feel like they are behind this. My amendments are basically changing titles. It does not change any of the rebates. It does not change any of the substance of what the volunteers will get. But they feel that the title is a bit unfair. I was reading the United Fire Fighters Union’s press release earlier, and they seem to have a similar view – I will not go too much into it:

... misleading, to dress this tax bill up as something that supports Victorian volunteers and emergency service workers.

So my view on this is to change the title, to change it all the way through – long title, short title. I just urge people, at least for the volunteers that feel they have been unnecessarily slighted, to support my amendment.

David DAVIS: I will just make a couple of comments. The Liberals and Nationals will support Mr Bourman’s amendments, so we will make it clear that that is our position. I do note with a wry smile that Mr Bourman made commentary a little while ago about changing the title of a bill, so there

is sort of, how can I say, a small ‘h’ hypocrisy, if I can put it that way, involved in that. But nonetheless we accept the arguments he has put here and the argument that volunteers have put that this is in effect trying to misuse the good offices of all the many volunteers across the state. And the extraordinary reaction that Mrs McArthur has drawn attention to tonight, where so many brigades are offline, is perfect evidence of that irritation and profound disappointment from many of those brigades. So in that sense we will certainly support it.

Jeff BOURMAN: I would just like to respond to Mr Davis. I am quite comfortable in my hypocrisy, Mr Davis.

Jaclyn SYMES: Seeing as we are doing it at the moment, Mr Bourman, obviously you would be aware that it does not impact the operation of the bill, but part of the intention of the bill – in fact what it exactly does – is to create a fund to support volunteer emergency response agencies, so we think that it is an appropriate title and it reflects very clearly the reality and the intention of the legislation. We will not be supporting your amendments.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: I do advise members that section 64 of the Constitution Act 1975 applies to this bill and note that suggested amendments have been circulated by several members. Standing order 14.16 sets out the procedure for dealing with suggested amendments, and this is one of those suggested amendments. The question is that Mr Bourman’s suggested amendment 1, which tests all his remaining amendments, be agreed to.

Council divided on suggested amendment:

Ayes (17): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Noes (22): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Suggested amendment negatived.

Clause agreed to; clauses 2 to 5 agreed to.

Clause 6 (22:40)

David DAVIS: I move:

1. **Suggested amendment to the Legislative Assembly –**
Clause 6, page 3, lines 30 to 32 and page 4, lines 1 to 28, omit all words and expressions on these lines.

This suggested amendment sharpens the list of who can be funded.

Jaclyn SYMES: I think that we have addressed many of the concerns that people had in relation to where the funding was going throughout the evening. Removing government departments who receive funding from the levy in name only would actually remove funding support from critical frontline services. Where a funding recipient is listed as the secretary of DJCS or the secretary of DEECA they are the responsible entity for the expenditure on these emergency services. It does not mean that we are funding public servants. The money collected through the fund that is being allocated to the other entities is only sufficient to fund frontline services that provide direct emergency response and recovery efforts. For this reason we will not be supporting the amendment, but hopefully I have covered off some of the concerns people had, alleging that the funding would be for core public servants.

David DAVIS: What I would say is the concerns have not been sufficiently allayed. In fact there is nothing to prevent the relevant agencies purchasing the relevant equipment that they need. This

again opens the way for the fast siphoning of money out of these agencies to fund public servants. We will have more to say in the next suggested amendment on this too.

Council divided on suggested amendment:

Ayes (17): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Noes (22): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Suggested amendment negated.

Jaclyn SYMES: I move:

1. **Suggested amendment to the Legislative Assembly –**

Clause 6, page 4, lines 27 and 28, omit “Forest Fire Management Victoria” and insert “emergency management”.

2. **Suggested amendment to the Legislative Assembly –**

Clause 6, page 4, after line 28 insert –

“Examples

- 1 Functions of Emergency Management Victoria, the Emergency Management Commissioner, the Chief Executive, Emergency Management Victoria and the Secretary to the Department of Justice and Community Safety in relation to emergency management include operation of the following –
 - the State Control Centre;
 - Emergency Recovery Victoria;
 - the Emergency Alert Program in Victoria;
 - the Emergency Management Operational Communication Program.
- 2 Functions of the Secretary within the meaning of section 3(1) of the **Forests Act 1958** in relation to emergency management include functions delegated to the Chief Fire Officer employed under that Act.”.

Amendment 1 confirms that the funding to the DEECA secretary from the fund is limited in legislation to only funding their work in relation to emergency management. Further, amendment 2 is confirming that funding to the agencies listed in the bill is limited in legislation to only funding their work in relation to emergency management. I think they meet the intention effectively of what I believe many members were trying to articulate, so hopefully they will be supported.

Council divided on suggested amendments:

Ayes (24): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Jeff Bourman, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, David Limbrick, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

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

Suggested amendments agreed to.

Clause postponed; clauses 7 to 12 agreed to.

Clause 13 (22:49)

Jaclyn SYMES: I move:

3. **Suggested amendment to the Legislative Assembly –**
 Clause 13, page 9, line 4, after “recipient” insert “other than the CFA, Fire Rescue Victoria and VicSES”.
4. **Suggested amendment to the Legislative Assembly –**
 Clause 13, page 9, line 6, omit “exceeding –” and insert “exceeding 95%.”.
5. **Suggested amendment to the Legislative Assembly –**
 Clause 13, page 9, lines 7 to 9, omit all words and expressions on those lines and insert –
 ‘(2B) The percentage of the annual funding requirements of the CFA and VicSES that are to be funded by the levy in a levy year is 95%.
 (2C) The percentage of the annual funding requirements of Fire Rescue Victoria that are to be funded by the levy in a levy year is 90%.’.

This amendment is designed to fix the funding percentages for entities. I would again like to make it clear that this does not impact on FRV, CFA or VICSES’s operating budgets. It is just the percentages that we have spent a bit of time talking about this evening.

David DAVIS: We will oppose these suggested amendments. We have an alternative approach.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: The question is that the Treasurer’s suggested amendments 3 to 5 be agreed to, which test her suggested amendments 8 to 11.

Suggested amendments agreed to.

Jaclyn SYMES: I move:

6. **Suggested amendment to the Legislative Assembly –**
 Clause 13, page 9, after line 14 insert –
 ‘(4) After section 12(5) of the Principal Act **insert –**
 “(5A) The Minister must specify in a notice of a determination in respect of the next levy year under subsection (1) –
 (a) for each funding recipient –
 (i) an estimate of the amount in dollars of the funding requirements of the funding recipient that are to be funded by the levy in that levy year; and
 (ii) the percentage of the funding requirements of the funding recipient that the amount in subparagraph (i) represents; and
 (b) an estimate of the amount of levy to be collected in that levy year for each land use classification specified in section 15(1); and
 (c) that there is no duplication of funding.”.’.

This amendment is designed to ensure that the government reports on how the revenue that is being collected through the levy will be spent, including a breakdown by entity and the percentage of the annual budget that the ESVF will fund. This is an accountability measure. I understand and support in principle the amendment suggested by the opposition; however, this is a preferred way forward to bring about the same outcome.

David DAVIS: We will not oppose this, because it picks up many of the points that were in our reporting amendments. To that extent it improves the bill, and we support it.

Suggested amendment agreed to.

David DAVIS: I move:

2. **Suggested amendment to the Legislative Assembly –**

Clause 13, page 9, after line 14 insert –

‘(4) After section 12(6) of the Principal Act insert –

“(7) Despite anything to the contrary in this Act, the proceeds of the levy must not be used to fund any Department within the meaning of the **Public Administration Act 2004**.”’.

We are still very concerned that the funds raised through this massive new tax, across every piece of land in the state, will be diverted to fund what should be normal, regular departmental expenditure. This is a government that is in financial difficulty. It is a government that needs to be watched very, very closely on these matters. If the government is not intending to fund departmental expenditure of this nature, it will support this amendment; it would have nothing to fear. My concern is that the government will not support it, because the government in fact intends to divert this levy to fund departmental funding that should be from the normal sources.

Jaclyn SYMES: Just briefly, I have explained it is not the intention to fund bureaucrats proper. The money needs to go through departments to pay for radios et cetera. I have explained how this all works.

David DAVIS: The truth of course is that funding could come directly to the agencies; it is not required to go through the secretary of the department. This just opens a vent about a mile wide, and the government will use it to fund normal departmental expenditure. I do not necessarily accuse the Treasurer here of bad faith on this. This is just an opening that a desperate government will use at a future point. It might be that it is another decision made by a government, and it may be against the intentions of this particular Treasurer.

Council divided on suggested amendment:

Ayes (17): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Noes (22): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Suggested amendment negated.

Clause postponed; clause 14 agreed to.

Clause 15 (22:58)

David DAVIS: I move:

3. Clause 15, line 21, omit “**Division 2**” and insert “**Divisions 2 and 3**”.

4. Clause 15, page 16, line 27, omit ‘trust.’” and insert “trust.”.

5. Clause 15, page 16, after line 27 insert –

‘Division 3 – Reporting

20E Annual report on levy

The Minister must cause the following information to be included in the report of operations of the Minister’s Department under Part 7 of the **Financial Management Act 1994** for a financial year –

- (a) the total amount of revenue raised from the levy in the financial year;
- (b) a breakdown of that amount by collection agency and by land use classification as set out in section 15(1);

- (c) the amounts distributed to each funding recipient from the revenue raised from the levy in the financial year.”’.

These amendments are a belt-and-braces approach to ensure that the reporting is as strong as possible. We want to see where the money is coming from, which groups and which areas, and how it is disbursed.

Jaclyn SYMES: We do support annual reporting on the collections and spending of the ESVF. Therefore we have proposed our own amendment, which we believe provides stronger reporting requirements. Our amendment outlines exactly how much money is collected through the levy and exactly how much, including the percentage, is going to each entity included in the legislation. As I said, I believe that our amendment is slightly improved and should take precedence over Mr Davis’s, acknowledging that they have similar intent.

Amendments negated; clause agreed to.

Business interrupted pursuant to standing orders.

Jaclyn SYMES: Pursuant to standing order 4.08, I declare the sitting be extended by up to 1 further hour.

Clauses 16 and 17 agreed to.

Suggested new clause (23:00)

Jaclyn SYMES: I move:

7. Suggested amendment to the Legislative Assembly –

Insert the following New Clause to follow clause 17 –

‘17A New section 62A inserted

After section 62 of the Principal Act **insert –**

“62A Proceeds of levy

The proceeds of levy collected under this Act must not exceed the sum of –

- (a) the amounts applied to fund the funding recipients in accordance with section 12(2A), (2B) and (2C); and
- (b) the administrative costs incurred in the performance of functions under this Act.”’.

This suggested amendment makes clear that all the revenue raised through the fund will be spent on emergency services, and that is the intention of this suggested amendment: to ensure that clarity.

David DAVIS: We will support this suggested amendment – I will just be clear about that – but I do want to ask the minister one question about the proceeds of the levy. The proceeds of the levy will change with the announcements the minister has made today. I want to know whether those changes will be reflected in the state budget delivered next week and whether the arrangements that have been altered by the Treasurer’s decisions today have been fully taken into account, what the scale of them is and how much less will be collected.

Jaclyn SYMES: There are some components that will be evident in next week’s budget. Other components that I have flagged today will form a broader piece of work that will be brought forward by the Minister for Agriculture.

David DAVIS: How much is the change in the levy collection after the announcements today? How much is it diminished by?

Jaclyn SYMES: We are still working through some of those issues specifically, particularly in relation to the announcements that I have made today, but that will become evident in due course.

David DAVIS: Is it tens of millions? How much is it? What is at least the scale or quantum?

Jaclyn SYMES: Obviously, as we have indicated, rebates for drought-impacted farmers will be significant in relation to making those concessions for farmers doing it tough.

Suggested new clause agreed to; new clause postponed; clauses 18 to 21 agreed to.

Clause 22 (23:03)

Jaclyn SYMES: I move:

8. **Suggested amendment to the Legislative Assembly –**
Clause 22, line 9, omit “determined under” and insert “specified in”.
9. **Suggested amendment to the Legislative Assembly –**
Clause 22, line 10, omit “12(2A)” and insert “12(2B)”.
10. **Suggested amendment to the Legislative Assembly –**
Clause 22, line 20, omit “determined under” and insert “specified in”.
11. **Suggested amendment to the Legislative Assembly –**
Clause 22, line 21, omit “12(2A)” and insert “12(2C)”.

These are consequential suggested amendments.

Suggested amendments agreed to; clause postponed; clause 23 agreed to.

Progress reported.

Suggested amendments reported to house.

The PRESIDENT: The Deputy President reports that the committee has made progress in the bill, suggesting certain amendments to the Assembly, and asks leave to sit again. Pursuant to standing order 14.16, a message will be sent to the Assembly requesting that they make the amendments suggested by the Council. The question is:

That the Council again resolve itself to a committee of the whole later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Business of the house

Budget 2025–26

The PRESIDENT (23:05): I have received a message from the Assembly:

The Legislative Assembly informs the Legislative Council that under s 52 of the *Constitution Act 1975*, approval has been granted for Jaclyn Symes MLC, Treasurer, to attend the Assembly on Tuesday 20 May 2025 to give a speech on the Annual Appropriation Bill.

Bills

Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025

Introduction and first reading

The PRESIDENT (23:06): I have a message from the Assembly:

The Legislative Assembly presents for the agreement of the Legislative Council ‘A Bill for an Act to amend the **Emergency Services Superannuation Act 1986**, the **State Superannuation Act 1988** and the **Transport Superannuation Act 1988** and for other purposes.’

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (23:06): I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Harriet SHING: I move, by leave:

That the second reading be taken forthwith.

Motion agreed to.*Statement of compatibility*

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (23:07): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

In accordance with section 28 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (**Charter**), I make this Statement of Compatibility with respect to the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025.

In my opinion, the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025 (**Bill**), as introduced to the Legislative Council, is compatible with the human rights as set out in the Charter. I base my opinion on the reasons outlined in this Statement.

Overview

The Bill amends the **Emergency Services Superannuation Act 1986** to –

- (a) provide for a 90 per cent superable salary policy for Executive officers, and other contract employees, who are members of the Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme;
- (b) increase the number of times members of the Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme can change their contribution rate each year;
- (c) increase the period of time in which a spouse, following the death of a member, may apply to become a member of Emergency Services and State Superannuation's accumulation arrangement, the ESSPLAN Scheme;
- (d) reduce the size of the Emergency Services Superannuation Board from 12 to 10 members;
- (e) remove the requirement for State Superannuation Fund representatives on the Emergency Services Superannuation Board to be State Superannuation Fund members and vary their selection process such that they are nominated by unions rather than being elected by members of the State Superannuation Fund; and
- (f) abolish the position of deputy Board member for the Emergency Services Superannuation Board.

The Bill also amends the **State Superannuation Act 1988** and **Transport Superannuation Act 1988** to increase the number of times members of the New Scheme and Transport Superannuation Fund respectively can change their contribution rate each year.

Human rights issues

Overall, most of the provisions of the Bill do not engage the human rights contained in the Charter. Furthermore, in general, most of the provisions in the Bill operate beneficially in relation to natural persons.

The right which is relevant to this Bill is the right to take part in public life.

Right to take part in public life: section 18

Section 18(1) of the Charter provides that every person in Victoria has the right, and is to have the opportunity, without discrimination, to participate in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

The Charter does not define the term “conduct of public affairs”, but it may include any exercise of political, legislative, executive, or administrative power at all levels, including by participating directly in the conduct of public affairs by, for example, taking part in popular assemblies which have the power to make decisions about the affairs of a particular community.

Reduction in size of Board from 12 to 10 and the abolishment of the position of deputy Board member

Clause 4(1)(a) of the Bill reduces the total number of Board members from 12 to 10. Clause 6 of the Bill removes the position of deputy Board member. Clause 12 of the Bill provides a new section 35, which contains transitional provisions that provide for the cessation of any existing positions which are surplus to the new membership.

Interpreted broadly, it is arguable that the right contained in section 18(1) of the Charter has been engaged on the basis that the Emergency Services Board is a representative board established to make decisions regarding the administration of the Emergency Services and State Superannuation Schemes. A person's involvement in a board of this nature may be regarded as a right to participate in the conduct of public affairs, because the Board makes decisions about a group of members in society.

If so, there is a reasonable argument that this right has not been limited by the Bill. The reason for the reduction is that it reflects the declining number of contributors to the Emergency Services and State Superannuation Schemes. Indeed, there are currently two vacancies on the Board, and a number of deputy vacancies. As such, the reduction in Board members from 12 to 10, and the removal of deputy members, will not have a practical effect on the term of any existing Board member.

Furthermore, even if the right has been limited by the Bill, such a limitation would likely be justified having regard to the purpose of the limitation, which is to reflect the declining number of members, improve efficiencies of the Board and assist the Board in running more effectively.

Change from election to nomination

Clause 4(1)(b) of the Bill amends the form of appointment for two of the members of the Board from election to nomination.

It is arguable that removing the ability to be involved in the election process engages the section 18(1) right to participate in the conduct of public affairs. In a similar way as outlined above, a person's ability to vote in this election process may be regarded as a limitation on this right, as they can no longer take part in a process which relates to the composition of a Board that makes decisions about a group of members in society.

If so, the limitation imposed by the Bill is justified. This is having regard to the purpose of the limitation, which is to avoid representation imbalances, and to avoid vacant positions which have the effect of disenfranchising members of the State Superannuation Schemes, due to the difficulty in securing eligible candidates from the small pool of active members. Furthermore, this amendment is also unlikely to impact many people due to the diminishing number of State Superannuation Fund members.

Conclusion

No Charter rights are impermissibly limited by the Bill. I therefore consider that the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2025 is compatible with the Charter.

Hon Jaclyn Symes MP

Treasurer

Minister for Industrial Relations

Minister for Regional Development

Second reading

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (23:07): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Ordered that second-reading speech be incorporated into *Hansard*:

The purpose of the Bill is to ensure consistency in the application of the 90 per cent superable salary policy for members of the Emergency Services Superannuation Scheme (ESSS), assist members in managing their superannuation and personal finances by enabling more frequent contribution rate changes, better support non-member spouses of members who die to apply to become members of ESSPLAN during a time of grief, and make changes to the membership of the Emergency Services Superannuation Board for efficiency and appropriateness in light of the current membership arrangements.

The Bill:

- a. Amends the *Emergency Services Superannuation Act 1986* (ESSA) to legislate the 90 per cent superable salary policy for Executive Officers, and other contract employees, who are members of the ESSS to ensure this policy is applied consistently in future;
- b. Amends the ESSA, the *State Superannuation Act 1988* (SSA) and the *Transport Superannuation Act 1988* (TSA) to increase the number of times members of the ESSS, New Scheme and Transport Superannuation Fund can change their contribution rate each year so that members are better able to manage their superannuation and personal finances;

- c. Amends the ESSA to allow spouses, following the death of a member, a period of 12 months in which to apply to become a member of ESSPLAN to better support non-member spouses during a period of grief and potentially trauma;
- d. Amends the ESSA to reduce the size of the Board from 12 to 10 members to improve the operational efficiency of the Board;
- e. Amends the ESSA to remove the requirement for State Superannuation Fund (SSF) representatives on the Board to be SSF members and vary their selection process such that they are nominated by unions that are representative of the members of the SSF. This is designed to respond to the ongoing decline in the number of active SSF members; and
- f. Amends the ESSA to abolish the position of deputy Board member as they are rarely called on and there are alternative ways modern boards can manage the absences of existing board members.

90 per cent Superable Salary rule for emergency services Executive Officers

In 2022, the Government agreed to the superable salary for new emergency services Executive Officers, and other contract employees, who are members of the ES DB Scheme being determined as 90 per cent of their remuneration subject to a minimum of the highest non-executive salary. The prevailing method of determining superable salary was grandfathered for existing emergency services Executive Officers, while providing them with the ability to opt into the new arrangements for both past and future service.

This policy was initially implemented informally, by notifying employers of the new superable salary policy. Government now proposes to formalise this policy in legislation to ensure that it applies consistently to all relevant members of the ESSS.

Allow more frequent changes to member contribution rates

Currently members of the ESSS, New Scheme and Transport Superannuation Fund can only change their contribution rate once a year. This limit was most likely imposed when these schemes were introduced as the administration required was more resource intensive and time consuming.

The Bill removes the limit on the number of times members of the ESSS, New Scheme and Transport Superannuation Fund can change their contribution rate each year.

Given the automation of most of the schemes' administration processes, removing the current limit will have a minimal impact on the schemes and will allow members to better manage their superannuation and personal finances.

Spouse membership following a member's death

Under current arrangements, following the death of a member, their spouse has up to three months to apply to become a member of ESSSuper's accumulation arrangement, the ESSPLAN Scheme.

The Bill extends the period in which a spouse can apply to become an ESSPLAN member to 12 months. This is designed to support non-member spouses during a time of grief and potentially trauma.

Reducing the size of the Board to 10 members

Currently under the ESSA, the Board is to consist of 12 members that are appointed by the Governor in Council. Six board members are nominated by the Minister and six are directly elected by members of the schemes (member-elects). Three of these member-elects are currently elected by members of the ESSS, with one member-elect for each of the emergency services organisations. The remaining three member-elects are elected by members of the former SSF. This arrangement is consistent with Commonwealth superannuation legislation which generally requires 'equal representation' of employees and employers on superannuation trustee boards.

As the SSF is closed to new members, the number of active SSF members has declined significantly and will continue to do so. Active SSF members are now only around 11 per cent of the SSF's total membership.

As only active SSF members can vote and be elected to the Board, it is very difficult to source SSF member-elects from the declining pool of active SSF members.

The size of the current Board is also larger than is considered optimal and active SSF members are now only around 20 per cent of all active ESSSuper members (compared to around 75 per cent when the current Board composition was agreed).

To address these issues, the Bill reduces the size of the Board from 12 to 10, by reducing both the number of SSF-member elects and Government nominated members by one. This ensures that the equal representation of employee and employer members of the Board is retained.

The Bill will also subsequently amend quorum requirements for SSF and ESSS member-elects to the Board to ensure efficient and balanced decision making.

Method of selecting SSF representatives

Currently SSF member-elects are directly elected by active members of various employer groups. This ensures the Board can make decisions informed by the valuable lived experience of elected members.

However, with a diminishing number of active members, making up approximately 11 percent of all SSF members, it has become more difficult to recruit new suitable candidates resulting in vacancies that cannot be filled.

The Bill therefore includes amendments to remove the requirement for SSF representatives on the Board to be SSF members and amends how SSF representatives are selected, so they will be nominated by relevant unions who are representative of the make up of members of the SSF.

The Minister, in consultation with relevant unions, will determine the union nomination process, including the unions that may nominate candidates for the two SSF positions. Candidates nominated by the unions do not need to be members of that union and unions will be able to nominate Board candidates with relevant skills, boosting the skills and experience of the Board. This arrangement aligns Victoria the superannuation boards of the Commonwealth and other states.

Given the large active membership of emergency services members, the Bill does not change the number of ESSS member-elects nor the method of selecting or appointing them.

Abolishing of the position of deputy member

The Board currently consists of nine deputy member positions, one for each of the six member-elects and a pool of three for the Government nominated members. Deputy members act in the position of Board members when a Board member is absent, ill or suspended.

Experience over the years has demonstrated that there has been minimal need to call on deputy members as there are alternative ways that modern boards can manage the absences of existing members. Between the period from 2011 to 2023, deputy members have only attended Board meetings on three occasions.

For this reason the Bill includes amendments to abolish the position of deputy Board member.

I commend the Bill to the house.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (23:07): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for one week.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for one week.

Justice Legislation Amendment (Miscellaneous) Bill 2025*Introduction and first reading*

The PRESIDENT (23:07): I have received the following message from the Legislative Assembly:

The Legislative Assembly presents for the agreement of the Legislative Council 'A Bill for an Act to make miscellaneous amendments to the **Crimes Act 1958**, the **Criminal Procedure Act 2009**, the **Justice Legislation Amendment (Criminal Appeals) Act 2019**, the **Magistrates' Court Act 1989**, the **Sentencing Act 1991**, the **Social Services Regulation Act 2021** and the **Worker Screening Act 2020** and for other purposes.'

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (23:08): I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Harriet SHING: I move, by leave:

That the second reading be taken forthwith.

Motion agreed to.

Statement of compatibility

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (23:08): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

In accordance with section 28 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*, (the Charter), I make this Statement of Compatibility with respect to the Justice Legislation Amendment (Miscellaneous) Bill 2025 (the Bill).

In my opinion, the Bill, as introduced to the Legislative Council, 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 seeks to improve the operation of the Victorian legal and justice systems by implementing the following reforms:

- narrowing the trustee secret commission offence in section 180 of the *Crimes Act 1958* to capture only dishonest or otherwise corrupt conduct
- extending the commencement date of summary appeal reforms in the *Justice Legislation Amendment (Criminal Appeals) Act 2019* by 3 years
- supporting the expansion of the Magistrates' Court of Victoria's electronic Case Management System to its criminal jurisdiction
- correcting section referencing errors in the *Worker Screening Act 2020*
- amending the *Social Services Regulation Act 2021* (SSRA) to correct an error by repealing section 330G(2)(a), a provision relating to the regulation of out of home care workers and carers, during a transitional period, and
- repealing an outdated regulation-making power in the *Magistrates' Court Act 1989*.

Human Rights Issues

Many of the Bill's reforms are technical in nature, and do not give rise to human rights issues. The following rights are relevant to the Bill:

- equality (section 8)
- privacy and reputation (section 13)
- protection of families and children (section 17)
- property rights (section 20)
- right to a fair hearing (section 24)
- rights in criminal proceedings (section 25), and
- retrospective criminal laws (section 27).

For the following reasons, I am satisfied that the Bill is compatible with the Charter and, to the extent that any rights are limited, those limitations are reasonable and justified.

Amending the *Crimes Act 1958* to narrow the trustee secret commission offence

The Bill amends section 180 of the Crimes Act to narrow the trustee secret commission offence so that it only captures dishonest or otherwise corrupt conduct.

Property rights (section 20)

Section 20 of the Charter provides that a person must not be deprived of their property other than in accordance with law. The amendments to the trustee secret commission offence in the Crimes Act may promote this right by ensuring that routine, good faith transactions engaged in during a trustee's replacement can occur without risk of criminal liability. The reforms will also remove the onerous requirement to obtain the consent of all trust beneficiaries or the Supreme Court of Victoria (SCV) for the proposed conduct, which will help to prevent unnecessary and costly dissipation of trust assets.

Right to a fair hearing (section 24)

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 a fair and public hearing. The reforms to section 180 of the Crimes Act will apply retrospectively to ensure that trustees and other persons are not charged with a serious indictable offence for prior conduct that was not dishonest or otherwise corrupt. The reforms clarify the mental element that the

prosecution must prove in different circumstances and break down the conduct covered by current section 180 into separate offences. If a charge is brought under revised section 180, this improved clarity may promote an efficient and expeditious hearing and support the accused's right to a fair hearing.

Rights in criminal proceedings (section 25)

Section 25(1) of the Charter provides that a person charged with a criminal offence has the right to a presumption of innocence until proven guilty. As with the right to a fair hearing, these reforms will promote just outcomes in criminal proceedings. Without the section 180 reforms, a person may be criminally liable, for example, for a good faith offering or giving of valuable consideration to an outgoing trustee. The amendments will make clear that for a successful prosecution, it must be proved that the conduct was done for a dishonest or otherwise corrupt purpose, and with the requisite intention or knowledge.

As noted above, the reforms will break down the conduct captured by section 180 as currently in force into separate offences. This will not expand the ambit of section 180, but will instead clarify the elements of each offence in line with modern drafting techniques, with the additional threshold of requiring a 'dishonest or otherwise corrupt purpose'.

Retrospective criminal laws (section 27)

These amendments engage, but do not limit, retrospective criminal law rights under section 27 of the Charter. Section 27(1) provides that a person must not be found guilty of a criminal offence based on conduct that was not an offence at the time the conduct was engaged in.

The Bill includes a transitional provision for the amendments to section 180, which provides that the revised trustee secret commission offences:

- will apply retrospectively to conduct engaged in prior to commencement, instead of section 180 as currently in force, including for the purposes of any ancillary offence relating to section 180 (thereby only capturing past conduct engaged in dishonestly or otherwise corruptly), and
- uphold the legality of any prior convictions and decisions by beneficiaries of a trust or the SCV to consent to conduct under section 180 as in force prior to commencement of these reforms.

Amendments to the *Criminal Procedure Act 2009* and *Sentencing Act 1991* to support Magistrates' Court case management

The Bill amends the Criminal Procedure Act and Sentencing Act to support the rollout of the Case Management System (CMS) in the Magistrates' Court Criminal Division, allowing the Magistrates' Court of Victoria to achieve efficiencies following investment in the CMS.

Right to recognition and equality before the law (section 8)

Section 8 of the Charter provides that every person is equal before the law and is entitled to the equal protection of the law without discrimination.

The Bill will promote the right to equality before the law by increasing access to justice for Victorians. Currently, court users may be required to travel significant distances to physically file documents with the registry. These amendments will reduce the need for travel by enabling certain applications to be filed online. As such, it will ensure that court users, including those with disabilities and who live in rural or regional areas, can access registry services more easily.

Correcting an unintended deemed exclusion in the *Social Services Regulation Act 2021*

The Bill rectifies an unintentional deemed exclusion for out of home carers by repealing section 330G(2)(a) of the *Social Services Regulation Act 2021* (SSRA). This provides that all findings of misconduct in accordance with section 105(5) of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* are deemed exclusion decisions for the purposes of the new worker and carer exclusion scheme under the SSRA.

On repeal of section 330G(2)(a), a person would not be deemed to be excluded from being an out of home carer following a finding of misconduct made in accordance with section 105(5) of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* on its own. Instead, deemed exclusions under section 330G of the SSRA will only apply to findings that a person should be disqualified from registration, on the basis of a finding under section 106(3) that the person poses an unacceptable risk to children and a finding that a person should continue to be disqualified under 112 of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*.

Right to privacy and reputation (section 13)

Section 13(a) of the Charter provides for the right of a person 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. The

right protects a person's interest in the freedom of their personal and social sphere, which includes the right to establish and develop meaningful social relations and may also incorporate a right to work in some circumstances (to the extent that work is necessary to establish and develop social relations, and in cases relating to caring for a child).

The amendment to the SSRA engages this right and promotes it, in that it will mean that findings of misconduct will not result in an automatic exclusion but rather, will ensure that an exclusion is only deemed under the SSRA where an out of home carer also presents an unacceptable risk of harm to children.

Right to protection of families and children (section 17)

Section 17 of the Charter provides that families are entitled to be protected by society and the State, and every child has the right, without discrimination, to such protection as is in the child's best interests and is needed by the child by reason of being a child.

This amendment engages section 17 as it removes an automatic exclusion of out of home carers where a finding of misconduct has been made against them.

The amendment to the SSRA promotes the section 17 right as it is expected to result in fewer out of home carers being deemed as excluded. This is intended to ensure the availability of out of home carers will not be unnecessarily impacted, minimising disruption for children in care where a carer may be excluded, who has not been found to pose an unacceptable risk of harm.

The amendment also limits the section 17 right, because it will mean that a carer who has engaged in misconduct may still be able to work with children in out of home care. This limitation is reasonable and justified, however, on the basis that the Suitability Panel must still perform a risk assessment of the carer and must determine, on the balance of probabilities, that the carer does not pose an unacceptable risk to children. The amendment is consistent with the arrangements for excluding out of home care workers and carers for the worker and carer exclusion scheme under the SSRA.

Hon Enver Erdogan MP
Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation
Minister for Corrections
Minister for Youth Justice

Second reading

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (23:08): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Ordered that second-reading speech be incorporated into *Hansard*:

The Justice Legislation Amendment (Miscellaneous) Bill 2025 amends a number of Acts to support the courts and improve the operation of the Victorian justice and legal systems. It:

- narrows the *Crimes Act 1958* trustee secret commission offence to only capture dishonest or otherwise corrupt conduct
- defers commencement of summary appeal reforms in the *Justice Legislation Amendment (Criminal Appeals) Act 2019*
- improves the operation of the Case Management System in the Magistrates' Court
- corrects technical errors in the *Worker Screening Act 2020*
- rectifies an unintentional deemed exclusion for out of home care workers in the *Social Services Regulation Act 2021*, and
- removes an obsolete regulation-making power from the *Magistrates' Court Act 1989*.

Narrowing the trustee secret commission offence to only capture dishonest or otherwise corrupt conduct

Section 180 of the *Crimes Act 1958*, as currently in force, makes it an indictable offence for a person to offer or give to a trustee, or for a trustee to receive or solicit for themselves or any other person, valuable consideration for the appointment of a new trustee in the trustee's place, without the consent of all trust beneficiaries or the Supreme Court of Victoria. The Bill will narrow the trustee secret commission offence by requiring the relevant conduct to have been done with a dishonest or otherwise corrupt purpose.

This offence was introduced in 1905 after the Royal Commission on the Butter Industry found widespread bribery and corruption involving agents, including the receipt and payment of secret commissions. It was later consolidated in the Crimes Act. Recent Supreme Court of Victoria decisions on the application of section 180

have held that a corrupt purpose is not an element of the offence. This has left trustees and other persons engaged in routine, good faith transactions relating to the replacement of an outgoing trustee at risk of serious criminal liability. It follows that the offence is no longer fit for purpose.

The reforms will ensure that only conduct done for a dishonest or otherwise corrupt purpose and with the requisite intent or knowledge will be captured by section 180. The phrase ‘a dishonest or otherwise corrupt purpose’ is intended to mean dishonest conduct or conduct done with a wrongful or improper purpose. It should not capture good faith transactions.

The reforms will also remove the onerous and costly requirement for trust beneficiaries or the Supreme Court to consent to a person offering or giving, or a trustee soliciting or receiving, valuable consideration associated with a trustee’s replacement, such as reimbursement of reasonable costs. This will save those involved, and the Court, time and resources. The consent requirement will no longer be necessary once the reforms commence, as neither beneficiaries nor the Court would knowingly consent to dishonest or otherwise corrupt conduct.

The Bill will break section 180 down into five offences. This does not expand the ambit of section 180, but rather will clarify, through the use of modern drafting techniques, the elements the prosecution must prove in each scenario currently prohibited by section 180, with the additional threshold of requiring a ‘dishonest or otherwise corrupt purpose’ and either intent or knowledge.

The revised section 180 offences will be retrospective in operation, except in specific instances. This will mean that trustees and other persons who have in the past engaged in good faith, routine trust transactions that may have inadvertently breached section 180 as currently in force, can be assured that they will not be held criminally liable. Retrospectivity also extends to circumstances in which a person may be criminally liable under certain ancillary offences in the Crimes Act that relate to the primary section 180 offence as currently in force.

These reforms are important to keep our criminal laws fit for purpose, to promote just outcomes, and provide confidence in the legality of good faith, routine dealings that are central to the effective operation of trusts.

Delaying the commencement of summary appeal reforms

The Bill extends the forced commencement date of summary appeal reforms in the *Justice Legislation Amendment (Criminal Appeals) Act 2019* for 3 years, to 1 July 2028. This allows additional time for implementation planning and for affected justice agencies to prepare for commencement of these significant changes to criminal procedure.

In 2019, Parliament passed laws to modernise Victoria’s summary criminal appeal system. These laws, currently set to commence on 5 July 2025, will abolish summary appeals of criminal cases to the County Court and replace them with new processes that seek to enhance efficiency and reduce trauma for witnesses and victims who will no longer have to re-attend court and give evidence a second time on appeal.

These are important objectives, but they can only be achieved if courts and justice agencies have sufficient time to prepare for this change in practice. The commencement date for these reforms was postponed on previous occasions to allow affected agencies to prepare, while also recovering from the impacts of the pandemic on courts. Since the Criminal Appeals Act passed, Parliament has passed several other pieces of legislation which have made, or will make, significant changes to other aspects of criminal procedure. These include enabling judge alone trials to address the impacts of the pandemic on jury trials which, though temporary, required significant effort for courts to implement, the *Youth Justice Act 2024*, and, more recently, the *Justice Legislation Amendment (Committals) Act 2025*.

This changed environment has required Government to turn its focus to supporting implementation of these critical reforms to the justice system. In light of the significant time and resources required to implement the summary appeal reforms on top of these other reforms, it is necessary to further delay their commencement. This will ensure that implementation activities can be undertaken in a careful, staged manner, minimising significant disruptions to the court system.

Improving the operation of the Case Management System in the Magistrates’ Court

The Bill makes technical amendments to the Criminal Procedure Act and Sentencing Act to allow the Magistrates’ Court of Victoria to extend the use of its Case Management System in its criminal jurisdiction. These reforms will modernise registry services and improve the efficiency of court operations by enabling certain documents to be filed electronically.

Correcting technical errors in the Worker Screening Act 2020

The Bill will make technical amendments to the Worker Screening Act to correct errors in references to sections in the Act relating to National Disability Insurance Scheme checks and Working with Children checks.

Rectifying an unintentional deemed exclusion for out of home care workers in the *Social Services Regulation Act 2021*

The Bill will amend the SSRA to ensure that, during the 3-year transitional period for the Suitability Panel, a person can only be excluded from working in the out of home care sector when the Panel finds both that the person:

- a. engaged in conduct, and
- b. poses an unacceptable risk to children.

This amendment will ensure workers are not unintentionally excluded from working in the out of home care sector, where a Panel has not found they pose an unacceptable risk to children in out of home care.

This ensures consistency with the approach to exclusion decisions made by the Suitability Panel before the new Act was introduced, and is the approach taken by the new Worker and Carer Exclusion Scheme for out of home care workers and carers.

Removing an obsolete regulation-making power from the *Magistrates' Court Act 1989*

The Bill repeals an outdated power in the Magistrates' Court Act to prescribe municipal areas where police officers are not required to serve civil process. This provision is no longer required as police officers do not serve civil process.

I commend the Bill to the house.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (23:08): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for one week.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for one week.

Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025*Introduction and first reading*

The PRESIDENT (23:09): I have a further message from the Legislative Assembly:

The Legislative Assembly presents for the agreement of the Legislative Council 'A Bill for an Act to amend the **Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013**, the **Accident Compensation Act 1985** and the **Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004** and for other purposes.'

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (23:09): I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Harriet SHING: I move, by leave:

That the second reading be taken forthwith.

Motion agreed to.

Statement of compatibility

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (23:09): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

In accordance with section 28 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (the **Charter**), I make this statement of compatibility in relation to the **Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025** (the Bill).

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

Overview of the Bill

The Bill makes various amendments to the *Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013* (the **WIRC Act**), *Accident Compensation Act 1985* (**AC Act**) and *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* (the **OHS Act**) to:

- introduce lived experience membership criterion for the WorkSafe Board Advisory Committees being the Occupational Health and Safety Advisory Committee (**OHSAC**) and the WorkCover Advisory Committee (**WAC**)
- improve return to work (RTW) outcomes by requiring employers to provide RTW co-ordinators with the assistance and facilities reasonably necessary for the performance of their functions under the WIRC Act and to ensure they receive appropriate training
- introduce new compensation entitlements and improve 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
 - increasing weekly pensions payable to dependent children of deceased workers
 - extending the duration of provisional pension payments for dependent partners to 26 weeks
 - creating an entitlement to lump sum payments for economic loss for dependants who are not the partner or child of a deceased worker
 - creating an entitlement to lump sum payments for non-economic loss for close family members of deceased workers
 - providing access to a broader 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
- improve operations of the Workplace Injury Commission (**WIC**) by allowing WIC to:
 - certify a consent agreement made between the parties to resolve a dispute which has been referred to arbitration
 - document an enforceable agreement for a worker's arbitration costs where the parties resolve the dispute at arbitration or further conciliation following arbitration
 - share information with an injured worker once conciliation or arbitration has concluded
- streamline administrative arrangements for the members of WorkSafe's Board, the Chief Executive Officer and hearing loss assessors
- correct minor drafting errors from the *Workplace Safety and Other Matters Amendment Act 2022* and the *Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment (WorkCover Scheme Modernisation) Act 2024*.

Human Rights Issues

The following rights are relevant to the Bill:

- the right to equality before the law (section 8)
- the right to participate in public life (section 18)
- the protection of families and children (section 17)
- the right to privacy (section 13)
- the right to freedom of expression (section 15)
- the right to presumption of innocence (section 25(1)).

For the reasons detailed below, I am satisfied that the Bill is compatible with the Charter and, if any of the abovementioned rights are limited, those limitations are reasonable and demonstrably justified having regard to the factors within section 7(2) of the Charter.

Right to Equality before the law – section 8

Section 8(2) of the Charter provides that every person has the right to enjoy their human rights without discrimination. Section 8(3) of the Charter provides that every person is entitled to equal protection of the law without discrimination and has the right to equal and effective protection against discrimination. The purpose

of the right in section 8(3) is to ensure that all laws and policies are applied equally, and do not have a discriminatory effect.

‘Discrimination’ under the Charter is defined by reference to the definition in the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010* (EO Act) and refers to discrimination based on an attribute in section 6 of that Act, which includes age, race, sex, disability and parental status amongst many others. Direct discrimination occurs where a person treats, or proposes to treat, a person with an attribute unfavourably because of that attribute. Indirect discrimination occurs where a person imposes a requirement, condition or practice that has, or is likely to have, the effect of disadvantaging persons with a protected attribute, but only where that requirement, condition or practice is not reasonable.

Training of RTW co-ordinators

Clause 7 of the Bill inserts new ss 106A and 106C into the WIRC Act to require employers to provide RTW co-ordinators with training, facilities and assistance as reasonably required to fulfil their functions. Failure to comply with these obligations without reasonable excuse, will constitute an offence attracting a penalty of 120 penalty units for a natural person, and 600 penalty units for a body corporate under clauses 8 and 9 of the Bill.

RTW co-ordinators have a crucial role in ensuring the removal of barriers and provision of adequate support for injured workers returning to work. The amendments inserted by clauses 7 to 9 of the Bill will ensure that RTW co-ordinators have the necessary skills and resources to adequately support injured workers and to reduce discrimination and other barriers they may face when returning to work. Therefore, the Bill promotes the right to equality by ensuring that injured workers returning to work are supported, treated equally and not discriminated against based on their disability or injury.

Allowing family members of a deceased worker to receive provisional payments in the case of death by suicide

Clause 22 of the Bill amends the WIRC Act to remove the section that currently prevents WorkSafe or a self-insurer from making provisional payments to family members who are likely to be entitled to compensation in circumstances where a worker dies by suicide.

Provisional payments are important to ensuring that death and dependency claims are managed sensitively and without delay by providing immediate financial support to family members of workers whose death is likely to have been work-related. Excluding all deaths caused by suicide from the entitlement to provisional payments may constitute indirect discrimination against the protected attribute of ‘disability’, which includes a mental or psychological disease or disorder. By amending the WIRC Act to provide that family members of a worker who has died by suicide are not excluded from receiving provisional payments, clause 22 promotes the right to equality by ensuring that the WIRC Act does not treat deaths by suicide differently from other work-related deaths.

Right to Participate in Public Life – section 18(1)

Section 18(1) of the Charter provides that every person in Victoria has the right, and is to have the opportunity, without discrimination, to participate in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through chosen representatives.

This includes being able to share opinions and be involved in decision making relating to aspects of public administration, including the formulation and implications of policy.

Introducing lived experience membership in OHSAC and WAC

Clause 11 and 55 of the Bill amends the WIRC Act and the OHS Act respectively to require the membership of the WAC and OHSAC to include people with lived experience of being affected, directly or indirectly, by incidents that occur at a workplace involving death, serious injury or serious illness.

The purpose of the OHSAC and WAC is to advise the WorkSafe Board on matters of policy relating to promoting healthy and safe working environments, workers’ entitlement to compensation and the operation and administration of the OHS and WIRC Acts and associated regulations.

The amendments in clause 11 and 55 of the Bill promote the right to participate in public life, providing the opportunity for people with lived experience to be a voice for injured workers, or the dependants of workers who died at work in policy-making decisions concerning occupational health and safety, workers compensation and rehabilitation.

Right to Protection of Families and Children – section 17(2)

Section 17(1) of the Charter recognises that families are the fundamental group unit of society and entitles families to protection by the society and the State. The right is principally concerned with unity of family, which in this context encompasses the diversity of families living within Victoria, not only those recognised by formal marriage or cohabitation. The right in section 17(1) is related to the right to privacy in section 13(a)

of the Charter, which relevantly provides that every person has the right to not be subject to unlawful or arbitrary interferences with their family.

Section 17(2) of the Charter provides that every child has the right, without discrimination, to such protection as is in the child's best interests and as is needed by them by reason of being a child. This right recognises the special vulnerability of children, and requires the State to adopt social, cultural and economic measures to protect children and to promote their development and education. The scope of the right is informed by the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which requires that in all actions concerning children, the best interest of the child shall be the primary consideration.

Extending the duration of provisional pension payments to 26 weeks

Clause 11 of the Bill inserts new s243(1)(ab) into the WIRC Act to extend the maximum duration of provisional payments of the weekly pension for the dependent partner of a deceased worker from 12 weeks to 26 weeks. In so doing, clause 11 promotes the protection of families and children under s17 of the Charter, by reducing the risk of financial hardship, following the work-related death of a family member.

Provisional pension payments are currently only available for a 12-week period following the death of a worker. However, for around one in four claims it can take longer than 12 weeks for claim acceptance. This can result in a period where no financial support is available which can cause financial hardship for the dependent partners and children of deceased workers.

The Bill will ensure financial support to the dependent partner of a deceased worker continues in circumstances where their claim determination is delayed beyond the existing 12-week payment period. This will provide certainty and stability and ensure that financial support is provided at a crucial time for dependent partners.

Increasing weekly pension payable to dependent children of deceased workers

Clause 21 of the Bill amends the WIRC Act to increase the rate of weekly pension to dependent children of a deceased worker to:

- 12.5 per cent of the worker's pre-injury average weekly earnings (PIAWE) if there are up to four eligible dependent children; or
- an equal share of 50 per cent of the worker's PIAWE if there are four or more eligible dependent children.

The amendments recognise the economic loss of partners and children who are dependent on the deceased workers income. Families with children are particularly vulnerable following a work-related death and the current weekly pension entitlements do not realistically reflect the costs associated with raising children and can result in financial hardship. By increasing the rate of the weekly pension for dependent children these amendments promote the right to protection of families and children as under s17 of the Charter.

A new lump sum payment for non-economic loss

Clause 19 of the Bill inserts new s237A into the WIRC Act and clause 41 inserts new s92A(8)(c) into the AC Act to create a new entitlement to compensation for non-economic loss for the 'close family members' of a worker whose death is work-related

The Victorian workers compensation scheme is almost exclusively focussed on compensating family members and dependents of workers for their economic loss experienced because of a work-related death. The WIRC Act and AC Act do not compensate for the "non-economic loss" caused by work-related deaths.

Therefore, clauses 19 and 41 of the Bill will introduce compensation for "non-economic loss" for work-related deaths. The entitlement will be available to close family members of the worker irrespective of their level of dependency on the worker's earnings.

The Bill will define a close family member as being a person who had a genuine personal relationship with the worker at the time of their death and who was:

- a partner, parent, guardian, step-parent, grandparent, sibling or step-sibling of the worker
- a person of whom the worker was a parent, step-parent or guardian.

I consider clauses 19 and 41 of the Bill promote the right to protection of families under section 17(1) of the Charter by ensuring that families are compensated and supported for their grief, pain and suffering following the traumatic circumstance of the work-related death of a close family member.

Right to Privacy – section 13(1)

Section 13(a) of the Charter states that a person has the right not to have their privacy 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.

Obligation to provide all relevant documents and information

The Bill amends the WIRC Act and AC Act to introduce the following new entitlements for family members and/or dependants of a worker whose death is work-related:

- lump sum compensation of up to \$20,000 per claimant for the economic loss resulting from the compensable death of a worker experienced by a person who was dependent on the worker but was not their partner or child
- lump sum compensation of \$10,000 per claimant for the non-economic loss experienced by a close family member resulting from the compensable death of a worker
- compensation for family members for the reasonable costs of forensic cleaning incurred after a compensable death that occurs in the home of the worker or the home of a family member of the worker.

To assess claims under these new amendments, WorkSafe will, under existing information gathering powers in s552 of the WIRC Act, be required to collect relevant personal information and documents from family members to establish their relationship to and/or financial dependency on the deceased worker.

These provisions engage but do not unreasonably limit the right to privacy. Section 13 of the Charter contains internal limitations, which affect the scope of the right. Because any interference with a person's privacy or reputation occasioned by these provisions will be pursuant to law and non-arbitrary, it will not limit the rights protected by section 13 of the Charter. Relevantly, I note that this requirement is necessary to enable WorkSafe to effectively obtain relevant personal information and documents to fulfill its functions. Further, WorkSafe must comply with relevant obligations under the *Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014*, the *Health Records Act 2001* and the WIRC Act. WorkSafe also has a Privacy Manual setting out how WorkSafe and its Authorised Agents collect, store and use personal information.

Right to freedom of expression – section 15

Section 15(2) of the Charter provides that every person has the right to freedom of expression, which includes the freedom to seek and receive information.

Amendments to improve the operation of the Workplace Injury Commission

Clauses 34 and 35 of the Bill enable the Accident Compensation Conciliation Service (the legal name of the Workplace Injury Commission) to provide documents to injured workers and their representative following the conclusion of a conciliation or arbitration, so that they no longer have to make a Freedom of Information request to access to their own file. This promotes the right to freedom of expression as it removes a procedural barrier for workers wishing to access their own conciliation and arbitration file to review the information relied upon and the decision made during the process.

Right to presumption of innocence – section 25(1)

Section 25(1) of the Charter provides that a person charged with a criminal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law. The right is 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.

New Employer Offences

Clause 7 in the Bill inserts new ss 106A and 106C into the WIRC Act which create offences that contain a 'reasonable excuse' exception, which may place an evidential burden on the accused.

The relevant offences relate to failure of an employer to ensure that a person who is appointed to act as a RTW co-ordinator completes an approved training course within a required period, and an offence relating to the failure of an employer to provide an RTW co-ordinator with the facilities and assistance that the person reasonably requires to perform their functions. Clauses 8 and 9 of the Bill then contain the relevant penalty provisions, being 120 penalty units for a natural person, and 600 penalty units for a body corporate.

By creating a 'reasonable excuse' exception, these offences are relevant to the right to the presumption of innocence under s 25(1) of the Charter, because they place an evidential burden on the accused, in that they require the accused to raise evidence of a reasonable excuse. However, in doing so, this offence does not transfer the legal burden of proof. Once the accused has pointed to evidence of a reasonable excuse, which will ordinarily be peculiarly within their knowledge, the burden shifts back to the prosecution to prove the

essential elements of the offence. I do not consider that an evidential onus of this kind limits the right to be presumed innocent, and clause 7 of the Bill is therefore compatible with this right.

Hon Jaclyn Symes MP

Treasurer

Minister for Industrial Relations

Minister for Regional Development

Second reading

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (23:09): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Ordered that second-reading speech be incorporated into *Hansard*:

The Bill makes several amendments to the *Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013*, *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* and *Accident Compensation Act 1985* to improve the experience of injured workers and other claimants throughout their time on the WorkCover Scheme (Scheme) and to improve the support provided to families and dependants of deceased workers. These changes deliver on the Victorian Government's commitment to implement recommendations of the Independent Review of WorkSafe Victoria's management of complex workers' compensation claims led by Peter Rozen KC (now Judge Rozen) and a review of the adequacy of compensation and supports for family members of workers whose death is work-related. The Bill will ensure that the Scheme, WorkSafe, its Agents and self-insurers are taking a person-centred approach to the delivery of services. The Bill also includes administrative changes that will improve the operation of the Scheme, WorkSafe and the Workplace Injury Commission (WIC).

The Rozen Review was commissioned in response to the Victorian Ombudsman's 2019 recommendation to review WorkSafe's agent model to determine how and by whom complex claims should be managed. The Rozen Review made 22 recommendations for reform. The Victorian Government committed to delivering on these recommendations by accepting five recommendations in full and accepting 14 in principle. Five of these recommendations (9, 14, 17, 19 and 20) required legislative change.

The Bill also includes amendments that deliver on recommendations made following a review of the adequacy of compensation and support arrangements for families impacted by a work-related death. The Family Supports Review recommended broadening the types of compensation and support available for families of deceased workers and made 10 recommendations, eight of which were accepted by the Victorian Government.

The Bill includes amendments to deliver on the Government's commitment to implementing accepted recommendations from the Rozen Review and Family Supports Review.

I will now address the key amendments in more detail.

Improving the experience of injured workers and other claimants

The challenges faced by injured workers and claimants should not be compounded by their experiences of the Scheme. Improving these experiences by ensuring that WorkSafe, its Agents and self-insurers adopt a person-centred approach is a key focus of the Bill and will ultimately lead to better outcomes.

To achieve this, the Bill amends the *Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013* and the *Accident Compensation Act 1985* (the Acts) to insert new objectives of both the Acts, and WorkSafe, to ensure that injured workers and other claimants and users of the Scheme are treated fairly, respectfully and with dignity, and receive high-quality services. These objectives will apply to all users of the Scheme, not just workers and their families and will ensure that all decisions made under Victoria's workers' compensation framework are guided by these person-centred objectives.

To assist in operationalising these new objectives, the Bill will also amend the *Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013* to empower the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC (Minister) to publish a Code of Claimants' Rights (the Code). When published, the Code will provide clear service standards that injured workers and other claimants on the Scheme will be entitled to when engaging with WorkSafe, its Agents and self-insurers. It will also set out corresponding obligations on WorkSafe, its Agents and self-insurers and include a procedure for making, investigating and resolving complaints about non-adherence to the Code. WorkSafe will be responsible for investigating and resolving these complaints and may issue remedies where a complaint is substantiated including an apology, an explanation of a decision or outlining steps that will be taken to avoid future non-adherence to the Code.

The Code will be released for public comment and tabled before Parliament, providing Parliament the opportunity to scrutinise the Code to ensure it contains standards that are relevant and valuable for claimants.

These changes will ensure that claimants of the Scheme are provided with a legislative basis for setting expectations for dignified and respectful treatment. Overall, this will improve an injured worker's overall claims journey and lead to better return to work outcomes and more effective service delivery.

Training of return to work (RTW) co-ordinators

Improving return to work outcomes of injured workers is a key focus of the Victorian Government. We know that workers who are not adequately supported stay on the Scheme longer and have poorer return to work outcomes which can adversely impact their overall wellbeing.

RTW co-ordinators play a vital role in supporting RTW. It is important they have the necessary skills, training and resources to provide this support and respond appropriately to contemporary challenges in Victorian workplaces.

The Bill makes amendments to the *Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013* to require employers to ensure that RTW co-ordinators appointed pursuant to the Act complete approved training and have assistance and facilities reasonably required to fulfil their functions in supporting injured workers returning to work.

Mandatory training courses and timeframes for completion will be determined by the Minister via a Ministerial Order. This will be published in the Government Gazette and available on the WorkSafe website. WorkSafe will also provide guidance to employers on what facilities and assistance may be appropriate for return to work co-ordinators in a compliance code.

Consistent with other provisions for appointing RTW co-ordinators under the Act, non-compliance with these provisions will be met with penalties.

The Victorian Government recognises that Victorian businesses are diverse in terms of size and nature of work. As such, training requirements may differ depending on whether the employer is a large or small business and will be delivered in such a way that is accessible and provides necessary information and skillsets. This may include a mix of both online training and face to face workshops.

Employers and Employees will be consulted on the training requirements and be provided with a reasonable time to comply after the obligations commence.

Statutory review

To ensure that the Scheme's operations, and claimants experience of this, are regularly evaluated, the Bill will require statutory reviews of the Scheme to be undertaken at least every five years, with the first such review to be completed by 31 December 2030. The report on each review will be required to be tabled in each house of Parliament within six months of the final report being provided to the Minister.

Lived experience membership in WorkSafe Advisory Committees

The Bill makes amendments to the *Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013* and *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, directly or indirectly, by incidents that occur at a workplace involving death, serious injury or serious illness. People with lived experience have valuable insight to provide and this amendment is an important step towards strengthening their voice in policymaking concerning occupational health and safety, workers' compensation and rehabilitation.

Improving supports for family members after a work-related death

The Victorian Government recognises the significant impact workplace trauma can have on the families of victims. Following on from the Labor Government's Families and Injured Workers System Reform and Implementation Package, the Bill contains several amendments which will improve support for families who have been forever impacted by serious workplace injuries and deaths to help them deal with their trauma and alleviate financial hardship.

Increasing weekly pension payable to dependent children

The Bill amends the *Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013* and the *Accident Compensation Act 1985* to increase the weekly pension payable to dependent children of a worker whose death is work-related. For workers with up to four dependent children, each child will be entitled to a weekly pension of 12.5 per cent of pre-injury average weekly earnings (PIAWE), more than double the current rate of 5 per cent of PIAWE. For workers with five or more dependent children, each child will be entitled to a pension paid at an equal share of 50 per cent of the worker's PIAWE (double the current entitlement of 25 per cent of PIAWE). The increased pension rate will apply to all future entitlements to the dependent child

pension on or after the proclamation date. The increased pension rate will also be applied retrospectively so that any person who was entitled to a dependent child pension in the five years prior to the commencement of the amendment will be entitled to have received that pension at 12.5 per cent PLawe. Impacted child pension recipients will receive a payment to account for the difference between the pension they received and what they are now entitled to receive. This amendment ensures that the Scheme provides better financial support for children and that child pensions are more reflective of the costs associated with raising a child.

Lump sum payment for economic loss of dependants that are not partners or children

The Victorian Government recognises the diverse range of dependants that a deceased worker may have that are not children or partners. The *Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013* currently does not provide compensation to a person who was economically dependent on a worker's earnings at the time of their death if there is also compensation payable to partners or children. This means that if a worker was providing economic support to a partner, a child and also a parent or sibling then the parent or sibling would not be entitled to compensation.

The Bill will create a new lump sum compensation entitlement for dependants other than partners and children where a deceased worker also has a dependent partner(s) or children. Eligible dependants will be able to receive compensation of up to \$20,000 for their economic loss. This compensation will be available for work-related deaths which occur on a date that is after Royal Assent.

Lump sum payment for non-economic loss

The Bill will also create an entitlement for close family members to access a lump sum payment for non-economic loss. A close family member includes a partner, parent, step-parent, guardian, grandparent, sibling, step-sibling, child or step-child of the worker or a child to whom the worker was a guardian at the time of their death. Eligible close family members can each receive \$10,000 compensation. This compensation will be available for deaths which occur on a date that is after Royal Assent.

Extending duration of provisional pension payments

Dependant partners of workers whose death is work-related are currently entitled to receive a provisional pension for up to 12 weeks while liability for their claim is determined. However, for around 1 in 4 claims it can take longer than 12 weeks for liability to be determined. This can result in dependant partners experiencing a gap in the financial assistance they receive, which can cause financial hardship. The Bill amends the *Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013* to extend the provisional payments period to up to 26 weeks after the death of the worker. This will apply to claims relating to a death which occurred on a day that is after Royal Assent. This amendment seeks to ensure that partners will not face a gap in payments between the end of the provisional pension and any ongoing pension they are entitled to. The Bill will also remove the current exclusion on making provisional payments in connection with a worker's death that was caused by suicide.

Therapy and other support services

The Victorian Government recognises that family members who are impacted by the death of a worker will have diverse support needs. While the Scheme already provides access to family counselling services, family members may benefit from a broader range of therapy or support services. The Bill will therefore enable the Minister to issue a Ministerial Direction identifying those therapy and other support services that families can access to support them with the grief and trauma they experience after a work-related death. It will also increase the amount of therapy and other support services which can be accessed to \$10,000 per work-related death. This amount will be indexed annually. This amendment will ensure that the Scheme can better meet the needs and preferences of families of workers who die at work or who have a with severe injury or eligible progressive disease.

Forensic cleaning

Some work-related deaths occur in a worker's own home or in the home of a family member. This can be extremely traumatising for families and, unfortunately, the Scheme is currently unable to assist families facing these traumatic circumstances. The Bill creates an entitlement to compensation for the reasonable cost of forensic cleaning of the home in such circumstances. WorkSafe and self-insurers will be able to provide this compensation as a provisional payment.

Improving the operation of the Workplace Injury Commission

WIC provides conciliation and arbitration services to support injured workers and employers to resolve disputes regarding workers' compensation claims. The Bill streamlines the administration of WIC's powers by allowing WIC to resolve disputes by certifying consent agreements made between parties during the arbitration process. It also allows WIC to document an enforceable agreement for a worker's arbitration costs and award a worker's arbitration costs in line with the Costs Schedule.

Currently, WIC is unable to share information with injured workers when the dispute resolution process has ended. To remedy this, the Bill allows WIC to share documents and information with the worker after conciliation and/or arbitration has concluded. This will avoid circumstances in which workers are required to make a freedom of information application to request access to this information, alleviating burden, stress and unnecessary administration.

Improving administrative arrangements for WorkSafe

The Bill will also make several amendments to improve the administration of the Scheme and its operational effectiveness. The Bill amends the *Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013* to ensure that further impairment benefits for eligible progressive diseases and serious lung injuries are indexed annually in line with the consumer price index (CPI). This will ensure the compensation amounts are aligned with those for further hearing loss, as intended.

The Bill will also streamline the appointment of hearing loss assessors by removing the requirement for these assessors to be approved by the Minister. Instead, any registered medical practitioner who has undertaken the Ministerially approved training course will be able to be appointed as a hearing loss assessor by WorkSafe. This amendment will reduce delay in appointing assessors and will align their appointment process with those in place for other impairment assessors under the Act.

The Bill amends the administrative arrangements for the appointment and resignation of the WorkSafe CEO. The WorkSafe CEO is currently appointed by the Governor in Council. The Bill will allow the WorkSafe Board to appoint the CEO with the approval of the Minister and allow the WorkSafe CEO to resign by providing a signed letter to the Chair of the WorkSafe Board. This will reduce administrative burden and align the CEO appointment process with that of similar Victorian Government entities.

The Bill will also create a power for the WorkSafe Board to appoint an Acting CEO where the WorkSafe CEO is unable to fulfil the duties of the role or the substantive office is vacant. The Acting CEO will have all the rights and powers and must perform all the duties, of the WorkSafe CEO as set out by the *Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013*, the *Accident Compensation Act 1985*, the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004*, the *Dangerous Goods Act 1985* and the *Equipment (Public Safety) Act 1994*.

Currently, the terms and conditions of appointment of Directors of the WorkSafe Board are also set by the Governor in Council. The Bill will allow the Minister to specify the terms and conditions of these appointments. WorkSafe Board Directors will also be able resign by writing to the Minister, rather than the Governor in Council. These minor amendments are designed to streamline these administrative processes.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Bill makes several important changes to the WorkCover Scheme that are necessary to improve the experiences of injured workers and claimants throughout their claims journey, increase the support available to families and dependants of workers whose death is work-related and improve the operation of the Scheme, WorkSafe and the Workplace Injury Commission.

I commend the Bill to the house.

Harriet SHING: I advise the house that some amendments to the Workplace Injury, Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2025 were passed in the Legislative Assembly. These amendments correct drafting errors identified after the bill was introduced to Parliament. The amendments ensure that all other dependants who are financially dependent on a deceased worker can access the new entitlement for economic loss and remove the requirement for family members who make a compensation claim following a work-related death to be legally represented or have their claim determined by a court. This is not consistent with the policy intent and will be removed from the original bill that was proposed. This is the nature of the amendments. I commend the bill to the house.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (23:10): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for one week.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for one week.

Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2025*Second reading***Debate resumed on motion of Gayle Tierney:**

That the bill be now read a second time.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (23:11): We have had the warm-up act this evening, and we are the support act. I thought it was a warm-up, and now we are on to the main event, the main course, with whatever delectable delights on the smorgasbord of regulatory reform that awaits us in what is the government's third regulatory legislation amendment reform bill – bills that the government brings before the Parliament from time to time –

Harriet Shing interjected.

Ryan BATCHELOR: because it gets better with age. That is right. It is very late, isn't it? They are important because they help the continuous process of making sure that various parts of our regulatory system are upgraded, updated or amended to ensure that they are delivering on their stated purposes and to fix various errors.

There are some who spend a lot of their time decrying things like government regulation; I am not one of those. I think that in many respects the way that government regulation is used does the things that keep our community safe. It does the things that keep updated the parts of the functioning of our administrative state that enable us to live our lives healthier, safer and freer and that make them less confusing and less inefficient. I think that it is too easy in politics sometimes to criticise red tape and to criticise various forms of regulation, but I think you will see in the regulatory reform bill that is before us today that regulatory changes can have a significant, serious and real impact on people's lives, and there are a few of the changes that are located in the regulatory legislation amendment reform bill today that will do just that.

Part of the task is to remove some redundant provisions and reporting notifications to help streamline administration. Another is to make what appear to be small and technical amendments but that can have really positive consequences. I want to come particularly to the provisions that are being amended in the Adoption Act 1984 that will do just that. But there are further amendments that are being made here by this bill, principally to things like the Domestic Animals Act 1994, which will empower councils to keep better data on the location of dangerous dogs. There will be some amendments made to the Environment Protection Act 2017 to make it quicker and easier for businesses to do the right thing and to be refunded financial assurances paid to the EPA. And there are some amendments to the Mineral Resources (Sustainable Development) Act 1990 to protect commercially sensitive information provided by licence holders to their work plans. So you can see across this that there are a range of areas in a range of settings that will provide a range of benefits. The one I want to spend a little bit of time talking about at the start of the speech is the changes that are being made to the Adoption Act. The amendments to the Adoption Act 1984 contained in this bill will allow the secretary to comply with a court order to produce documents in court proceedings or in royal commission proceedings, which is not currently permitted. The bill will allow natural relatives to access identifying information about adopted persons so they can be reunited.

The reason why I think this is particularly important is that it will particularly help families who have been impacted by forced adoptions, including members of the stolen generations, to connect with their biological families, for many of them a fundamental human need has been denied to them through no fault of their own. This Parliament and other parliaments in the last 20 years have spent a deal of time uncovering the stories of the stolen generations and those who have been subject to forced adoptions. The stories that we have heard have been harrowing about the experiences of individuals who were forcibly adopted. I know in work I have done previously when I was working supporting members of the Commonwealth Parliament and the Commonwealth minister for families, we spent a great deal of our time both supporting members of the stolen generations and also supporting those Australians

known as forgotten Australians, care leavers and others who were forcibly adopted out. Through the various inquiries that have been conducted by parliaments both here and in Canberra, we know that many, many children who were forcibly adopted in the course of our history have been left with very little connection to their biological family. They have been left with very little sense of who their family are. That has had, for many, serious, profound and long-lasting consequences that have been with them for all of their lives. Some only learn the identity of their family after those family members have died, and they are truly anguishing sets of circumstances.

What this bill seeks to do in making these amendments to the Adoption Act is to try and make a small change that can make a real and significant difference to those individuals by providing them with the capacity under the law to have greater access to information about their biological family. We know that there are sections of the Adoption Act that restrict access to adoption records. The advice that the government has received from counsel is that these provisions prevent the relevant secretary from complying with compulsory processes for the production of documents in the context of civil proceedings: producing documents pursuant to consent orders, including for early discovery and the inspection of documents by a party following discovery or in response to a subpoena. It has also prevented the secretary from complying with a notice to produce from a royal commission. We know that in recent civil litigation historical forced adoptions have highlighted that the restrictions imposed by the Adoption Act, as interpreted in recent legal proceedings, are preventing the secretary from disclosing adoption information even in response to a court order or a subpoena. That restriction is impeding the administration of justice in the broadest terms but also impeding the individuals affected in their quests both to claim justice and to find out more about who their family is. These changes that are being made here, with respect to adoptions and forced adoptions, will give the relevant secretary the authority to comply with those proceedings, and that will have significant benefits for those and not frustrate those civil court proceedings and not hinder the administration of justice.

The other purpose of some of the other changes is to support natural relatives of adopted persons receiving identifying information for the purposes of reunification, and that will help these people, as I said, who have often, through forced adoption practices, lost all connection to their relatives. So I think my purpose in going into this in some detail is to demonstrate that often those areas of our legislative agenda, our legislative program, that may on the face of it appear to be about drier topics – regulatory reform – actually have significant and real impacts on people's lives.

There are a range of other changes brought forth in the bill. There are changes to the Domestic Animals Act with respect to the requirements around notifications to local government authorities about particularly dangerous dog breeds. We know that there are, for good purposes relating to community safety, public safety and the safety of individuals in our community, measures in place to ensure that certain breeds of dogs that are regarded as dangerous have to have certain notification provisions put in place so that local councils, as the relevant and responsible authority for the management of these rules, have an understanding about where these animals are at any particular point in time. There have been circumstances where the existing provisions have meant that councils have been unable to keep track in certain circumstances of these dangerous dog breeds, and the changes that are being made here will mean that owners can no longer decline to notify councils of a new address at which the dangerous dog is kept. So that clarity in these regulatory provisions that are being proposed by the bill before us today will expand notification requirements to require owners to notify councils when a dangerous, menacing or restricted breed of dog has been moved, but also when that dog dies, so that the councils will have a much better and more accurate picture of the number and location of dangerous, restricted or menacing breed dogs that exist in their local government area. In particular, this change has been brought about through consultation with local government authorised officers in 2023.

There is also a change to the way that infringement notices for certain types of dog attack offences can be issued so that the penalties associated with owners who do not take proper care and control of their dogs can be done in a way that is more efficient and more effective and does not rely on lengthier and more complex court cases – so replacing these matters being dealt with by a court with being dealt

with by infringement officers. There are also some other further changes in the domestic animals section of this, particularly relating to declared bird organisations and requirements on ministers to ensure that our assessments for renewal applications are done within 60 days so that these declared organisations do not lose the continuity of their operations.

There are a range of changes to the Essential Services Commission Act 2001, providing the commission with the power to commence civil penalty proceedings within six years from the date of a contravention. There are a range of other changes to the Environmental Protection Act as well to allow the EPA to charge a business owner where their registered vehicle has been used to illegally dump waste.

This is a series of examples of what, on the face of a bill, on the face of a topic, might seem to be dry, regulatory changes, but they can and will have significant impacts on the everyday lives of Victorians. They are worthy of the consideration of the chamber, and I am happy the government supports them.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (23:26): I rise to speak to the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2025 at this late hour of night as we await the Fire Services Property Amendment (Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund) Bill 2025 to come back from the Assembly, which is a devastating result for so many. I have just got text messages as I have been half-listening to Mr Batchelor on this bill, with concerns from people in country Victoria where I grew up about how devastated they are and alerting me that they are all very worried about the CFA going offline. Now I have gone off on a tangent, but I did want to make that point that it is an important bill that we have been debating all day.

But to get back to this bill, this is an omnibus bill, and it largely is looking at making a number of changes. It amends nearly 40 regulations across 16 acts, which cover a number of portfolios, including the areas of child protection, the Attorney-General, environment, agriculture, energy, housing, water and a couple of other areas. The government claims that these changes will contribute to increased economic productivity and make it easier to do business in Victoria, but I just wanted to say that today when I woke up, I was listening to an interview on 3AW. It was with the man who has been quoted in today's *Australian*, Angie Romas, and his son Adam, who own a sandblasting business in Dandenong South. He very eloquently went on radio and spoke of the enormous impost of doing business in Victoria and the capacity for him to be able to pay a huge land tax bill. I raise this because of this point in this bill around increased economic productivity and making it easier to do business in Victoria. This bill might proclaim to do this, but there are so many issues that are actually making it so difficult for businesses to be able to do business. The land tax bill that he has been lumbered with has gone from \$8700 to over \$203,000 in just 10 years. I mean, that hike, that land tax grab, that cash grab again by the Allan Labor government is completely unsustainable.

Businesses cannot do the work they need to do. Economic productivity and doing business in Victoria need to be much better than they are with these tax grabs that are going on, whether it is the bill that we have just spoken about, which is going to absolutely smash farmers and every household and business, or the land tax that he spoke of, which is really very, very significant.

Business generates a stream of taxes that come in, whether it is payroll, GST or land tax. But I want to just quote from Paul Guerra, the chief executive of the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) – who has done a brilliant job in that role, I might add, and I am sure he will do a brilliant job in his next role heading up Melbourne. Yes, I think he is looking forward to that. But nevertheless, he has been very, very effective in supporting small business and business for the Victorian economy and the state. He said the spike in land tax was:

... pushing costs to unsustainable levels, stalling investment, slowing transactions and choking growth.

Instead of boosting activity, these changes are scaring off new and existing businesses and investors ...

I think they are really very important comments from Mr Guerra to just explain what is happening – how land taxes are making it so difficult for business to actually operate. We do want improved and

increased economic productivity in this state and we do want to make it easier for business to be able to do what they do, but the government are not doing that in so many areas of their responsibilities. It is quite disgraceful, and it is going to stifle that business growth, stifle investor confidence and drive business out of the state. That is not me saying that; that is the chief executive of VCCI saying that. We need to be giving businesses hope. We need to be giving the economy some confidence. Taxing your way out of a mess, which is what this government is doing, is not the way. They are trying to tax their way out of a mess because they have mismanaged taxpayers money. They have mismanaged it to such a degree that the levels of debt and interest that we are paying are unsustainable at the current rates. So they are trying to claw that back by taxing productivity, and that will stall economic growth.

While this bill makes minor tweaks in various places, and the government says it is to increase economic productivity and make it easier to do business in Victoria, I make those points because I think if the government were really serious about those issues then they would address their increasing desire to tax Victorians to the hilt. In fact they are destroying the state. They are wrecking the state. They are wrecking economic activity. They are wrecking hope, and they are wrecking the ability of this great state to get back on its way. It is going to take years and years and years to pay off this enormous debt that they have incurred.

Mr Batchelor very clearly went through the bill, and he outlined the acts that this bill has an impact on. He spoke about the areas that affect the Attorney-General's portfolio: the Adoption Act 1984; the Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 1996; the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005; the Circular Economy (Waste Reduction and Recycling) Act 2021; the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Act 2003; the Environment Protection Act 2017; the Domestic Animals Act 1994; the Electricity Industry Act 2000; the Mineral Resources (Sustainable Development) Act 1990; the Mineral Resources (Sustainable Development) Amendment Act 2023; the Essential Services Commission Act 2001; the Housing Act 1983; the Subdivision Act 1988; the Transfer of Land Act 1958; and the Water Act 1989. They are all the acts that this omnibus bill covers. I will not go into a huge detail on all of those various acts, but I do want to point out a few.

I think Mr Batchelor also referenced the area around adoption in part II, division 1, of the Adoption Act 1984. The government wants to implement, as I understand it, the recommendations from the Legal and Social Issues Committee in response to the inquiry into historical forced adoptions in Victoria. That was an important body of work in looking at that very sensitive issue, and it is a very serious and very important issue for many, many people. But it has taken quite some time for the government to even get to that response – over three years. These amendments largely do correlate with the recommendations from the inquiry. They will allow the Secretary of the Department of Justice and Community Safety to comply with a court order or subpoena to produce documents in litigation or a compulsory notice from a royal commission to produce documents concerning adoption information, and they will allow the secretary to obtain access to certain adoption-related records from Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria.

The bill will allow natural relatives, such as siblings of an adopted person, to access identifying information about the adopted person to enable them to identify or contact them. Of course this is I think the most important part, because that allows siblings and families to be able to be reunited. If they had been separated through adoption, then that does give them the ability to have that information be passed through and be identified so that those reunifications can occur. I do think that is important for those that have been through that process, and I think that is a particularly important part of this bill, and Mr Batchelor articulated that very well. It also allows the secretary to refuse to disclose certain information where they may believe that somebody's life may be in jeopardy or there could be at risk of physical harm or it could place them in some sort of harm, so it does give the secretary that ability if they feel that it is necessary.

The other area I want to go through is the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, which then allows the secretary to authorise a principal officer of an Aboriginal agency to exercise their various powers in relation to protective intervention or protective orders with respect to Aboriginal children as well as

any of their non-Aboriginal siblings. That is just really to enable or clarify that non-Aboriginal siblings may form part of the same class or belong with their Aboriginal siblings so that they are seen to be one and do not have any sorts of barriers around who they are. Again, I think that is an important element for this bill to recognise and for those individuals who are in that situation. So that will clarify those aspects.

Part 4 of the bill relates to the circular economy, waste reduction and recycling, and the amendment that applies to that particular act will update the list of provisions for which a civil penalty order can be made by a court. Now, there are around nine civil penalty provisions under which duty holders may be exposed to civil penalties. I understand that this is a bit of a tidying-up; there were errors in the initial drafting or an oversight which failed to prescribe the provisions previously having been subjected to civil penalties. So this is just tidying up those errors that had not been done in previous drafting around that particular piece of legislation.

There is another aspect to the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability I want to raise, and this allows the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability to undertake paid duties outside their role as a commissioner with the approval of the minister. Now, this is a little bit curious given that the government say they want to be able to attract and retain quality candidates for the role, but the commissioner is paid between \$290,000 and \$300,000 per annum, so it is not an insignificant payment to that commissioner's role. So to then have a part-time role outside what the commissioner is doing does seem to be a bit curious around, as has been said, a bit of a part-time gig for the commissioner and a nice part-time gig on \$300,000 to run this and look at it and then be able to go off and do something else. That is rather curious, I would have to say; if this commissioner is allowed to do that, what is next? Nevertheless that is the government's reasoning for the changes to that particular act.

The Domestic Animals Act 1994: the bill looks to amend that particular act to require owners of dangerous, menacing or restricted dog breeds to notify their local council if the dog has moved residence or died. We have heard too many stories in recent years of dangerous dogs and some shocking incidents where children have been involved – very sad cases of maulings and other very serious incidents. This is a good area of change so councils can then track where these dogs are, keep an eye on them and make sure that the owners care for them in an appropriate manner and they are not being let loose, so to speak. It is so they are able to manage them better and able to actually limit any potential risks that these dangerous dogs or these menacing dogs may have on the community. The other elements of that amendment are fairly self-explanatory.

I will just move on to the Electricity Industry Act. The bill allows the Essential Services Commission to make minimum solar feed-in tariff determinations for the upcoming financial year by 28 May in the preceding financial year rather than 28 February. This amendment probably does take away a little bit of the transparency that had previously been there. The government has said that there are no further requirements for reporting. We do need to ensure that we are doing it right, and this amendment actually diminishes transparency about how much renewable energy is being bought and sold by energy retailers. I suppose over time we will be able to tell where that is at given the demands on the system, how much will be actually generated and how much will be used through the renewable energy market.

The Environment Protection Act: the amendments that the bill goes to basically require that when the Environment Protection Authority Victoria or council revokes the registration of a licence or a permit, the notice must include the date from which the revocation takes effect. It is just, again, tidying up a little area. It will then not allow the EPA to pursue a business or business owner where a vehicle owned by the business has been used when waste has illegally been dumped. If a business has illegally dumped waste, then they can track that and manage that. I think that is fairly reasonable. We do not want illegal waste being dumped all over the place, and that can be tracked by the EPA. There are quite a few other elements to that particular amendment, but it is all just tidying up in relation to how the EPA needs to be able to conduct its work and simplify some of those procedures for the governing board. It also gives more flexibility to the board to be able to undertake the work that they do.

The Essential Services Commission Act has an amendment which really seeks to provide a limitation period of six years from the date on which a contravention occurred for the Essential Services Commission to commence civil penalty proceedings, as currently there are no explicit limitation periods specified in the act concerning civil penalty contraventions.

The Housing Act, the mineral resources acts and others are pretty minor amendments, although the Mineral Resources (Sustainable Development) Amendment Act 2023 removes the requirement of the department head to notify the Secretary of the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action within seven days of approving of a variation of a rehabilitation plan involving extractive work carried out on land within the Melbourne strategic assessment levy area. It is a bit technical and there are other technical elements to it, but the change is proposed on the basis that a variation to a rehabilitation plan is not a levy event. So this one is a little bit technical around that requirement, but it is really looking at making sure that those regulatory components come online in a timely fashion.

For Service Victoria, the amendment to part 12 of the act seeks to raise revenue for the government by charging fees for various government services and providing the Service Victoria CEO with the power to require fees and charges to be paid by customers using the services or products provided by Service Victoria. The government say that the fees, when they are applied, must provide or improve access to government services, so they are actually requiring that Service Victoria is actually doing what it says it is doing.

The rest of the bill deals with some other areas around the Water Act and the Transfer of Land Act. The Transfer of Land Act amendment removes outdated references to paper-based conveyancing transactions and other redundant provisions. There are a few other technical elements around that one. The Water Act amendment allows the minister to set a date by which the Victorian Environmental Water Holder must submit a corporate plan, providing necessary flexibility in reporting dates.

These amendments are largely non-contentious in relation to tidying up some drafting areas and some other technical areas in that list of bills. There are quite a number of them, as I have tried to highlight. I have not gone into a huge amount of detail in relation to the exact workings of each of the bills, but I have tried to give a snapshot of exactly what most of the amendments aim to do. Therefore we certainly will not be opposing this bill. It is tidying up those areas that I said and making some small amendments. I think those ones around the Adoption Act and Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 are particularly significant, given what they are aiming to do, which is to improve the outcomes for children, Aboriginal children and other children, who have been adopted in reuniting them with their siblings and family members. Those areas of this bill I think are very important and more significant than perhaps others, although they are technical in nature. I do think there needs to be some oversight and transparency, and there are some aspects around the removal of various transparency elements of a number of the acts. However, the government has assured the opposition that there are no concerns around overseeing them and making sure that the acts do what they are actually intended to do. With those words I will not prolong my speech any longer. I think, at this late hour of the night, I will stop there and pass on to the next speaker.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (23:49): I am quite excited to be speaking on this bill – it has been sitting in my notes for about three months, I think. This Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2025 does a lot of things, taking on everything from dangerous dogs to dumping rubbish and bird clubs. As much as I love a good bird club, I am not going to be talking about many of the details of the bill, most of which is sensible regulatory reform. However, I am going to be talking about two changes which we would like to see, and my colleague Ms Gray-Barberio will talk about the adoption parts of the bill later in the debate. This bill fixes things that are not quite working in our legislation, but there are some very sensible reforms which are not here.

In the May 2024 budget the government announced \$2 million for Trust for Nature to facilitate nature covenants on private land in Melbourne. Conservation covenants are a huge success story. Victoria has some amazing wildlife and bush on private land and plenty of landowners who would like to see

their land protected. Covenants allow these landowners to enter into agreements which protect that habitat and the species in it for generations to come. This \$2 million for Trust for Nature was then legislated via a new section in the Victorian Conservation Trust Act 1972, which established an account for Trust for Nature to use. However, it limits the use of the account to vacant residential land in Melbourne. Trust for Nature is very happy to prioritise covenants on this land; however, the reality is there is not that much land that meets this criterion, and as a result Trust for Nature is not able to use the full \$2 million. We had previously drafted an amendment to address this issue; however, we have since worked with the government and received an assurance that the forthcoming state tax bill will solve the problem and enable more landowners to protect the habitat on their land via Trust for Nature. As a result, we will not be moving that amendment, but I did want to put it on record that we look forward to the government following through on their promise around this important issue.

The second issue that I want to raise, although it falls slightly out of scope of the different issues that are addressed in this bill, is that we believe this was a missed opportunity to protect Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria from privatisation. Last year the then Treasurer floated the idea of privatisation of births, deaths and marriages via a joint-venture partnership to deliver some of its services. Despite the fancy words, the idea of privatisation faced a strong backlash from the community, who believe our private information needs to be carefully protected and not managed on a for-profit basis. In the past Labor has tried to privatise services and infrastructure by stealth via public-private partnerships or moves like leasing the Port of Melbourne for 50 years. While the state still owns the land for 50 years, it will be run by a private entity whose priority is profit and not meeting the needs of Victorians. We know when times are tough governments of all stripes are tempted to sell the furniture to the highest bidder. Births, deaths and marriages information should be protected, and this could have been achieved by ensuring that any future privatisation could only go ahead with the democratic approval of both houses of Parliament. This is a change that would have strong community support, and I would urge the government to consider it.

I do not have any further comments on the rest of the bill. The Greens will be supporting this bill. As I indicated, my colleague Ms Gray-Barberio will have some further comments to make about the adoption aspects of the bill.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (23:53): I also rise to partake in what has been a most enjoyable debate on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2025. It is indeed a content-rich environment and a diverse one at that. No doubt there have been many things on in Melbourne tonight. There may have even been a game of football or something, but I think this is what people have been holding out for, as Mr Batchelor referred to – the smorgasbord we have before us in this bill.

Renee Heath: The gallery is full!

Michael GALEA: The gallery is a little bit emptier than it has been at other points of the day, but I am sure they are watching in some capacity. This is a wideranging bill that covers various different relatively minor – some, though, are very important – regulatory reform aspects. It links in as part of the ongoing iterative process in terms of what this government is continuing to do to make sensible reforms, improve regulations and streamline those processes as much as can be reasonably done.

We have had many debates in this place in particular this week and in weeks past about the very important work that the government is doing in the space of planning and making it easier for more Victorians, especially young Victorians, to get their own home. That is a very, very important thing that we are doing. If you look at the work through Better Regulation Victoria and all the other various aspects, there is a long history that we do have of reform in the state which is designed to make services easier to access for individuals – better services – but also to streamline those processes for businesses too. I will pick up on a comment from Ms Crozier, who mentioned the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. And yes, I will join in wishing Paul Guerra all the very best for his

forthcoming tenure at Melbourne Football Club. You seem very excited about that too, Minister Shing. Are you a Melbourne fan?

Harriet Shing interjected.

Michael GALEA: She is about to be. The force of Mr Guerra's personality will make Minister Shing a Melbourne fan. I think we can bestow that great honour on you tonight to join that illustrious club. Things do happen in the Legislative Council late at night sometimes.

But on a more serious note, and a very exciting note as well, I do note that for just the 14th time there will be, this year, a World Chambers Congress – only the 14th. I was surprised that there had not been more. I am not quite sure how often this event gets held, but it is indeed a very significant event for the various chambers of commerce around the world. This year, in September, it is going to be held in Melbourne. We know we certainly are the major events capital of Australia and one of the key major events hubs of the world I dare say, and this is another landmark event. I know, having spoken with people from various different corners of the world, they are very excited about coming to Melbourne this year. Just a few weeks ago I had the great opportunity of meeting with the Kyiv chamber of commerce, and they are very excited indeed about coming to Melbourne and bringing what they hope to be a large delegation with them as well. So it will be a very exciting time in that first week of September, when we will have a huge chunk of the world's business communities and other thought leaders as well descending on Melbourne for what will be, I am sure, a very important congress.

There are a number of pieces of legislation that are amended by the bill before us today, and one such act is the Domestic Animals Act 1994. Of course we all love our domestic pets. They brighten up our lives, and indeed, as Minister Shing says, our wild ones do as well sometimes. I am not sure if donkeys are technically classified as domestic pets.

Harriet Shing interjected.

Michael GALEA: They would not be owned by anyone. I think you have just described my cat, though, as well, Minister Shing. I am sure there is a blurred distinction somewhere from wild to domesticated. But we do all love our pets, whether it is our donkeys, whether it is our horses, Mrs McArthur, or whether it is our cats or our dogs.

A member interjected.

Michael GALEA: Chickens. Yes, chickens have been a recurring theme in some debates, I believe, this week as well. Whether it is our chickens that some people might have as pets too, they do brighten up our lives. I am sure, for many members of this place, there is nothing better than coming home after a long day or a long sitting week to your chickens, to your cats, to your rabbits, to your donkeys, to your dogs.

Harriet Shing interjected.

Michael GALEA: I am sure we will be hearing the screams of your donkeys from right here in Parliament, Minister Shing. I am sure they will be eagerly awaiting your return at some godforsaken hour later this evening.

Bev McArthur interjected.

Michael GALEA: I am speaking about a very important piece of legislation, Mrs McArthur. Indeed sometimes we get, in this Parliament, graced with visitations from pets, whether it is Bracks the dog, who comes into the annexe, or whether it is indeed Mr Larry Purcell, who visited my office earlier this evening. It was wonderful to have him come and visit. The surname is perhaps debatable, but Larry came to visit, and it was lovely to have a bit of a play with him and take him outside for a short walk as well. Those sorts of things certainly can brighten up what can otherwise be a very serious workplace.

Dogs are terrific. We are very, very lucky to have them. In some small cases, though, we can see dangerous dogs causing significant issues, and when those issues do arise they are very severe indeed. We have seen some horrific examples of dog attacks in this state and more broadly over recent years. We could probably have a whole separate debate as to whether it is really the dog's fault or how they were raised, but it is important that where these cases arise we do keep good data management of those situations. That is where the reform to this act comes into play in assisting councils to keep that data as up to date as possible and as effective as possible.

Business interrupted pursuant to standing orders.

Harriet SHING: Pursuant to standing order 4.08, I move:

That the sitting be extended.

Motion agreed to.

Michael GALEA: Indeed the reform, when it comes to domestic animals, is one relatively small component today but an important one for community safety that is provided for under this bill. It comes of course on the back of a raft of measures that this government has implemented, whether it has been banning the cruel puppy farms – we have now got the strictest breeding rules in the country; making it an offence to sell a pet without a valid microchip and source number from the pet exchange register; removing the need for greyhounds to be muzzled in public; producing Victoria's first animal welfare action plan, which recognises that animals are sentient; or giving renters the right to keep a pet – we have a great many renters in this state, and they have just as much right to have pets as anyone else. Of course we have also reformed the Animal Welfare Advisory Committee to ensure that government receives expert advice and become the first state to introduce mandatory reporting of animal fate data for dogs and cats in shelters and pounds. So a wide range of measures have already been implemented, and the reforms today will in some small way help to complement that.

A very significant piece of this legislation before us today – significant in terms of its effects more than its volume – is some changes to the Adoption Act 1984, which will promote consistency with other legislation and some existing policies. This will provide a legal basis for the departmental secretary to comply with a court order in order to produce any documents required by any court or by a royal commission in any proceedings which will facilitate support and better outcomes for a child. Currently this is not permitted by the legislation, an oversight which will be addressed in the bill before us today. It will also, and Ms Crozier went to this point as well, allow natural relatives to access identifying information about an adopted person so that they can be reunited. We know how important it is for people to have that sense of connection, that sense of belonging. In this country we have many great stories to tell from our history but many bad ones too, and the stolen generations is perhaps one of the absolute worst stories that we have. The measures in this bill will I certainly hope go a significant way to supporting people who themselves or through family members are in some way connected to the stolen generations to reclaim that identity, to find that connection, to build those links with loved ones lost, loved ones and relatives that were never known that otherwise could have been. A fundamental human need, a fundamental human right, will be facilitated by the measures in this bill.

The issue of child adoption and especially forced adoption is one that we have had a long and confronting journey with in this country. In previous speeches this week I had some opportunity to speak about a recent visit I paid to Ukraine. In a very short amount of time I was able to discuss the over 19,000 – suspected to be more than 30,000 – children who have been forcibly abducted from stolen land, from temporarily occupied territory that Russia has taken from Ukraine. Of all the meetings I had – frankly every meeting I had there would have been worth the visit just in and of itself – a meeting in particular that I had with a remarkable woman, Anastasiia Stepula from the Ukrainian Child Rights Network, was particularly profound. She told me in great detail about the issues, the challenges, what has been happening but also the challenges in overcoming and trying to bring these children back. There are currently 1.6 million children in these illegally occupied zones. We know that at least 30,000 have been taken; we do not know how many more will be. Younger

children are forcibly adopted out. They are often stolen completely or under false pretences – under the guise of ‘We’re going to take your children to the beach for a day out’ – never to be seen again. Their names are changed; their birthdates are changed. They are adopted to a family in Russia. Many that are too young will never even know their true identity. For older children, they are too often put into camps to be brainwashed and indoctrinated and to be trained up to fight against their own country once they turn 18.

There are many people, mostly civilians themselves, who have against incredible odds managed to get their children back. Older children have managed to find their way home, but it is a small minority. Quite startling to me as well is that given the contested status of occupied territories, it is actually very difficult under international law to prosecute these cases, which was quite staggering to hear. It is one of many, many horrendous things going on and part of a campaign of terror against an entire group of people that has been perpetrated by a murderous tyrant who surely deserves to rot in hell.

There are of course many other aspects of this bill as well. Regulatory reform covers a wide range of areas, whether it is the Essential Services Commission or various other aspects that have been touched upon. Referring to the previous speaker, I know Dr Mansfield was keen for Trust for Nature to get a guernsey as well. I know that is a topic that we have actually discussed a few times in this place. I know it is of particular interest to Ms Terpstra, as I did once tell the chamber, that when I was much, much younger, as a child, I actually was, for want of a much better word, a model and featured in a Trust for Nature brochure, standing admiringly and looking up at a large gum tree with a friend of mine. A family friend was working for Trust for Nature at the time, and they needed some children to facilitate, to help demonstrate how wonderful some of these sites are. The Harbury site, which is in Pakenham Upper, not too far from my region now, is a beautiful site, and though I have not been back since, I believe it is still very much cared for and looked after by that organisation too. I always enjoy hearing about Trust for Nature in this place. Indeed it is important that we acknowledge the very valuable work that it does, and we will very much continue to support it.

Evan Mulholland interjected.

Michael GALEA: A Hamer initiative, you say, Mr Mulholland. Well, we are happy to give credit where credit is due. He was certainly one of the more progressive Liberal premiers, wasn’t he? My time is up, but I will commend the bill to the house.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (00:08): I will have it in *Hansard* that it was a fantastic Hamer government initiative, because we know that it is indeed the Liberal Party that is the true party of conservation here in the state of Victoria.

I want to talk about the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2025 and indeed talk about some of the issues to do with our environment and natural environment here in the state of Victoria. I particularly want to talk about a crisis that is occurring in the northern suburbs and also the western suburbs, as my colleagues tell me, and that is of illegally dumped rubbish, which is a crisis that is out of control in the northern suburbs. I note that some elements of the bill do deal with this and take a step in the right direction.

Colleagues in this chamber would have heard me speak pretty frequently about illegally dumped rubbish in this place. It is because it is a crisis. Too many businesses and individuals are using the northern suburbs as a dumping ground for hard waste and, even worse, a dumping ground for illegally dumped asbestos. Instead of disposing of it safely they are dumping hazardous materials like asbestos and other materials in our open spaces in our community, and it is really not good enough for people to be doing that. I spent a lot of time in my previous portfolio in the building space working with different families that were trying to get into a house and dealing with a small minority of very dodgy builders. To my great frustration, many of the companies caught out dumping rubbish are also the same abhorrent people that get caught dumping all of the rubbish from their building sites illegally in our community. These are rubbish individuals in this case.

I have to recognise this: in July last year community groups in the northern suburbs lit up at the sight of a truck bogged at the side of the Hume Highway with its load in the air attempting to illegally dump rubbish on the side of the Hume Highway. They happened to get caught out because they got bogged. I could not help but laugh and enjoy the thousands of comments on different community groups in the north about the misfortune that this cowardly individual had got himself in – and they are cowards. They are cowards because they dump all their rubbish onto our open spaces in our community. There is no other way to describe these individuals. Go about your business and dispose of your rubbish safely, or we will call you out on it. I am pleased that this bill goes some way to putting some liability onto those businesses where the owners of said vehicles cannot be identified. They are crooks and they are crooked. The open space in the northern suburbs is not yours to dump your rubbish in.

I would also like to acknowledge the advocacy of Hume City Council in this space. In March last year, actually, through this Parliament, I advocated for the government to put a fence around land adjacent to the Hume Highway on Mount Ridley Road at a water-filling station because it had for several months become a free tip of illegally dumped rubbish. Everything from hazardous waste to nappies to garbage bags to cardboard was in a big stinking pile on Mount Ridley Road which was being used as a free tip. I want to also thank Hume councillor Jim Overend for putting up a notice of motion at council advocating for the government to put a fence around this area, as we had done in the Parliament as well. Then, several months later in June, the state government finally acted and put a fence around that area. It is no longer a free tip for people to dispose of their rubbish illegally, which is good.

I also want to acknowledge, particularly in the environment space, some exciting businesses in my community. It was great to visit Aussie Bin Hire in Thomastown last week, a great recycling business in my electorate, with the Shadow Minister for Environment Brad Rowsell. It is great to see this business grow and take off as part of our circular economy. I want to thank Shahroze Gilani, Junaid Bhai and Abdullah Bhai for hosting us there in Thomastown.

I also want to speak about our natural environment. I want to speak about it, acknowledging earlier I said the Liberal Party is the natural party of conservation – and that is true. I want to speak also about a place I took the Shadow Minister for Environment last week, which is the Greenvale Reservoir and the Greenvale Reservoir Park. I mentioned to the shadow minister that it has been over 3000 days since the government back in 2017 promised \$1.4 million to reopen the Greenvale Reservoir Park. It was closed for dam wall reconstruction works in 2014 and never reopened. Then in 2017, out from the election, the government promised \$1.4 million to reopen it – and then nothing happened. Part of that media release said they were going to upgrade the Somerton Road entrance to the Greenvale Reservoir, but that also contains overgrowth of weeds, illegally dumped rubbish, broken-down concrete – nothing seems to have been spent. So I actually put to the government this week: what was that money used for? We do not know – we do not know what it was used for. That is \$1.4 million that we do not know how it was spent. Was it just a media release? We actually do not know. I think communities like Greenvale deserve better than that.

As I explained, there was \$1.4 million to reopen the Greenvale Reservoir Park in 2017. It was quite surprising actually: I obviously advocated on behalf of the community, we had about 1500 signatures on my petition to open the Greenvale Reservoir Park, and so finally we see the government spring into action. We had the then Minister for Water, Ms Shing, with the member for the neglectorate of Greenvale, promise \$3 million to reopen the Greenvale Reservoir Park in November last year. We still do not really have a timeframe on when that might happen, given the last media release was over 3000 days ago – that promise was \$1.4 million in 2017, that media release by Ms Spence and Ms D'Ambrosio. You have to wonder when the park will actually open and what that \$1.4 million is being spent on and what that \$3 billion is being spent on now and whether it is actually happening.

I truly hope the government gets it right this time and it is not just a media release, because we have had plenty of media releases up in the north. The community has a lot of fond memories of the Greenvale Reservoir Park. It is where many saw their first kangaroo; there have been many cultural barbecues from the Turkish community, from the Italian community. I have got a lot of Italian cousins

in Greenvale, and I went there to the reservoir park many times as a kid for family days with extended families and cousins. I know many in our community, from our Iraqi community to our Turkish community and others, really enjoyed and have fond memories of going there to recreate, to kick a footy and to have a barbecue, and they really look forward to being able to do that again in such a wonderful part of the world and such a scenic part of the world that has been closed off for I think too long. As I said, I have obviously got scepticism on whether the government can keep this commitment – this \$3 million commitment now; it was \$1.4 million in 2017, but now it is \$3 million. I wonder whether that is inclusive of the \$1.4 million or not. Hopefully the minister can provide me with some details on that, as I spoke about it this week in an adjournment.

I received several responses back to my advocacy on this issue in the Parliament. The Minister for Environment actually mentioned that there were two toilets. I know Mr McGowan likes to talk about toilets, but I also have a bit of a toilet issue in regard to this park, because the Minister for Environment informed me that there were not one but two new toilets as part of an upgrade to the northern section of the park, which is very small but is open to the community; you can go in there. The Minister for Environment actually informed me that they had upgraded the picnic area, and they had installed two new toilets. I had been there many times, and I even went there – it is around the corner from my office – and rechecked. But there were no toilets – no toilets. Yet in several responses to me the Minister for Environment – copied and pasted probably from the department – said they had installed two toilets. I later did another adjournment on this, and he was, embarrassingly, forced to clarify. He did not say that he himself got it wrong but said Parks Victoria had clarified that no toilets have actually been installed. So there you go: no toilets have been installed. It was just a mistake. Many in my community found that bemusing. But I am really looking forward to that park reopening.

As Mr Galea mentioned, this bill makes several changes to do with adoption, and this is a very important topic. In my maiden speech, actually, I talked about Victoria's dwindling birth rate and how it is a big issue for us to grapple with as a state. Family formation is a really big issue and an issue that I endeavour to make a contribution towards and tackle in my parliamentary career in any way I can, because it is important for our state and it is important for our economy, but family formation is important to people's lives. Unfortunately, it used to be the fact back in 2022 that we had a birth rate of 1.48 children per woman, which is low – lower than the rest of the country. That has now fallen to 1.39 children per woman, well below our replacement rate here in Victoria and unfortunately the lowest in the country. People are not having children because of a cost-of-living crisis, because of their housing situation, because of their economic circumstances, and that is a really, really sad thing. We need to encourage family formation, traditional families or non-traditional families. We need to do everything possible, and hopefully changes to the Adoption Act 1984 can do that, because family formation is really important. I am certainly doing my part. My wife and I are having another baby this July, which will be our third – so one for the country. But it is quite an important issue for our nation and an important issue for our state. 1.39 children per woman is the lowest in the country, and the crisis of family formation and encouraging that in the future is a really important issue for this Parliament collectively to tackle.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (00:23): I am pleased to speak on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2025 and pleased to offer my contributions, but in particular to address the changes in relation to child protection and adoption. As my colleague Dr Mansfield noted, the Greens do support this bill. We support a number of the regulatory changes that the bill will bring. We support Aboriginal agencies having more authority with respect to Aboriginal children. We think it is a good step towards self-determination, and we support the ability of natural siblings, grandparents et cetera of adopted people to get information about the adopted person. The Greens recognise that the intention behind new section 90A is to prevent harm. We support steps to keep people safe, but we cannot ignore the very real risks that this clause poses to the rights of adoptees and parents who seek to access information about their own history – information that for too long in this state was deliberately withheld.

In scrutinising this bill I met with Sharyn White, the vice-president of Adoptee Rights Australia. She had a number of concerns about the bill, which I want to address today. Let us be clear about what new section 90A proposes. It gives the secretary the power to withhold identifying information from someone if they believe there is a risk of harm, but what is concerning is just how vague that standard is. The bill does not define what constitutes a risk of harm. There is no clear threshold, and it leaves a lot of room for discretion and not much room for accountability. Worse still, there is no robust avenue for review. If the secretary decides to withhold your information, you cannot appeal to the Office of the Victorian Information Commissioner, you cannot go to VCAT and your only option is the County Court – a daunting, expensive and time-consuming process that most people simply will not even bother pursuing.

While the government has a role to play in preventing harm, particularly to those experiencing family violence, it is important to also balance this with appropriate procedural safeguards or protections to ensure that the law is applied consistently. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case with this section of the bill. New sections 97A and 90A blatantly disregard the findings of the review of the Adoption Act 1984 by the Victorian Law Reform Commission tabled in 2017, which recommend rewriting the information access section of the Adoption Act 1984 and in fact the entire act, including making decisions reviewable by the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, VCAT.

The broad discretion to withhold information without requirement for a formal finding, independent assessment or right to be heard contravenes principles of fairness, transparency and proportionality. It risks arbitrary application and may result in individuals being denied information that is critical to their identity, their history or relationships without explanation or recourse. It is crucial that adopted people and their relations have the right to access information relating to their culture or hereditary medical risks. We know that secrecy and shame have been hallmarks of past adoption practices in Victoria, and we know how harmful that has been. Countless Victorians are still carrying the grief of not knowing who their family is or having no medical history and no understanding of their identity. The harm is ongoing.

The Victorian Law Reform Commission recognise this. In 2017 they released a comprehensive report on access to adoption information, and their message was clear: the act needs a full, modern overhaul. They said the adoption information system would reflect contemporary understandings of privacy, trauma and human rights. But instead of responding to that report with comprehensive reform, we are here debating a narrow and potentially regressive clause that has not been subject to broad public consultation and that has not been properly justified, and that risks setting us back.

I just want to speak for a moment about fairness. We have robust systems under the Freedom of Information Act 1982 to weigh the public interest and personal safety against the right to access information. We have review rights, clear criteria and independent oversight, but none of those protections apply here. We are creating a parallel system under the Adoption Act, one that offers less transparency and fewer rights. Why should one person's access to their birth records be treated with fewer safeguards than someone else's request for government information? Why are we lowering the bar? This bill does not answer those questions.

The Greens believe in a restorative approach. We believe in centring the voices of adoptees and their families, and we encourage the government to consult with Adoptee Rights Australia to address these concerns with this multifaceted and comprehensive bill. It is so important that we balance all of the positives of this bill with carefully safeguarding any areas of concern for the community.

As I noted at the beginning of my speech, the Greens are in support of the positive changes to make and simply encourage careful attention to the points I have raised today. I commend this bill to the house.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (00:29): I also rise to make a contribution on the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2025. This is an omnibus bill that will enact a number of changes to a number of acts, and this will be a test of my mental faculties at this time of the

morning. It is very late at night and certainly early in the morning on Friday now, and getting across this will be challenging. But nevertheless, what I think I will do is highlight some of the acts that will be changed. Then I will focus on one of them which is of great importance. The bill seeks to support effective and efficient regulation, and it will amend the following acts: the Essential Services Commission Act 2001, the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, the Minerals Resources (Sustainable Development) Act 1990, the Adoption Act 1984 and the Environment Protection Act 2017. It also seeks to amend the Service Victoria Act 2018, the Transfer of Land Act 1958, the Mineral Resources (Sustainable Development) Amendment Act 2023 and the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Act 2003.

There are also some other amendments that will streamline processes and reduce administrative burdens for businesses, departments, agencies and regulators. The acts that are proposed to be amended under that tranche are the Housing Act 1983, the Electricity Industry Act 2000 and – this one piqued my interest – the Domestic Animals Act 1994. The amendments proposed for that particular act are to allow for certain organisations to have their registrations and approval removed at their request but also to require declared bird organisations to provide for a renewal of application 60 days prior to the end date of any active approval to allow for sufficient time and consideration of the renewal application before the active renewal lapses. I thought, ‘This is quite interesting. I wonder how many bird clubs we actually have here in Victoria.’ It was interesting. I had a bit of a look on the internet. Some of them have very interesting names, and there are quite a few. I know the minister will be interested in hearing about this as well.

The Yorkshire Canary Club of Victoria would be a very interesting organisation indeed. I know there are many people in Victoria who would deeply care and have deep interest in owning or showing Yorkshire canaries. I did not know that such a thing existed, but there you go – Yorkshire canaries are a thing. There are the Australian Plainhead Preservation Club and the Geelong & District All Breeds Pigeon Club – because I know there are people who call themselves pigeon fanciers, but they also like to race pigeons, so there you go. There are clubs that actually do these things, so you can join a club and participate and partake in racing or breeding pigeons. This one was also quite interesting: the Victorian Lizard Canary Society. I did not know there was such a thing as a lizard canary. You learn lots of things that you would never have thought you would learn about. You learn all this knowledge you never thought you would ever learn about, but you have now acquired it; whether you like it or not, you have acquired some knowledge. There you go. That is the Victorian Lizard Canary Society, and then there is also the Melbourne Canary Improvement Society. I do not know how you would improve your canary, but there must be a way because there is a club that helps you do it. There must be skills that you can learn about improving canaries, and I am sure there are many and varied skills for improving canaries. But there is also the Budgerigar Council of Victoria, a very important council. Everyone loves budgerigars. I used to have a budgie when I was a kid, and it used to sit on my dad’s beer can and drink beer out of the beer can, which is probably not a thing you would encourage today. But back in the day that was a thing that used to happen, and the budgie actually loved it.

There are also the Avicultural Society of Australia, the Wimmera Bird Club, the Gippsland Caged Bird Society, the Victorian Canary Society, the Border Fancy Canary Club, the Gloster Canary Club of Victoria, the Melbourne and Regional Fife Canary Club – there are all these different types of canaries; who would have thought – the Mornington Peninsula Avicultural Society, the Melbourne Border Fancy Canary Club, the Melbourne Pigeon Society and the Australian Canary Association. A shout-out to all those clubs. They are fantastic clubs. I am sure they are well patronised by many Victorians who like canaries or fancy pigeons.

I note there were no chicken clubs there.

Lee Tarlamis: You could start one.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Absolutely right. If you want to, you could do a chicken appreciation or chicken fanciers club, because I know that many people do like to in fact show their chickens. There

is many a regional show where people turn up and compete to win prizes for chickens. It is 12:35 in the morning, and this is what we get to talk about at this early hour. But yes, there are chicken-fanciers, and I know I have seen some pretty big roosters in my time, particularly at many a regional show. I know I can reflect on –

Lee Tarlamis interjected.

Sonja TERPSTRA: There you go. As I say, people reflect on the fact that, particularly going to the Royal Easter Show and the Melbourne Royal Show, people come from regional areas and bring their chooks with them and show them, and there are prizes for that. Just like I was mentioning, I am sure there are also prizes for the Fife canary and the lizard canary – who would have known the lizard canary – and the Plainhead Preservation Club. These things are important because it will allow these organisations to apply for renewal of their application 60 days prior to the end date. Why do you need this? Well, because if you are a declared bird organisation, what it means is that you can then sell these birds and you can do it without having to do it through a pet shop or a residential premises. It is important, but there are some birds that are exempt from this requirement. They are waterfowl, fancy poultry – there you go; if you have fancy poultry you do not have to worry about this – fancy pigeons, racing pigeons and birds used for the commercial production of meat or eggs. If you have things other than that, then you have got to basically comply with these requirements.

There is a list of declared bird organisations. As I said, I give a shout-out to those bird organisations. Like I said, I am sure that there are people who are avid bird-fanciers. The Budgerigar Council of Victoria is a very important council, as I said before. There is lots you can learn. Like I said, you can improve your canary. How that works, I do not know, but it is something you can do. These are important things. As I said, it enables these very important clubs to do more and to advocate or increase awareness of the importance of the breeds, particularly for people who like birds and like bird-keeping and for the promotion of aviculture and the wellbeing of birds, whether in captivity or in the wild. That is important.

I know other speakers have spoken about other things tonight. There are some other acts of importance that are being amended through this bill. As I said, the Allan Labor government takes regulatory reform and amendment very seriously, and this is another example and another tranche of acts that are being amended. A bill such as this supports efficient and effective regulation, because we need to have that efficiency. We like to have efficient regulation. It is important to be efficient and effective when you are regulating, so we do that and we consistently review it to make sure we are consistently effective. We want to promote consistency with other legislation and existing policies, because when you have legislation things can change and policies can change. It is important to make sure that when we are reviewing legislation it is consistent with other pieces of legislation, and as policies change we make sure it is consistent with that as well.

The bill also reduces the administrative burden of regulation. I just spoke about bird clubs, and you can see that by having the proposed amendment for the bird clubs it means that they can just notify the agency 60 days prior to the end date of their application for renewal before it lapses, because then there will be some other process. Trying to streamline that means that they get to save time. It reduces the regulatory burden, and it is amending legislation to make sure any technical errors are addressed and to make minor updates as well. Again, these are important things. Making sure we can amend our legislation so that acts do not basically get out of step or out of kilter or become basically stumbling blocks or insurmountable problems for other acts of Parliament is important.

As I mentioned, I have been talking about pets and animals, and with dogs one of the things that is going to happen under the amendment to the Domestic Animals Act includes notification of the death or change of address of a dangerous, menacing or restricted breed of dog. Currently councils are not informed if a dog under one of these categories dies, and therefore they are not aware of how many are living in the municipality at one time. That is going to help local councils have better data and access to information, which is crucial. Currently, if some owners of dangerous or menacing dogs

refuse to provide an address when they move, they are only required to notify that they have moved. That effectively means that councils do not necessarily have the tools that they need to be across where a dangerous dog might be kept. It is a rare occurrence, but nevertheless fatalities can result from dog attacks. Therefore the introduction of this amendment would promote the right to life and supports local governments' ability to ensure appropriate precautions are taken for keeping dangerous, menacing or restricted dog breeds to minimise any safety risks. We all love our dogs and most of the time our loving furry pets are gorgeous, but of course if there are some menacing dog breeds the last thing we want is for somebody to be severely injured or killed as a result of a dog attack. This is just going to help the councils keep on top of that and know where those dog breeds might be.

There are a range of other things that are happening under this omnibus amendment act. For example, some of them relate to our circular economy legislation. Even though that act was only passed in 2021, which was not that long ago, we want to update the list of provisions for which a civil penalty order can be made by the court. This would reflect new provisions introduced by the Environment Legislation Amendment (Circular Economy and Other Matters) Act 2022, which is already in force.

Again, we need to make sure we update things to keep pace with other changes that have come on board to keep things harmonised and make sure that everything works together as it was intended to. It is a good thing. As I said, it is something that the Allan Labor government does to continue to make sure we have bills or laws that support efficient and effective regulation and, whether it is businesses or clubs or other entities that are bound to comply with various rules and laws, that it can be done in an efficient and effective way that is going to be good for the community as well. We think this bill is a sensible bill, and of course it supports our overall regulatory reform agenda.

It is now a quarter to 1 in the morning. We are very energised and excited to be talking about regulatory reform at this hour. I have 8 seconds left on the clock, so I think I have done my job. Having said that, I commend this bill to the house.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (00:44): I am very happy to stand and speak on this third regulatory legislation amendment reform bill, the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2025. We know that these bills are important because they help government to continuously undertake regulatory reform so that Victoria is a better place to live, to work and to do business. We know that were it up to the Liberals we probably would not have white lines painted on the road for cars to drive down. If the Liberals had it their way, their hands would be off the steering wheel, and God knows what would be happening. That is just the way they approach the world, whether it is economics or social cohesion or whatever it is. But yes, I am glad to be part of a party that takes a positive, proactive and constructive approach to a regulatory framework that sees us get the best out of our society and the best out of our Victorian economy.

The bill makes amendments to over 14 acts of Parliament that provide simple, straightforward, uncontroversial improvements to legislation that all sides of the Parliament can get behind. I think we have heard in many of the contributions tonight the gusto and the wherewithal with which speakers have been able to get behind these regulatory improvements. They will provide important benefits, ensuring Victoria has clearer, fairer, more modern laws and regulations while strengthening regulatory tools available to agencies. The proposed amendments remove or refine redundant processes, reporting and notifications, helping to reduce the administrative burdens on businesses, governments and individuals. Since these rules were drawn up, obviously things have changed in our society yet again. Although the Liberal–National coalition do not want to see things in our society change – they would rather see us looking in the rear-view mirror and have us look more like the 1950s than the 2050s – we are always evolving legislation and the regulations that have previously been drawn up so that they are fit for today and of course fit for tomorrow.

They also demonstrate the way in which small technical amendments can make a difference in our everyday lives. There are amendments to the Domestic Animals Act 1994 which will ensure we empower councils with better data on the location of dangerous dogs, helping to keep our community

safe. Amendments to the Adoption Act 1984 will remove barriers to help families who have experienced forced adoptions to reunite. Amendments to the Environment Protection Act 2017 will make it quicker and easier for businesses and individuals who do the right thing to be refunded financial assurances paid to the EPA, and amendments to the Mineral Resources (Sustainable Development) Amendment Act 2023 will protect commercially sensitive information provided by licence-holders in their work plans. The amendments aim to support effective and efficient regulation and promote consistency with other legislation and existing policies, because it is important that various regulations work together seamlessly so we are getting the best outcomes for everybody that they touch. We will streamline processes and reduce the administrative burden for businesses, departments, agencies and regulators, and of course we will correct technical errors in and make minor updates to legislation.

We are amending the Essential Services Commission Act 2001 to provide the Essential Services Commission with the power to commence civil penalty proceedings within six years of the date on which a contravention occurred. This will give enough time for contraventions to come to light and give the ESC sufficient time to undertake complex investigations and protect consumers. We are also amending the Environment Protection Act 2017 to allow the EPA to charge a business or a business owner where their registered vehicle has been used to illegally dump waste. We know that the Liberals do not have any concern for protecting consumers, and I do not think they have got much concern for waste being dumped either, as we see in their environment and climate policies. And of course we see the winding back of any consumer protections at any point; they just want to expose people to the harshness of the market. We know through their student university days studying Reaganism and Thatcherism that the Liberals are just so hard-nosed. There have been some egregious examples of illegal waste dumping in recent times, and this reform will better protect our communities, including our national parks, where some of this illegal dumping is occurring.

Amendments to the Adoption Act 1984 will allow the secretary to refuse to disclose certain information where they reasonably believe it may jeopardise someone's life or physical safety or cause them harm. This is a critical reform that will mean we can better protect individuals where there is a potential risk of family violence. Promoting consistency with other legislation and existing policies through amendments to the Adoption Act 1984 will allow the secretary to comply with a court order to produce documents in court proceedings or in a royal commission, which is currently not permitted. Importantly, this bill will allow natural relatives to access identifying information about the adopted person so they can be reunited. This is an important amendment that will help families impacted by forced adoptions, including stolen generations, to connect with their biological family – a fundamental human need which has been denied through no fault of their own and something I am sure that we can all absolutely support through this bill.

We are also amending the Transfer of Land Act 1958 and the Subdivision Act 1988 to allow for the collection of fees in line with Victoria's pricing-for-value guidelines. This is a necessary reform that recognises the work of the registrar that has to be undertaken with every transaction, whether it is withdrawn, amended or rejected.

We will also streamline process and reduce administrative burden for businesses, departments, agencies and regulators by making amendments to the Housing Act 1983, and that will ensure regulators are not collecting unnecessary data from community housing providers, helping to keep sensitive banking information with its owners.

Also, the Electricity Industry Act 2000 removes unnecessary reporting requirements for licensed electricity sellers, and there will be amendments to the Water Act 1989 that will allow water corporations to serve notice of a board meeting by electronic means. This is another example of the way in which we are making sure that existing legislation reflects the modern ways we govern.

We will also be correcting technical errors and making minor updates, as the bill tidies up legislation by removing references to repealed provisions, such as in the Mineral Resources (Sustainable

Development) Act 1990 and the Domestic Animals Act 1994. It also clarifies that under the Environment Protection Act 2017, the EPA can consider both actual and potential costs of any remediation or clean-up when considering whether to release a financial assurance.

On the economic growth statement, while this bill is a great example of the way the Allan Labor government undertakes regulatory reform at every opportunity, we have also set out a broader plan to cut red tape as part of our economic growth statement to make it easier to do business in Victoria. Unlike those opposite, who are ideologically opposed to regulation, we know that good regulation is good both for businesses and for communities, because we want Victoria to thrive in all aspects – economically, socially and environmentally. Of course if you do not have all of them thriving at the one time, you are out of balance – a bit like the Liberal Party.

We also know that onerous and outdated regulation makes it hard to do business, stifles innovation and slows growth. That is why, as part of the economic growth statement, we have committed to cutting unnecessary red tape and simplifying government processes so that businesses can get on with creating jobs, fostering innovation and driving economic growth. Work is underway to halve the number of business regulators by 2030, from 37 to 18; speed up environment effects statement processes; deliver new priority assessment teams with key regulators to fast-track the assessment of priority projects; use digitisation to speed up government to streamline licensing; streamline liquor and planning approvals for hospitality businesses; and slash \$500 million in regulatory burden for businesses by 2030.

Through our Business Acceleration Fund we are making sure that regulatory agencies, including local governments, are streamlining, simplifying and digitising regulatory functions to make it easier to start and grow a business in Victoria. So far more than 130 game-changing projects have been funded through the Business Acceleration Fund and its predecessor the Regulation Reform Incentive Fund. This will transform the way Victorian businesses deal with state and local governments, reducing valuable time, paperwork and costs by setting up a Resources Victoria approvals coordination role to significantly reduce approval times for construction projects, removing the need for unnecessary food safety compliance programs for 30,000 low-risk businesses so they can focus on customers and business development and developing an online system that allows Victorians to apply for and display a digital working with children card on the Service Victoria app. As part of the economic growth statement, the government announced \$14 million in additional funding to digitise outdated regulatory processes, adopt AI for approvals, reduce red tape and implement a tell-us-once approach, saving business time and money. You could only hope that the Liberal Party could have a process to remove some of their outdated processes so perhaps they might see a little bit more success than they did in the federal election. But anyway, they can only hope, and I suppose anyone who supports them or once supported them or once maybe even voted for them could hope for the same as well.

We are also ensuring that regional Victoria can reap the benefits – and of course the Labor Party has had four premiers from regional Victoria; our four most recent premiers have all been from regional Victoria – with part of this funding going towards proposals that will enhance growth and productivity in the regions in industries like freight, food production and manufacturing and towards digitising rural and regional council systems. Through these initiatives we are making sure regulation is smart and simple, saving medium and family businesses time and money. The economic growth statement is our road map to help businesses succeed in Victoria, because when businesses succeed it creates more jobs and more opportunities for Victorian workers and their families.

Over the last 10 years we have reviewed and reformed regulations in liquor, environmental protection, essential services, electricity, building and construction, health, planning, consumer affairs, fee pricing, owners corporations and more. We have legislated regulatory improvements to automatic mutual recognition, cladding safety, wage theft, gender equality, casino gambling laws, as well as work in screening processes, green energy and greater energy market protections, to name a few. Our government invests in regulatory reform, because we know that good reform needs a kickstart. That is why we have established the Business Acceleration Fund. We have funded projects estimated to

have saved Victorian businesses and workers over \$450 million per year, giving Victorians nearly 330,000 days back per year in saved time. We have simplified Victoria's food safety requirements, saving low-risk business more than 80 hours a year each in preparing and managing their food safety programs; that is time back they can use to grow their business and provide more goods and services to all Victorians. We have streamlined Heritage Victoria permits for low- and no-harm applications, including removing the need for some permits altogether, speeding up approvals to get houses built quicker and cheaper, increasing housing supplies. We have digitised applications and approvals at the conservation regulator, making it quicker and easier to process wildlife management permits, saving agricultural businesses and individuals at least 678 days per year, and we have digitised licensing and approvals for 350 early childhood education and care providers, saving providers up to 4 hours per application and up to 8 hours on their assessments. We have accelerated permit process approvals by 10 days for 2000 oversized vehicles each year, making it easier for businesses to move cranes and platform trailers.

I am delighted to have had the opportunity to speak on this bill. I will make a note that I heard Mr Galea talking about a sport club other than his own, and given that he barracks for Essendon it is no surprise he was talking about another club. I actually thought he was talking about another code. Anyway, as he is putting the boot into Essendon, I will leave my contribution at that.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (00:59): I am pleased to speak in support of the Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs in the other place's Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2025. This bill includes almost 40 proposals across 14 different acts that provide simple, straightforward, uncontroversial improvements to legislation that all sides of the Parliament can get behind. In listing these amendments to the Adoption Act 1984, the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, the Circular Economy (Waste Reduction and Recycling) Act 2021, the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Act 2003, the Domestic Animals Act 1994, the Electricity Industry Act 2000, the Environment Protection Act 2017, the Essential Services Commission Act 2001, the Housing Act 1983, the Mineral Resources (Sustainable Development) Act 1990, the Mineral Resources (Sustainable Development) Amendment Act 2023, the Service Victoria Act 2018, the Subdivision Act 1988, the Transfer of Land Act 1958 (TLA) and the Water Act 1989, all have minor changes which serve to simplify and uncomplicate the regular activities of government agencies, businesses and individual Victorians. The Allan Labor government is committed to legislating effective and efficient regulation, which is why these amendments aim to fine-tune legislation so that it reflects the modern needs of business, the community and the government. The bill also has many benefits which can be found across its four main objectives, which I will come to soon.

I wish to firstly note, however, that this bill is indicative of a government which is committed to bettering the lives of Victorians by making simple, straightforward improvements to legislation, because we are a government that is not afraid to get things done. This may not be the easiest or most glamorous bill brought before the house, but it is ultimately vital work. Not only does regulatory reform contribute to increased economic productivity, but it makes it easier to do business in Victoria and it protects our consumers, our communities' health and safety and the environment.

The bill addresses a wide range of matters which, once enacted, will support effective and efficient regulation. The bill will amend the Essential Services Commission Act 2001 to set a six-year period for the ESC to commence civil penalty proceedings. Currently no explicit limitations period for commencing civil penalty proceedings exists. This will change, and it will ensure that the ESC can promptly undertake investigations and commence necessary proceedings. This will promote the long-term interests of Victorian consumers and properly oversee regulated industries in Victoria, which is consistent with the legislative framework of other regulators, such as the Australian Consumer Law, which also has a limited period of six years for consumers to take legal action against a business for a consumer protection issue, with some variations.

Amendments to the Domestic Animals Act 1994 will mean that local governments will be able to better manage the potential risks posed by dangerous, menacing and restricted breeds of dogs. Owners

will be required to notify local governments if the dog dies or is relocated. An owner of a dog for which there is an investigation into an alleged offence or a dangerous dog must notify the council within 24 hours if the owner's address changes. This notice under the amendment must include the new address of the dog. These amendments mirror the ones made for menacing dogs in a restricted dog breed. Additional amendments made to the Domestic Animals Act 1994 include enabling approval holders to surrender their dog obedience training organisation's approval and applicable organisations' approval for cancellation by the minister, enabling commercial dog breeder approval holders to surrender the approval to the minister for cancellation and enabling holders to surrender their animal registry licence for cancellation by the secretary. If a declared bird organisation applies for a new declaration at least 60 days before the expiry of the current declaration, the minister must approve or reject the new application before the current declaration expires. This will ensure that local councils have accurate current details to inform compliance and enforcement activities.

The bill will also clarify the intent of previous amendments made to the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, in particular the abilities of the Secretary of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing to authorise a principal officer of Aboriginal agency to act with consideration to the unique cultural requirements of Aboriginal children, as well as any of their non-Aboriginal siblings. Such changes are crucial, given the diversity of families, to mitigate the risk of traumatisation that comes with the upheaval of family units, to avoid delays through protective intervention orders that result from separate authorities and also to maintain crucial cultural and kinship ties by promoting the care of vulnerable children by First Nations agencies. Importantly, this will also work to avoid delays to child protection investigations that result in individual authorisations.

The Mineral Resources (Sustainable Development) Amendment Act 2023 will be amended to allow for the minister to redact confidential and commercially sensitive information. This works to ensure transparency and accountability while also protecting legitimate commercial interests.

Changes to the Adoption Act 1984 will empower the Secretary of the Department of Justice and Community Safety not to disclose certain adoption information, particularly where they believe it may increase the risk of harm to another person, including family violence. These changes are in line with the information privacy principles of Victorian government agencies already sharing information with each other, aligning the Adoption Act 1984 with minimum standards for how Victorian public sector organisations manage personal information. Crucially, this serves to better protect members of the community impacted by adoption legislation that would be impacted by alerts. In 1928, when adoption legislation was first introduced to Parliament, approximately 64,000 Victorians had been adoptees. While these numbers decreased significantly after the 1970s, that is a significant number of Victorians today who would be impacted by this legislation, and it is critical that we update it to maintain relevance to these Victorians.

Changes made to the Electricity Industry Act 2000 will also allow the Essential Services Commission to set the minimum solar feed-in tariff for the upcoming financial year up until either the date that is declared by order published in the *Government Gazette* or by Governor in Council on the recommendation of the minister or, if no declaration is made, by 28 May in the preceding financial year. The significance of this change in date to 28 May in the preceding financial year, in comparison to 28 February, is that it reduces the time between when a determination must be made and the start of a new financial year, which of course is 1 July, to which it applies for three months. Furthermore, the legislation removes certain mandatory reporting requirements for government and industry where the data is of limited or no use either to government or to stakeholders and provides for further transitional provisions in relation to determinations.

Amendments to the Environment Protection Act 2017 mean that the Environment Protection Act will better be able to target its regulatory and enforcement activities. This means the EPA will be able to pursue a business or business owner where the vehicle owned by that business has been used to illegally dump waste and revoke a registration for a certain prescribed authority on a prescribed date on which it will take effect. Further, environmental notices or orders will apply to officers of a body

corporate at the time when they were issued, not after. In simple terms, responsibilities cannot be avoided or delegated, nor should they be.

The second intention of the bill is to promote consistency with other legislation and existing policies. The bill does this by amending the Service Victoria Act 2018. Changes will ensure Service Victoria has the flexibility to deliver new value-added services to customers, as backed by the appropriate charging in line with the Victorian pricing or value guidelines. Before any fee can be set there will be a mandatory public consultation. This is imperative, as it will address gaps in legislation coverage of Service Victoria's ability to charge fees for the services it provides. Specifically, this will be done by inserting a new section in relation to the act's provisions which gives the Service Victoria CEO the power to request fees and charges to be paid by customers using the services or products provided by Service Victoria, subject to certain limitations set out under the section and according to the fee charge amounts as prescribed by the act. Through this amendment the implementation of this section does not extend to fees or charges which are already payable for the services or products laid out under any other acts or regulations.

The registrar of titles will also be able to collect fees on a value-for-money basis through the amendments to the Transfer of Land Act 1958. This is in line with Victoria's pricing-for-value guidelines and fees in other Australian states and territories, without being limited to cost recovery.

Amendments to the Subdivision Act 1988 will ensure that changes made to the Transfer of Land Act 1958 are consistent and will also be reflected in the part of this act which represents fees and charges by revising the section which sets out the matters on which the Governor in Council may make regulations under the act to broaden the provisions regarding the making of the fees and services provided by the register in regulations. Further amendments to the TLA will clarify that the forfeiture of fees applies in all cases where an instrument is subsequently withdrawn, refused or rejected after lodgement. The bill will also remove the ability to pay a half fee or claim a refund on a full fee for instruments that have been relodged following the withdrawal, refusal or rejection, as the cost and time put in the examination by the registrar for a second lodgement would be just the same as for the initial analysis. The electronic instrument pre-lodgement validations provided by the registrar have minor amendments, which include the removal of references to paper conveyancing transactions and other redundant provisions relating to assurance contributions. This will ensure that the TLA remains up to date, providing the best and the most accurate services to Victorian people, a goal which this government always has at the forefront of everything we do.

Aligning with various recommendations and reviews, the bill will amend the Adoption Act 1984 to ensure that the Secretary of the Department of Justice and Community Safety is able to disclose adoption information in response to a court order, subpoena or request from a royal commission.

Changes to the Housing Act 1983 will remove the requirement of registered housing agencies to provide their bank details, including details of their financial institutions and account numbers, to the housing registrar. This is an important change to protect the security of agencies' financial details when they are generally unnecessary for the housing registrar to hold. This information can be accessed by the housing registrar in situations deemed necessary through alternative means already in existence.

Finally, amendments to the Circular Economy (Waste Regulation and Recycling) Act 2021 revise the list of prohibitions in which a civil penalty order can be made by aligning with the changes brought into effect by the Environment Legislation Amendment (Circular Economy and Other Matters) Act 2022 already in force.

This bill aims to support effective and efficient regulation as well as address minor regulatory issues by streamlining processes and reducing bureaucratic delays in the day-to-day activities of government, businesses and individuals. This will help in modernising legislation, reducing regulatory burden on businesses and improving regulation. It will also ensure that the regulatory framework is fit for

purpose. Yearly omnibus bills such as these help to ensure that Victoria has a modern, adaptive and fit-for-purpose regulatory system that is applicable to the needs of Victorians today. It is a clear demonstration of this government's efforts to modernise and adapt our regulatory arrangements wherever possible, but it does more than that.

The Allan Labor government has a strong record of pushing for the cutting of burdensome red tape which holds Victorians back and reforming our regulatory framework to the benefit of all Victorians. Over the past 10 years we have reviewed and reformed regulations to liquor, environment protection, essential services, electricity, building construction, health planning, consumer affairs, fee pricing, owners corporation and more. We have also legislated regulatory improvements to automatic mutual recognition, cladding safety, wage theft, gender equality and casino and gambling laws, as well as worker screening processes, green energy and greater energy market protections, to name a few. These are comprehensive reforms which modernise our regulatory framework while removing outdated processes, helping Victorian households and businesses get on with it. It is about striking the balance between dispensing with the old and modernising the regulations to suit today and promoting economic growth across Victoria, and I commend the bill to the house.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (01:14): Thank you for the call this morning to speak to the bill before us, the last one of this sitting week, the Regulatory Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2025. Upon reading this bill and of course additionally the statement of compatibility provided I am reminded of my work as a member of the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee, and I do recall the very detailed actual examination of this bill before us from a human rights perspective. What I found quite interesting was that while this bill has many, many areas of reform to a number of acts contained within it, there are some that particularly struck a chord with me. So if you all do not mind, I am going to take my time to speak to the bits of this bill that were of particular and profound interest to me. They include – and other speakers have spoken to them – the reforms around adoption, but particularly I will take the time to speak to the adoption of Aboriginal children and the connection of Aboriginal families. I have spoken about it once; I have spoken about it maybe more than once if I think back correctly. There is so much that this government has done to make sure that Aboriginal families are kept strong and thriving in culture, and so I will say I was absolutely delighted by the examination of this bill through the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee and now the opportunity to speak on it this morning to discuss its particular impacts on Aboriginal children.

We all would remember with much interest the large-scale changes that were enacted by this place to section 18 of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, an area that for me I recall was of great interest before entering this place. That was a particularly impactful bill and a particularly impactful act, because what it does is allow Aboriginal agencies and Aboriginal community controlled organisations to actually have the powers and authority to care for Aboriginal children, which for so many years has actually stood with the secretary of the relevant department. The bill before us this evening actually enables some changes to section 18 of the Children, Youth and Families Act, and it is actually called 'section 18' out there in communities. What it does is allow us to really bolster the powers available to Aboriginal agencies so that they can intervene, where appropriate, to continue to protect the rights and safety, wellbeing and cultural care of Aboriginal children so that they remain with Aboriginal agencies, because first and foremost, we must be considering the child's best interest, particularly with respect to continuing that connection between the child and their extended family. Kinship care, as we know, is a very common practice in not only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities but many others, to take on the care of their young ones. So the changes that came about in part 3 of this bill to allow Aboriginal agencies to continue to intervene to secure the welfare, the health and the wellbeing of Aboriginal children was one that I was happy to make a contribution on here this morning but also in the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulation Committee.

There are many other diverse parts to this bill, and I can speak to them, but I do want to first and foremost speak to section 18 and take a moment to acknowledge all of those organisations that have with such goodwill taken on the very significant role of caring for our most vulnerable children in the

community, and those are the children in out-of-home care. Thank you to those organisations, with a particular reference to those that I have worked with very closely, not only through the Aboriginal Children's Forum but also in the youth justice space.

There are some further amendments that have been made in this bill, and they go to the cultural rights of Aboriginal children, because as members may recall, the charter of human rights also provides for the protection of the cultural rights of persons. Be they of a particular cultural, linguistic, religious or racial background, they cannot be denied the right to practise their culture, religion or languages in a community of others of the same background. That is particularly relevant when you look at section 19(2) of the aforementioned act, which recognises the distinct cultural rights of Aboriginal persons. They must not be denied their rights to enjoy their identity and their culture, whilst also maintaining their languages and kinship ties.

The maintenance of those distinctive spiritual, material and economic relationships with land, waters and other resources which they have a connection to under traditional law and customs are also secured under that act. While this right sat with section 19 of the charter, there was really some tightening up that needed to be done in section 18 of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, which we have been given that opportunity to do with the bill before us. Part 3 of this bill is really intended to allow principal officers of Aboriginal organisations and agencies to be clear when performing their functions that they can be undertaken with respect to an entire sibling group where Aboriginal children are in families with non-Aboriginal siblings – it does happen. What this does is avoid delays to protective intervention that would result from separate authorisation and promotes the cultural rights of Aboriginal children. When the government does intervene in the ongoing care of Aboriginal children, there is absolutely a consideration for maintaining the child's rights to their siblings' cultural heritage, communities and, as I said, those rights that are protected under section 19 of the charter, including their cultural, linguistic and racial background being recognised with respect to the practice of their culture, religion or language in the community.

There are of course some proposals that are in part 2 of this bill which do give the secretary access to certain adoption-related records held by Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria which will enable the secretary to carry out their role, particularly with regard to historical adoptions where there is missing or incomplete information, which I must confess often happens in stolen generation adoptions, as sad as that is. This proposal before us would promote the cultural rights particularly of Aboriginal persons by enabling the process by which they can re-establish their cultural identity and their kinship that they were denied as descendants of the stolen generations. As somebody who is a descendant of the stolen generations, I am absolutely delighted to have an opportunity to speak here in the early hours to a bill that might not even pique the interest of many. For me, it is a bill that enables stolen generation families and their descendants to much more quickly connect with their family, identity and culture and the rights bestowed upon them as First Nations people but also as Victorians under the charter.

There are of course parts of this bill that also would allow natural relatives, including siblings, aunts, uncles or grandparents, to access identifying information under the Adoption Act 1984 about the adopted person to enable them to identify or connect with family. That might include their name, their date of birth, the name of their parents and their adoption date. This amendment has the potential to promote the cultural rights of adopted persons and their relatives, enabling them access to their cultural background. In the case of Aboriginal persons this also enables the ability to reassert kinship ties, which may be strengthened by having access to the records about their identity, their family and their cultural ties. I know many of the organisations involved in section 18 of the Children, Youth and Families Act – that is, Aboriginal community controlled organisations – really are at pains to make sure that children under the care of organisations are actually afforded opportunities to connect with their family and with their culture.

In fact one of the leaders in our community is Aunty Eva Jo Edwards. She will be in here tomorrow in fact in Parliament providing cultural leadership to a group of Aboriginal young people who will be coming in here for some cultural leadership opportunities, and anyone that is in the Parliament right

now will actually see that we have got the yarning circle that is being prepared out in the gardens. Auntie Eva Jo is a very esteemed leader in our community, with a particular focus on connecting stolen generations and their descendants to their community, to their culture, to their heritage, to their language and mostly to their families. Despite this late sitting, I will be back here tomorrow with much enthusiasm as I meet many, many Aboriginal young people who are on their own leadership journey – leadership not just in their education but also in their knowledge of their culture and their place in the community. To Auntie Eva Jo Edwards: can I give you my thanks and let you know that I am looking forward to seeing you tomorrow. It is bills like this that we are talking about right now that make her work just that little bit easier as she works with Aboriginal agencies right across the state to ensure that the cultural ties of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care are strengthened, not lost, through the really tough situation of being a child under the care of Aboriginal organisations under section 18 of the Children, Youth and Families Act.

There is of course so much that I could otherwise speak to in this bill. I do know that others have spoken to various elements of the bill before us, and I thank them. But it would be quite remiss of me to not reaffirm how entirely powerful it is that we have a bill before us that will continue to connect Aboriginal children to culture and to family, as so many young people in fact are in contact with the out-of-home-care system and particularly those under the care of section 18 of the act and the leadership of Aboriginal organisations. There is so much that they do, so much that is unrecognised and undervalued. I want to tell you right here and right now that that is not the case for me and it is not the case for so many in the Aboriginal community who know just how much you do to make sure that we do not have another stolen generation in our lifetime, because the health outcomes and the wellbeing outcomes of those that were removed from home is just too devastating to go into.

But there is of course hope when the leaders like Auntie Eva Jo and Uncle Ricky Baldwin, who will be here tomorrow, are leading the next generation, and some of those kids I am given to understand have come through the out-of-home care system. They have come through and they are thriving, and tomorrow they will be here in our Parliament. I cannot wait to have the opportunity to speak to them about the bill before us and how it was that in the early hours of this morning we came together to make change that makes their life and their communities all that much more valued and makes their connection to Aboriginal people and Aboriginal culture reaffirmed through the protections available through section 18 of the Children, Youth and Families Act.

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (01:30): Thank you to everybody who has contributed today to a very wideranging and important bill which does provide a greater measure of regulatory certainty across many, many parts of the statute book. This contemplates changes to 14 acts that provide really simple and straightforward improvements. They are improvements which, as we have heard this evening from those around the chamber in their contributions, are supported by people irrespective of party alliance and agenda, because fundamentally this is about having a system of regulation that is consistent; that is free to the best extent possible of unnecessary duplication; that references, considers and reflects the modern priorities of industry, of business, of decision making and of access to services and programs; and that provides Victorians with a measure of consistency around the way in which the statute operates across various parts of the state and in a range of different frameworks. We have small and technical amendments which are part of this bill, again, in the way in which we are helping councils to collect better data. We heard extensive contributions on that from Mr Galea and Mr Batchelor. I think Ms Crozier may also have touched on the provisions around the Domestic Animals Act 1994 in her contribution. We also heard very significantly from Ms Watt and Mr Mulholland I think around amendments to the Adoption Act 1984 to remove barriers that are going to help families who have experienced forced adoptions to reunite.

I want to touch on a couple of the things that were raised by Dr Mansfield and Ms Gray-Barberio around the Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages and also the amendments to the Victorian Conservation Trust Act 1972. There was, as Dr Mansfield pointed out, a proposal to really

firm up and to strengthen work through the Victorian Conservation Trust Act. This was something which Dr Mansfield indicated with a measure of optimism would be the subject of ongoing conversations with the Minister for Environment, which I think is an appropriate process for these discussions to take place through. This is something which sits adjacent to the bill which is before the chamber today, and those conversations can and indeed should take place directly with the minister, who can consider the merits of the proposal that Dr Mansfield has put today and which are also, as I understand it, already part of an engagement between the Greens and government in that regard.

There was also a comment and some narrative from Dr Mansfield on the births, deaths and marriages registry and the proposals that were put in Dr Mansfield's contribution around changes to the registry. I want to note Dr Mansfield's comments around the changes that were speculated upon by the former Treasurer but were very, very clearly ruled out in relation to changes to the births, deaths and marriages registry. The former Treasurer was really clear in that he did not see any public benefit to be gained in pursuing anything along the lines of the concerns around privatisation, value capture, partnerships, whatever the terminology might have been; it is not in fact part of the priorities or indeed the direction of government in this regard. But there are, again, some other pertinent points around the way in which Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria functions operate that make it really clear that operating through the Department of Government Services means that we need to make sure that it can continue its work and it can continue to provide people with the support, the access, the consistency and the efficiency of decision-making that they deserve. So I hope that makes clear, on two components of the contributions from Dr Mansfield and Ms Gray-Barberio, the positions of government: firstly, ongoing conversations around conservation of land; and secondly, births, deaths and marriages being something which is not the subject of any speculation around changes as they relate to direct decisions being made by government without any interface with the private sector or industry more broadly.

There are a number of amendments that, again, have been the subject of really broad contributions this evening. I want to just touch on a couple of those examples, again, around the Adoption Act 1984 and the work that has been done here to enable the secretary to refuse to disclose certain information when they reasonably believe it may jeopardise someone's life or physical safety or cause them harm. This is a really critical reform that will mean that we can better protect individuals where there is the potential risk of family violence. There is also the work that has happened to ensure that the secretary can comply with a court order to produce documents in court proceedings or in a royal commission, which is not currently the case, and the bill would allow natural relatives to access identifying information about the adopted person so that they can be reunited. This is the work of the Parliament, as routine and as technical as it may be, that facilitates better outcomes for people, particularly people in what are often devastatingly vulnerable circumstances – people who are living without access to information about their identities, their histories, their genealogies, their countries of origin or their cultures of origin. This is again where making sure that connections are able to be created, located or sustained with family for people who are emerging after being in a vacuum of information about who they are is of essential importance to good decision-making but also to having a government which reflects the values which bring us all to this place and to our commitments to the work that we do.

We also want to make sure that when we are streamlining processes to reduce administrative burdens we are doing so in a way that means that regulators are not collecting or retaining unnecessary data from community housing providers. Amendments to the Housing Act 1983 will be covered in that regard. This will help to keep really sensitive banking information with owners and also make sure that we are removing those unnecessary reporting requirements for licenced electricity sellers.

There are a number of scenarios in which the integrity of data and information is borne out, and these are everyday transactions of a nature which might seem commonplace but where things go wrong, where there are gaps in the way in which information is collected, is used, is stored, is shared or is otherwise destroyed. We know that can have very far reaching and significant and permanent consequences for people where that information is shared inappropriately or unlawfully.

We do also have a range of reforms that are taking place within the broader statute book and broader statutory reform, and this is where, again, these sorts of regulatory reform bills do enable us to ensure that there is a good reflection of further legislative change within existing law. When we make sure that we do this, we want to also address ongoing reform through liquor regulation, environmental protection, essential services, electricity, building and construction, health, planning, consumer affairs, fee pricing, owners corporations and more. When we look to the other sorts of experiences that people have in their everyday lives, we are talking about everything from cladding safety through to worker screening processes. We are investing in regulatory reform because it is the right thing to do and because the law needs to adequately reflect and explain the framework of regulation of rights and responsibilities of accountability and transparency. That is exactly what this bill does.

I thank everybody for their contributions to this wideranging debate this evening and for their forbearance in what is a technical but nonetheless essential bill. Particularly at this time of the morning it is often hard to stay the course, but I commend everybody who has done so this evening. On that basis, I will conclude my summing-up remarks and commend the bill to the house.

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Third reading

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (01:41): I move, by leave:

That the bill be now read a third time.

Motion agreed to.

Read third time.

The PRESIDENT: Pursuant to standing order 14.28, the bill will be returned to the Assembly with a message informing them that the Council have agreed to the bill without amendment.

Fire Services Property Amendment (Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund) Bill 2025

Assembly's amendments

The PRESIDENT (01:41): I have received a message from the Legislative Assembly:

The Legislative Assembly returns to the Legislative Council 'A Bill for an Act to amend and change the title of the **Fire Services Property Levy Act 2012** to expand the coverage of that Act to emergency services and volunteers, to make consequential amendments to other Acts and for other purposes' and informs the Council that the Assembly has made the suggested amendments with which agreement is requested.

Amendments as follows:

1. Clause 6, page 4, lines 27 and 28, omit "Forest Fire Management Victoria" and insert "emergency management".
2. Clause 6, page 4, after line 28 insert –

"Examples

- 1 Functions of Emergency Management Victoria, the Emergency Management Commissioner, the Chief Executive, Emergency Management Victoria and the Secretary to the Department of Justice and Community Safety in relation to emergency management include operation of the following –
 - the State Control Centre;
 - Emergency Recovery Victoria;
 - the Emergency Alert Program in Victoria;
 - the Emergency Management Operational Communication Program.

- 2 Functions of the Secretary within the meaning of section 3(1) of the **Forests Act 1958** in relation to emergency management include functions delegated to the Chief Fire Officer employed under that Act.”.
3. Clause 13, page 9, line 4, after “recipient” insert “other than the CFA, Fire Rescue Victoria and VicSES”.
4. Clause 13, page 9, line 6, omit “exceeding –” and insert “exceeding 95%.”.
5. Clause 13, page 9, lines 7 to 9, omit all words and expressions on those lines and insert –
 - ‘(2B) The percentage of the annual funding requirements of the CFA and VicSES that are to be funded by the levy in a levy year is 95%.
 - (2C) The percentage of the annual funding requirements of Fire Rescue Victoria that are to be funded by the levy in a levy year is 90%.”.’.
6. Clause 13, page 9, after line 14 insert –
 - ‘(4) After section 12(5) of the Principal Act **insert** –
 - “(5A) The Minister must specify in a notice of a determination in respect of the next levy year under subsection (1) –
 - (a) for each funding recipient –
 - (i) an estimate of the amount in dollars of the funding requirements of the funding recipient that are to be funded by the levy in that levy year; and
 - (ii) the percentage of the funding requirements of the funding recipient that the amount in subparagraph (i) represents; and
 - (b) an estimate of the amount of levy to be collected in that levy year for each land use classification specified in section 15(1); and
 - (c) that there is no duplication of funding.”.’.
7. Insert the following New Clause to follow clause 17 –

‘17A New section 62A inserted

After section 62 of the Principal Act **insert** –

“62A Proceeds of levy

The proceeds of levy collected under this Act must not exceed the sum of –

 - (a) the amounts applied to fund the funding recipients in accordance with section 12(2A), (2B) and (2C); and
 - (b) the administrative costs incurred in the performance of functions under this Act.”.’.
8. Clause 22, line 9, omit “determined under” and insert “specified in”.
9. Clause 22, line 10, omit “12(2A)” and insert “12(2B)”.
10. Clause 22, line 20, omit “determined under” and insert “specified in”.
11. Clause 22, line 21, omit “12(2A)” and insert “12(2C)”.

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (01:42): I move:

That the message be referred to the committee of the whole on the bill forthwith.

Motion agreed to.

Committed.

Committee

Resumed.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: The committee will now deal with postponed clauses to which amendments were suggested by the Council. The Assembly have notified by message that they have agreed to make the amendments suggested by the Council.

Postponed clause 6 further considered (01:43)

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: The question is:

That clause 6, as amended by the Assembly on the suggestion of the Council, stand part of the bill.

Amended clause agreed to.**Postponed clause 13 further considered (01:43)**

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: The question is:

That clause 13, as amended by the Assembly on the suggestion of the Council, stand part of the bill.

Amended clause agreed to.**New clause 17A further considered (01:43)**

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: The question is:

That new clause 17A, as inserted by the Assembly on the suggestion of the Council, stand part of the bill.

New clause agreed to.**Postponed clause 22 further considered (01:44)**

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: The question is:

That clause 22, as amended by the Assembly on the suggestion of the Council, stand part of the bill.

Amended clause agreed to.**Reported to house with amendments made by the Assembly on the suggestion of the Council, without further amendment.**

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (01:45): I move:

That the report be now adopted.

Motion agreed to.**Report adopted.***Third reading*

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (01:45): I move:

That the bill be now read a third time and do pass.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (01:45): President, I want to thank the minister for taking on notice a number of points, and I look forward to some of that material coming forward.

The PRESIDENT: I am of the opinion that the third reading of this bill requires an absolute majority. The question is:

That the bill be now read a third time.

Council divided on question:

Ayes (22): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Noes (17): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Question agreed to by absolute majority.

The PRESIDENT: The question is:

That the bill do pass.

Question agreed to.

Read third time.

The PRESIDENT: Pursuant to standing order 14.28, the bill will be returned to the Assembly with a message informing them that the Council has agreed to the bill, including amendments made by the Assembly on the suggestion of the Council, without further amendment.

Business of the house

Adjournment

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (01:52): I move:

That the Council, at its rising, adjourn until Tuesday 27 May 2025.

Motion agreed to.

Adjournment

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (01:53): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Vocational education and training

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (01:53): (1631) My adjournment is for the Minister for Education. Victoria is home to some of the most talented and awesome teachers in the nation, and we are backing them with smaller class sizes so they can spend more time engaging with the student population in their education. Victoria is also the only state on record with continued VET enrolment growth in schools for the last four consecutive years. Last year, for the first time, more than 30 per cent of year 11 and 12 students in Victorian government schools chose vocational education. Can the minister outline the growth in VET enrolment and VCE in Victoria over the last four years?

Donnybrook Road, Kalkallo

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (01:54): (1632) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and the action that I seek is for the minister to guarantee funding for the duplication of Donnybrook Road, the C723, in the 2025–26 state budget and prioritise the construction work on this project. I have spoken many times before about Donnybrook Road, and I will keep speaking about it until real action is taken.

Donnybrook Road is one of the most congested roads in all of suburban Melbourne, and the local residents who travel on the road every day to get to work or drop the kids at school have completely lost all patience with the state Labor government. The road is chronically congested because it is a single-lane country road, but Labor decided to sign off on building tens of thousands of new homes on either side of the road before duplicating it or putting in the necessary infrastructure. Labor did not duplicate the road, they did not build continuous footpaths so people could walk or bike ride to the train station, they did not install bus bays or schedule more bus services and they did not put in enough car parking for all the people who want to catch the train. So everyone is forced to drive on this

single-lane former farm track and flyover, which was never designed to handle the current volume of traffic, let alone the exceptional growth that the government is targeting for the area. The road is a perfect example of a classic Labor planning failure. The government signed off on massive housing developments to get their hands on property taxes but did not invest in infrastructure needed to support the growth.

Contrast the horrible traffic conditions on the eastern side of the freeway planned under Labor with the western side of the freeway in Merrifield, where there is a magnificent four-lane road separated by a wide median strip. That is because the western side of Donnybrook Road was duplicated under the watch of the Liberal Party when Matthew Guy was the planning minister, who signed a development contribution agreement to ensure that developers duplicated the road to handle future traffic.

Just before the federal election the Minister for Transport Infrastructure Gabrielle Williams stood next to the Prime Minister as he announced a \$125 million investment to, as he said, ‘transform the roundabout at Donnybrook Road and Mitchell Street’, not to duplicate Donnybrook Road, which is the single most important infrastructure project needed in that area – not to duplicate the road but to transform a roundabout that the Victorian government just upgraded at the end of 2023. The Prime Minister also announced they would duplicate the bridge over the Merri Creek but would not commit to duplicating the single-lane bridge over the Hume Freeway, which is actually desperately needed because it is a chronic bottleneck. It is the problem. This government must commit to this project.

Corrections system

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (01:57): (1633) My adjournment this evening is to the Minister for Corrections, and the action I seek is that the minister tables a written update on the implementation of the cultural review of the adult custodial corrections system in Victoria.

Services in women’s prisons are under regular scrutiny for failing to meet acceptable standards. A recent incident in May at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, Victoria’s maximum security women’s prison, highlighted severe staff shortages leading to prolonged lockdowns. Nearly 60 staff members were absent, resulting in inmates being confined to their cells, exacerbating mental health issues and raising concerns about safety and humane treatment. Healthcare services within these facilities have also been criticised. A report by the Victorian Ombudsman revealed that an Indigenous prisoner resorted to using a pencil sharpener and tweezers to treat an ingrown toenail due to delays in accessing medical care within the system. The report condemned the lack of culturally informed healthcare policies for First Nations people in custody and called for reforms to ensure culturally safe healthcare services.

Mental health care continues to also be an area of concern. A mentally unwell woman has been held in solitary confinement for nearly a decade at a secure mental health forensic facility in Victoria. Despite recommendations for her reintegration since 2017, little progress has been made, prompting a Victorian judge to label the situation an emergency.

The government commissioned an independent cultural review of the adult custodial corrections system, and the review, involving over 1700 participants, aimed to create a safer and more inclusive environment within the prison system. Advocacy groups, such as the Victorian Women’s Health Services Network, welcomed these recommendations, emphasising the need for systemic changes to address gender-based violence and improve conditions for women in custody with adequate staffing, culturally informed health care, mental health support and infrastructure improvements. That report was given to the government in December 2020, more than 2½ years ago. Last year, via questions without notice, I asked the minister for an update on the implementation of the important reforms outlined in the cultural review. So at this time the action I seek is for the minister to update the house with a written update on implementation progress.

Forest management

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (02:00): (1634) My adjournment matter this morning is for the Minister for Environment, and it relates to the botched, rushed and ill-planned closure of the native timber industry and the ramifications of that, which we all knew were going to happen, but the government stuck its head in the sand. Minister, there is a significant issue caused by the government's appalling closure, and it relates to the bottleneck that occurs when you have too many contractors now in the system and work that needs to be done that is being delayed in being done but also too many people vying for the same contracts. You have got VicForests contractors who moved over and took one direction offered by the government into forest and fire management works, and you still have the civil contractors that have been in that marketplace and doing that good work for a long time, and all of them assist greatly in times of emergencies and bushfires. Minister, what you need to do is deliver on the contracted works for these existing forest fire management civil contractors or pay them out – give them work, let them earn their money or pay them out. The contractors – their equipment and expertise – are critical, as I have said, in bushfires.

Following the Labor government's closure, we had this botched transition. Indeed one commitment was made by the minister that civil contractors would have access to similar volumes that they had in the past, and one letter from the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action reiterates this, as my constituent has raised with me. But now they are devoid of work, and they are competing in a limited market. Last financial year one civil contractor performed 120 days of forest and fire management activity and in this year only 20 days. His business is in jeopardy, the equipment is sitting idle with little or no income, and DEECA has effectively stood him down. As a result, mental health has been affected and there is no income coming in.

Court injunctions place another layer of bureaucracy and pain, and the government's own DEECA is not fulfilling its objectives to provide that work for this whole industry. In March it was revealed that DEECA had failed to complete about half of the \$65 million in forest fire management, leaving \$30 million of works not undertaken. Minister, you must authorise work to get people back doing their job – their very important work – managing bushfire risk and clearing fire breaks or pay these civil contractors out fairly.

Northern Metropolitan Region schools

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (02:03): (1635) My adjournment this evening is for the Minister for Education, and my ask is: in the upcoming budget will you commit to prioritising public schools in the north like Moomba Park Primary School, John Fawkner College and Glenroy College? Public schools are attended by a majority of underserved students who have been experiencing years of inequitable resource distribution, chronic underfunding and neglect by successive governments that stratify a system of public schooling. Moomba Park Primary School struggles with basic maintenance, with toilets so dilapidated students refuse to go all day; it is that bad. John Fawkner College's long overdue visual arts, STEM and food tech facilities now sit idle behind fences, unfinished and unusable because of a builder's collapse. After years of chronic underfunding and neglect this school was finally given a glimmer of hope, only to be left in limbo once again.

This week the *Age* reported you have diverted \$2.4 billion from state school funding and delayed Gonski education reforms by three years – reforms designed to close the widening education gap. Data indicates a \$1.8 billion shortfall across 1560 public schools. Due to the significant neglect by your government, school enrolments in these areas have declined since 2014, directly impacting funding and curriculum options for the community. This contrasts starkly with the government's prioritisation of funding for a new high-security prison and luxury upgrades for the Formula One Grand Prix.

Minister, it is clear your government needs to urgently address curriculum, capital funds and the appropriate treatment of highly skilled teachers in the public system. I urge you to reconsider your government's marketised and selective approach to public education in Victoria, and I ask again if you will commit to prioritising public schools in the north in the upcoming budget.

Prison workplace safety

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (02:05): (1636) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Corrections regarding the alarming increase in assaults on prison guards in Victoria. The action I seek is for the minister to urgently address the safety concerns of prison staff and immediately implement measures to protect them from violent attacks. Recent data reveals that Victorian prison guards are being attacked, sexually assaulted and even hospitalised by some of the state's worst dangerous criminals. In the past 12 months alone there have been 442 attacks, including 10 sexual assaults on staff and six serious attacks. This is not acceptable in any workplace environment.

In one such instance that occurred in my electorate two prison officers were bashed by an enraged bikie inmate at the Metropolitan Remand Centre in Ravenhall. The officers were left unconscious after being knocked down to the ground and repeatedly stomped on. They were subsequently taken to hospital. This attack occurred in the Exford management unit, where the prisoners are supposedly kept under tight security.

The situation has reached a critical point, with prison officers prepared to vote on a no-confidence motion against the Corrections Victoria commissioner Larissa Strong in the coming months. The Community and Public Sector Union has highlighted ongoing concern about the commissioner's response to staff safety issues in the management of prisoners and her unwillingness to engage with union delegates on serious matters. Now data has also revealed that 360 assaults have occurred in maximum security prisons, with the Melbourne Assessment Prison and the Metropolitan Remand Centre recording the highest numbers. The women-only Dame Phyllis Frost Centre also reported a significant number of assaults.

The Shadow Minister for Police and Corrections David Southwick has described the prison system as being in chaos and plagued by staff shortages, safety issues and overcrowding. This is a failure of the Allan Labor government to prioritise community first. Considering these alarming stats and the severe impact on prison staff, I urge the minister to take immediate action. This includes reviewing and improving safety protocols, increasing staff levels and ensuring prison officers have the necessary resources and support to perform their duties safely. The safety of our prison staff is paramount. It is the responsibility of the Victorian Labor government to ensure that they are protected from harm. I call the minister to provide a clear and transparent plan to address these issues and restore Victorian public confidence in the management of our prison system.

Animal welfare

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (02:08): (1637) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Agriculture, and the action I seek is for her to provide an update on when the new Animal Care and Protection Bill will be introduced into Parliament. In 2016 the Victorian Labor government announced that they would be replacing our state's broken animal protection laws, which have not been updated since 1986, with a brand new animal care and protection act. Nine long years and multiple rounds of consultation later this bill is yet to see either house of the Parliament. This is despite a government media release, which is still displayed on the Premier's media centre website, committing that these laws would be in effect by 2019. It is also despite the bill actually existing; it has been written and it is ready to go but continues to languish on the minister's and the Premier's desks. Each day that goes by that they fail to honour their commitment to the people and animals of Victoria is another day where animals are condemned to ongoing cruelty and suffering. We have seen case after case where if these laws had been prioritised and in effect the outcome would be far different. This is because the current Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986 has some of the lowest penalties of any jurisdiction in the country, and as a legislative instrument it is completely failing animals.

One example is the recent case of starving horses in Mount Eliza, which has been flooding all of our newsfeeds. Despite horses being without food and without water, suffering injuries and outcomes of poor breeding and showing nothing more than skin and bone, authorities have been left with little option but to issue notices to comply. This is because our current laws are designed to only respond

when cruelty occurs. It means intervention cannot happen until animals are literally knocking on death's door and when owners refuse to cooperate.

One of the proposals in the new animal care and protection bill is a legislated duty of care. This will change the scope of our laws to be proactive instead of reactive. A duty of care allows for early intervention when an animal is not having their physical, psychological or social needs met, including food, water, shade, shelter and enrichment. Importantly, it would allow authorities to intervene far sooner than they currently are able to. If we already had a legislated duty of care, as we were meant to by now, these horses would not have deteriorated into the unbearably cruel state of neglect and starvation that they are currently in. Modernised animal protection legislation is vital to empowering authorities to ensure responsible pet ownership and care and to properly penalise cruelty when it does happen. This government commitment is almost a decade old, and we simply cannot waste another moment.

Economy

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (02:11): (1638) My adjournment matter is for the Treasurer, and what I am asking from the Treasurer is to perhaps finally at some point, please, please, in the next budget have a policy that relates to productivity, because there has been no serious policy for productivity in this state for a decade. The consequences when you do not address productivity in a state are that the state loses a number of things. It loses competitiveness in the first place. We are now in a record trade deficit of \$92 billion in this state because we are not competitive. We are losing businesses to other states because we are not competitive in any of our tax structures and in our productivity. The other consequence of not pursuing productivity is you lose economic growth, and the only economic growth we have had in this state for some time has been driven by population growth; we do not have per capita growth.

The other consequence of not pursuing productivity is that we do not build wealth for the next generation, and this tends to compound. It compounds in the slowness of our generation of intellectual property and the slowness in our adoption of technology. We had a debate here yesterday where were talking about EVs and maybe needing to have a structure around EVs, and I sat there almost wanting to blow my brains out, because it was like listening to a Ted Talk from 2005 – you know, 2005 rang in and they wanted their thought leadership back, because that was about 2005 thinking. It made me despair for the state, because by the time we get around to talking about AI and automation it will be 2035 and the horse will have well and truly bolted for this state. But this is what happens when you rip billions and billions of dollars from businesses' working capital to fund ludicrous nonproductive projects such as the Suburban Rail Loop and other infrastructure projects that do not generate wealth. This is what happens. You would not need to be taxing farmers to pay for fire trucks if you were generating wealth from it.

The action I seek from the Treasurer is to please incorporate productivity measures in this budget – and I mean genuine ones, not subsidies for costs, not embarrassing attempts at being a VC through entities like Breakthrough Victoria and the SEC, which is a venture capital program we have put in the constitution, bizarrely, and not self-indulgent funding for state enterprises and lazy joint ventures with universities. Please address the state's productivity.

Infrastructure projects

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (02:14): (1639) I want to start by pointing out tonight the stunning hypocrisy from the Greens, who have a member that had the gall to speak about mental health after they were the bloc of four that passed the bill that poses the biggest risk to mental health in rural and regional communities and farmers – a bill that just last week they disagreed with. I think it is disgusting, and it shows how low their price is.

My adjournment matter tonight is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. This week we learned that \$22 billion worth of vital state projects, including mental health services, family violence

prevention and homelessness support, are set to run out of funding by the end of the year. At the same time the government will pour another \$727 million into the Metro Tunnel switch-on budget on top of the \$15 billion already spent.

Let us be clear: this government is making a choice, and it is not choosing to honour its first responsibilities to keep people safe, fed and housed. Labor is choosing not to protect women and children from domestic violence and abuse. Labor is choosing not to support people in a mental health crisis – one that is about to get worse because of its decisions tonight. Labor is choosing not to help people put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads.

This Labor government is insisting on choosing the Suburban Rail Loop (SRL), a project that originally was costed at \$50 billion, and now just two parts of it are expected to be \$216 billion. This means an extra \$50,000 per every single taxpayer in the state of Victoria. Given these record-breaking cost blowouts, Victorians deserve to know what it is really costing them. Thanks to the last 10 years under Labor Victorians are already paying \$26 million in interest alone – money that could be going to projects that people really need. This government has ignored independent advice, and it just keeps digging this state into a bigger black hole.

This is not just about cost anymore, this is about consent. The government keeps pretending it has a public mandate, but it does not have a building case and it only has a path to double the debt in this state and to slash critical services while doing it. There is no public mandate because the state did not vote for you to slash vital services. People are watching your actions, and your actions demonstrate that you value vanity projects above Victorians. The action that I seek is for you to choose the people of Victoria above the SRL. Do not make cuts to services that vulnerable Victorians need so you can continue to forge ahead on your economy-destroying vanity projects.

Cost of living

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (02:17): (1640) My adjournment debate is also for the Treasurer. We have talked a lot today, in the context of Labor's latest tax grab, about the cost of living. We hear those words all the time, 'the cost-of-living crisis', all over politics and the media, but I think it is worth challenging, because what we actually face in Victoria is a cost-of-government crisis. Saying 'cost of living' makes it sound like it is nobody's fault, like the weather or some law of nature. But prices do not rise by magic, they rise because of decisions – bad ones – made right here in this place, including the one we have had tonight. We cannot blame that on the cost of living. It is purely and simply the cost of government. That is the real crisis we face in this state.

Take housing and buying a home: stamp duty adds tens of thousands to the bill, and development is stymied by regulation, taxes and red tape, so demand far outstrips supply. Renting: landlord taxes and new rules make it harder to rent out property, so fewer homes are available and prices soar. That is not a cost-of-living crisis, it is a cost-of-government crisis. Energy: net zero might sound plausible, but rushing the transition without proper planning has consequences – expensive ones. Bills go through the roof, yet somehow we write that off as a cost of living. Then there are the Big Build blowouts, delays and spiralling costs. Victorians know they are paying for it through higher taxes and through inflation.

The logic is simple: government spending causes inflation, and inflation drives the so-called cost of living crisis. So let us simplify that equation: what we have is a cost-of-government crisis. What is driving up construction costs? Union deals that make public projects more expensive and tradies harder to find for smaller jobs. Now tax: we have higher payroll tax on businesses of course but now also on education and even health, a tax on death in higher probate fees and more red tape for small businesses. That is the cost of government for you. To cap it off, the last Treasurer introduced new taxes to pay for COVID lockdown spending. Our lives were stuck on hold, quarantined and curfewed, and we are paying now for the cost of not living. So I ask the Treasurer to commission research showing, to the cent, exactly what proportion of the rising costs, prices and taxes Victorians face is the direct result of our cost-of-government crisis.

Northern Victoria Region childcare services

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (02:20): (1641) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Children concerning a critical issue affecting families across Northern Victoria: the severe shortage of childcare services, known as childcare deserts. In August 2023 a government press release proudly stated 50 early childhood centres would be delivered by 2028, but by May last year the timeline quietly slipped to beyond 2032. It has been two years since the 50 childcare centres were promised, but only four have been built. Since the timelines have blown out, many communities are wondering if these childcare centres will be built at all. I commend my Nationals colleague Annabelle Cleeland, member for Euroa, who has continued to raise this issue, highlighting the desperate need for child care in many regional areas. Twenty-six of the promised childcare centres remain without a timeline or site for construction, including Alexandra, Bendigo South, Lockington, Seymour and Woori Yallock in my electorate.

The lack of childcare options in Northern Victoria is placing a significant barrier to those who want to raise their family in regional Victoria, and it needs to be addressed. Many communities are classified as childcare deserts, with little to no access to early childhood education and care services. This shortage is especially acute in rural and regional areas, where greater distances between towns and lower population densities make it challenging to establish and sustain traditional childcare facilities. Local councils have raised concerns about the required ratio of staff to children, which is the same as metropolitan areas, which makes it difficult to sustain childcare services in regional areas, and this needs to be addressed. I have spoken with families who find it hard to return to work because of the absence of childcare services, some who remain on waiting lists for years and others who drive very long distances at the beginning and end of each day to first drop their child off before heading to work. The delays and uncertainty around the state government's plans to establish childcare centres is also making it hard for private providers deciding whether to open a centre.

My federal colleague Dr Anne Webster, the member for Mallee, has also raised strong concerns about this issue, and she has outlined the detrimental impact of childcare deserts on families – that families are being forced to uproot their lives, relocate to larger regional centres or even to Melbourne simply to access child care. Dr Webster has put forward several innovative solutions to help address this issue, including allowing family day care educators to operate out of community spaces such as town halls or libraries, establishing mobile day care centres and encouraging employer-supported childcare models in workplaces.

The action I seek is for the state government to deliver on their promise to open 50 new childcare centres by 2028 and address the desperate need for early childcare centres across Northern Victoria. We need effective solutions that ensure every child has access to quality early learning opportunities. By investing in child care, we can support families, bolster local economies, address workforce shortages and strengthen our regional communities.

ATET event space

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) incorporated the following (1642):

My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Local Government, and I seek the action of the minister to urgently investigate the heavy-handed treatment by the Melbourne City Council of ATET, a floating event space located in Docklands in my electorate.

The director of this business, Jake Hughes, has written to me outlining the steps that he has taken to comply with rules, permits and licences required by the council.

He sought to work productively with council to balance the needs of a venue which hosts events and live music with the noise-related needs of local residents.

I am informed that they took prompt action to address complaints but in June of 2023 had their licence to operate terminated.

It has been reported in the *Herald Sun* that a whistleblower has revealed that:

The City of Melbourne was determined to shut down controversial floating nightclub ATET and ignored reasonable attempts by the small business to stay open ...

...

'The council had no desire, at all, to find a resolution,' the internal council source familiar with the shutdown of the ATET business alleged.

'This wasn't about negotiation; it was about shutting down a small business.'

... the source from within the City of Melbourne alleged Ms Capp and others involved in the decision-making process overstated the number of complaints from residents.

This is a shocking allegation and, if true, represents not only an attack on the rights of small business in the City of Melbourne and on nightlife but on the ideas of due process and the rule of law.

To quote Jake Hughes:

We have done everything the council has ever asked of us and have been repeatedly blindsided by their actions not matching their words ...

This sort of behaviour is unacceptable from a local council and so I seek the action of the minister to find out from the council exactly how many complaints were received against ATET and whether they were substantiated and valid, and to investigate whether the council had a predetermined agenda in their investigation of ATET.

Responses

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (02:23): There were 11 adjournment matters this morning. All will be submitted to the relevant ministers for a response.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 2:23 am (Friday).