



Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Wednesday 28 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

CONTENTS

PAPERS	
Papers	2069
BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE	
Notices	2069
COMMITTEES	
Legal and Social Issues Committee	2069
Membership	2069
MOTIONS	
Middle East conflict	2070
MEMBERS STATEMENTS	
Kingston City Council community awards	2070
A-League Men grand final	2070
Family violence	2070
Regional Community Vet Clinic	2071
Lakes Entrance schools	2071
Nyora Football Netball Club	2071
National Reconciliation Week	2071
Budget 2025–26	2072
South East Community Links	2072
Vocational education and training	2072
National Reconciliation Week	2073
CareNet	2073
PRODUCTION OF DOCUMENTS	
National parks	2073
Payroll tax	2078
MOTIONS	
Economy	2082
QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE AND MINISTERS STATEMENTS	
Dame Phyllis Frost Centre	2097
Suburban Rail Loop	2098
Ministers statements: early childhood education and care	2099
Greyhound racing	2100
Budget 2025–26	2100
Ministers statements: Green Links grants	2101
Firewood collection	2102
Disability services	2102
Ministers statements: Marlene McKay	2103
Waste and recycling management	2104
Energy policy	2104
Ministers statements: housing	2105
Written responses	2106
CONSTITUENCY QUESTIONS	
South-Eastern Metropolitan Region	2106
Northern Victoria Region	2106
Southern Metropolitan Region	2106
Southern Metropolitan Region	2107
South-Eastern Metropolitan Region	2107
South-Eastern Metropolitan Region	2107
Southern Metropolitan Region	2107
Northern Metropolitan Region	2108
North-Eastern Metropolitan Region	2108
Northern Victoria Region	2108
Northern Metropolitan Region	2108
Western Victoria Region	2109
Eastern Victoria Region	2109
North-Eastern Metropolitan Region	2109
Eastern Victoria Region	2109
Southern Metropolitan Region	2110
MOTIONS	
Economy	2110
Drought	2112
BILLS	

CONTENTS

Retirement Villages Amendment Bill 2024.....	2128
Council's amendments.....	2128
BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE	
Notices of motion	2128
COMMITTEES	
Legal and Social Issues Committee.....	2128
Reference.....	2128
BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE	
Notices of motion and orders of the day	2145
STATEMENTS ON TABLED PAPERS AND PETITIONS	
Austin Health	2145
Report 2023–24	2145
Department of Treasury and Finance	2146
Budget papers 2025–26	2146
Select Committee on Victoria Planning Provisions Amendments VC257, VC267 and VC274	2147
Inquiry into Victoria Planning Provisions Amendments VC257, VC267 and VC274.....	2147
National parks	2148
Petition.....	2148
Environment and Planning Committee	2149
Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria.....	2149
Victorian Auditor-General's Office.....	2150
Managing Disruptions Affecting Victoria's Public Transport Network.....	2150
PETITIONS	
Waste and recycling management	2151
BILLS	
Appropriation (2025–2026) Bill 2025.....	2157
Introduction and first reading	2157
Statement of compatibility.....	2157
Second reading.....	2158
Appropriation (Parliament 2025–2026) Bill 2025	2162
Introduction and first reading	2162
Statement of compatibility.....	2163
Second reading.....	2163
State Taxation Acts Amendment Bill 2025	2164
Introduction and first reading	2164
Statement of compatibility.....	2164
Second reading.....	2167
ADJOURNMENT	
Community food relief.....	2169
Falls Creek school bus services.....	2169
Drought.....	2170
Croydon South housing development	2171
Energy policy	2171
Drought.....	2172
Economy.....	2172
Craigieburn community hospital.....	2172
WorkCover premiums.....	2173
South-Eastern Metropolitan Region public transport	2173
Police mental health services.....	2174
Early childhood education and care.....	2174
Hawthorn West Primary School	2175
Recreational prospecting.....	2175
Southside Justice sex worker legal program.....	2176
Glen Eira College	2176
Yan Yean Road, Yarrambat	2177
Victorian bank levy	2177
Suburban Rail Loop	2178
Responses	2178

Wednesday 28 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:**

Auditor-General –

The Orange Door: Follow-up, May 2025 (*Ordered to be published*).

Work-related Violence in Government Schools, May 2025 (*Ordered to be published*).

Crimes (Assumed Identities) Act 2004 – Report, 2023–24, under section 31 of the Act, by the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission.

Statutory Rules under the following Acts of Parliament –

Aboriginal Lands Act 1970 – No. 29.

Road Safety Act 1986 – No. 28.

Victorian Energy Efficiency Target Act 2007 – No. 27.

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 – Documents under section 15 in relation to Statutory Rule No. 29.

Business of the house**Notices**

Notices of motion given.

Committees**Legal and Social Issues Committee*****Membership***

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (09:38): I move, by leave:

That Jacinta Ermacora, Tom McIntosh and Sonja Terpstra be participating members of the Legal and Social Issues Standing Committee.

Motion agreed to.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (09:38): I move, by leave:

That:

- (1) Aiv Puglielli be discharged as a member of the Legal and Social Issues Standing Committee;
- (2) Aiv Puglielli be a participating member of the Legal and Social Issues Standing Committee;
- (3) Anasina Gray-Barberio be discharged as a participating member of the Legal and Social Issues Standing Committee;
- (4) Anasina Gray-Barberio be a member of the Legal and Social Issues Standing Committee.

Motion agreed to.

*Motions***Middle East conflict**

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (09:39): I move, by leave:

That this house:

- (1) notes that:
 - (a) as at 21 May 2025, there have been 53,655 reported casualties across Gaza;
 - (b) all of the 2.1 million population face high levels of acute food insecurity, and 470,000 people face catastrophic levels of food insecurity;
 - (c) over 92 per cent of children aged six to 23 months, and pregnant and breastfeeding women, are not meeting their nutrient requirements;
 - (d) after 11 weeks of blockade against incoming emergency relief, aid trucks were cleared to enter Gaza on 18 May 2025;
 - (e) the UN relief chief called the aid allowed in so far ‘a drop in the ocean’ of what is urgently needed, and no substitute for unimpeded access to civilians in such dire need; and
 - (f) a joint statement of 24 countries calls on the government of Israel to allow for a full and immediate resumption of aid to Gaza.
- (2) does not support the State of Israel’s continued invasion of Gaza; and
- (3) supports urgent calls for sanctions and an immediate and permanent ceasefire.

Leave refused.

*Members statements***Kingston City Council community awards**

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:40): Last week was National Volunteers Week, which made it so appropriate for me to be able to join with the City of Kingston at their annual volunteer awards event hosted by the mayor Cr Georgina Oxley. It was a terrific opportunity to celebrate all the many incredible volunteers that contribute so much to the Kingston community, and I would also like to particularly make mention of Jaqueline Hendrey, who won Kingston Citizen of the Year 2025. Jaqueline has led the Matt’s Place community meals program in Chelsea for 15 years, serving nearly 200,000 meals, a very incredible achievement indeed. Thank you, Jaqueline. We also had the winner for the Community Group of the Year with It’s Okay Not to Be Okay named the Community Group of the Year for their incredible contributions in the space of mental health advocacy in the local community. I would like to particularly acknowledge both winners of these awards and indeed acknowledge all of the nominees, who were very, very impressive as well.

A-League Men grand final

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:41): We also have a very exciting event coming up this weekend. After 15 years of rivalry, the A-League derby grand final is finally here, and what a wonderful opportunity to wish on our boys in blue. Well, come on. Go, Melbourne Victory!

Family violence

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (09:42): I rise to speak for the women and children that this government has left behind. Two weeks ago the Premier told the chamber she was proud to stand with victims of domestic violence, but standing with victims means more than standing for just a photo; it means funding services that keep people safe, not cutting them. Yet the government has cut \$32.5 million from primary prevention programs. They have stripped \$169.4 million from housing assistance. They have delayed key housing projects, including crisis accommodation, refuge redevelopments and an Aboriginal family violence refuge in the Wimmera. These are not just numbers on a page, they are women that are forced back into danger, children returned to fear and communities left without support. The government that truly stands with victim-survivors does not just walk away

from their options. It does not just leave them behind. It expands them. No woman should be turned away. No child should be left in harm's way, and no Premier should claim compassion while walking away from those who need it most.

Regional Community Vet Clinic

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (09:43): During my election campaign I visited the not-for-profit veterinary service Regional Community Vet Clinic when they were operating out of a donated space in a commercial clinic, severely limiting the days and hours they could offer to the community. That day I made a commitment to help them secure a permanent home for their life-saving work if I was elected. Now, one successful state budget bid and a few years later, that commitment has become a reality. Regional Community Vet Clinic now have a permanent building and their own home in Castlemaine, and I was honoured to attend and speak at the official opening with Maree Edwards last week. The clinic will provide essential vet treatment services to eligible community members at low or no cost, including desexing, vaccinations, dental care, general health check-ups, worming and flea treatments. The importance of this clinic right now cannot be overstated. We know that people's circumstances change, especially in a cost-of-living crisis. They may experience family violence, lose a source of income or become disabled, and this should never mean losing the companionship of an animal. In fact it is in these periods it is often more important than ever that they experience this love, safety and comfort that our pets can provide. When we care for animals, we care for ourselves too, and that is why we must continue working towards making veterinary care fair and accessible for all Victorians.

Lakes Entrance schools

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (09:45): I had a great time in Lakes Entrance last week, out with all things education amongst the community, and I had the privilege and the honour of cutting the ribbon at the new kindergarten based on the location of the Lakes Entrance Primary School. It was great to have families, the committee, educators – everyone – come along and really get around what is such a great investment in our youngest people in Lakes Entrance. Not only that, after opening the kinder – out of the budget – the next morning I had the good fortune of sharing the news with Simon Prior, principal at Lakes Entrance Primary, who has done a great job in the school in the around six years he has been there. NAPLAN results are going really strongly. On top of that the state government is contributing \$6.6 million of capital funding for new buildings in the school, which is fantastic. I was also fortunate to be able to drop up to the secondary college; there is half a million dollars for the Lakes Entrance Secondary College as well. We know how critically important education is for developing our future emerging generations, and in Lakes Entrance we are doing that.

Nyora Football Netball Club

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (09:46): I want to update the Parliament that I also got to drop into Nyora footy club – a great footy club with a really diverse committee and people of all ages but lots of young faces and lots of women. It is really fantastic. Whether it is the shelter they are putting over at the netball courts or the new toilets for umpires, things are going along well, and we got to announce \$150,000 for new lights on the footy oval. Whether it was the junior under-14 boys, the junior girls or all the seniors, everyone was really excited, and it was great to be out amongst them and celebrate it.

National Reconciliation Week

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (09:46): On the weekend I attended Reconciliation in the Park, an annual community event held in Geelong's Johnstone Park to mark the start of National Reconciliation Week. Were welcomed by Corrina Eccles, a proud Wadawurrung woman and local leader, and I was deeply saddened to hear her speak of the torrent of racism and abuse she experienced following the welcome to country she performed at the AFL's Indigenous round match in Geelong and how, despite her strength and commitment to her culture, she was starting to reconsider whether

she could keep turning up for these events. She spoke of how intense the racism has been in recent times, particularly this year. She is not alone in experiencing this. If you want to see what sort of abuse First Peoples are facing, have a look at some of the chat groups, like I have, discussing the recent cultural management plan for Mount Arapiles, or Dyurrite, and listen to some of the stories of racist abuse directed towards First Peoples that is happening out in the open in some of the nearby rural communities. It is outright vilification, and the people responsible should be held accountable but rarely are. It is absolutely shameful. I refuse to believe that people are so filled with hate and prejudice that they cannot be better than that. Those in positions of power – those with platforms, including all of us in this place – have a responsibility to demonstrate in their words and actions that racism is not acceptable. Reconciliation is a journey, and it is clear that we still have a very long way to go.

Budget 2025–26

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (09:48): Last week the Allan Labor government revealed a budget that delivers on services, builds infrastructure and provides help with the cost of living – a budget that delivers what matters most to Victorians. The cost-of-living measures are wideranging and will help where they are needed. We will see statewide free public transport for under-18s from next year and statewide free public transport for seniors on weekends from next year; the expansion of and making permanent the community pharmacy pilot, providing free support to Victorians in their community pharmacy for a wider range of services; a \$200 Get Active Kids voucher to help with uniforms, equipment and memberships; increases to the camps and excursions fund for eligible primary and secondary school students; and a \$100 power saving bonus for eligible concession card holders. We know that these measures will not solve everything, but they will go a long way to helping Victorians and their household budgets. Our budget is here to help those in need, because access to quality health care, affordable transport or school essentials is non-negotiable. The Allan Labor government is getting on with the job of providing support.

South East Community Links

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:49): I recently had the pleasure of visiting South East Community Links in Dandenong, where I met with CEO Peter McNamara and some of SECL's incredible staff and volunteers who support our community. For decades SECL has been a lifeline for people across the south-east. In the past year alone they have supported over 27,000 people and families facing challenges like financial hardship, family violence and social isolation. Peter spoke about the importance of multidisciplinary place-based services. SECL's philosophy of getting amongst the people means meeting people where they are, sometimes quite literally. A great example of this approach is their Community Connectors program at Frankston and Dandenong train stations, which provides on-the-ground support to people facing mental health issues, substance misuse, poverty and housing insecurity. In just one year Community Connectors supported more than 3000 people, connecting them to emergency relief, youth housing, financial counselling and local services. By embracing key community hubs, the program has eased pressure on local police and engaged people who may not otherwise seek help. I want to thank Peter and the SECL team for their dedication and innovative approach to meeting the ever-changing needs of our community.

Vocational education and training

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (09:51): This month I had the honour of standing alongside some of the fiercest advocates for working people, Minister D'Ambrosio and Minister Giles, as we marked a bold new chapter for skills, jobs and clean energy in our state. At the Plumbing Industry Climate Action Centre in Brunswick, alongside Master Plumbers and the Plumbing and Pipe Trades Employees Union, we celebrated the announcement of a national training centre in new energy skills, alongside a cutting-edge facility that will train the workforce driving Victoria's energy transition. At Kangan's Automotive Centre of Excellence in Docklands, I saw firsthand the passion of students preparing for the jobs of tomorrow. These achievements are not by accident; they are the result of determined leadership. I pay tribute to Minister D'Ambrosio for her unwavering commitment

to climate action and the revival of the SEC, with the SEC, from 1 July, powering schools, hospitals, trains and much more across our state, and to Minister Andrew Giles, who is breaking down barriers to education and empowering working people through fee-free TAFE. This is Labor at its best, creating opportunities for working people, preparing young people for the jobs of the future and building a fairer, cleaner state for us all. Labor is getting on with the job, and the north is leading the way.

National Reconciliation Week

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (09:52): This week marks powerful and painful milestones for Indigenous Australians: National Reconciliation Week, National Sorry Day and the eighth anniversary of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*. These events are a reminder of the continued call for justice for our Indigenous people – a demand for truth – not to mention that the foundations of this country were built on dispossession, violence and the erasure of First Nations people. The legacy of colonisation lives on in our institutions, systemic racism, economic inequality, reduced life expectancy, worse health outcomes and the trauma of forced removal of the stolen generations. Twenty-five years after the *Bringing Them Home* report, too many of its recommendations remain unfulfilled. Reconciliation must mean land back, truth-telling, reparations and shared power and decision-making. Shamefully, and sadly, as of 23 June Victoria had the highest out-of-home care rate for First Nations children in the country, at 103 per 1000 First Nations children. The *Family Matters Report 2024* projects that by 2034 the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care and on protection orders will rise by 38 per cent, compared to just a 5 per cent increase for non-Indigenous children. We cannot move forward as a nation when we deny justice to the oldest living culture on earth. ‘Sorry’ means working towards unity and equity. ‘Sorry’ means you do not do it again.

CareNet

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:54): I rise to speak about the growing impact of the current cost-of-living crisis, which continues to put immense pressure on families across our state. No Victorian should be forced to choose between paying the bills and putting food on the table. To help, I have established a small community food bank at my electorate office, in partnership with CareNet. The food bank provides pantry staples and is open Monday to Friday during business hours at my office, which is office 2, 9–11 Williamsons Road, Doncaster. For those who might be in urgent need overnight, a small pantry with essential items is also available at the front of my office. This initiative complements CareNet’s broader efforts across the North-Eastern Metropolitan region. Through the 2024–25 community food relief program local grants, CareNet received a \$50,000 grant to restore food distribution services in Banyule while continuing to support Manningham and Nillumbik. CareNet received its initial payment of \$37,500 in January 2025 and has since reopened referrals. It is now working with three partner providers to ensure those in need are connected with appropriate food relief services to assist residents in the North-Eastern Metropolitan region and beyond. I thank CareNet for its commitment to dignity, equity and practical support, and I reaffirm my belief that no Victorian should be left behind in this state of economic hardship.

Production of documents

National parks

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (09:55): I move:

That this house:

(1) notes that:

- (a) the government has described the Great Outdoors Taskforce process as a landmark opportunity to open up 1.8 million hectares of native forests that were formerly used for logging, potentially making the largest additions to Victoria’s parks estate;
- (b) statements from chairperson Lisa Neville indicated a shift in direction with no recommendations to be made regarding changes to land tenure or the creation of new national parks;

- (c) despite significant community and public consultation in forest protection, no public report or detailed rationale for this change being in scope has been released and that it is in the public interest in these high-value forests;
- (2) requires the Leader of the Government, in accordance with standing order 10.01, to table in the Council within six weeks of the house agreeing to this resolution, all documents relating to the Great Outdoors Taskforce and its consultation, including but not limited to:
 - (a) detailed responses, reports and submissions from the Engage Victoria survey on the 'The future of Victoria's state forests' undertaken by the Great Outdoors Taskforce and the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action;
 - (b) correspondence, advice, instructions, meeting minutes or recommendations relating to the decision to not make recommendations on changes to land tenure or the creation of new national parks;
 - (c) all correspondence between the Minister for Environment and/or the Minister for Outdoor Recreation's offices and the Great Outdoors Taskforce relating to the finalisation of the report and its scope; and
 - (d) any other related materials.

We know that our forests are unique. They carry great ecological and climate diversity. They have significant cultural, social and economic values. Importantly, they are homes and habitat for threatened plants and animals, hundreds of them in fact, including greater gliders, powerful owls and long-footed potoroos. But our forests have also been disrupted. Whether it be native logging, climate events and emergencies, poor fire management or introduced animals, it has all created a threat to our unique forests, which, once we lose them, we can never get back. That is why when former Premier Daniel Andrews brought forward the end of native forest logging he announced that the government would establish an advisory panel to consider and make recommendations to government on the areas of our forests that qualify for protection as national parks, and so the Great Outdoors Taskforce was born.

Chaired by former Labor minister Lisa Neville, the Great Outdoors Taskforce undertook public consultation on the future use of approximately 1.8 million hectares of public land. Its task was identifying priority areas for reservation change, including state forest areas that could be declared as national parks or another park category. But in October 2024 the taskforce announced that they would not be making any recommendation for large-scale changes to land tenure, including not creating any new national parks. Then in May 2025 stakeholders were sent correspondence saying that the breadth of feedback received made it clear that more impact could be achieved by making recommendations to improve state forest management systems instead of focusing on changes to land tenure. Beyond this, very little detail justifying this decision was ever released.

The taskforce engaged 185 stakeholder groups and received 4149 submissions to its Engage Victoria survey. No results have been publicly released, nor was any detailed consultation report. This document motion seeks to remedy that today. Stakeholders and individuals who made the effort to engage in this process in good faith have a right to know why and how this decision was made. They have a right to know if the government is once again caving to loud recreational interest groups. We saw it when they refused to listen to their own parliamentary inquiry into recreational duck shooting, caving to the disingenuous 'Save Our Outdoors' campaign, and now we are seeing it when it comes to the protection of our forests.

We cannot blame parks organisations, volunteers and Victorians for losing faith when it comes to this government on environmental legislation and protection. The back-away from large-scale land tenures such as new national parks following the end of native forest logging is not the government's first backdown. They have failed to introduce the long-overdue amended Wildlife Act, announced in 2020. They refused to release the expert panel report, which cost taxpayers \$3 million, on that. They have failed to introduce legislation to create central west national parks, announced in 2021 with a promise to be legislated last year. They have failed to respond to the parliamentary inquiry into ecosystem decline in Victoria, handed down in the last Parliament in 2021. It is the only parliamentary inquiry that they are yet to respond to. This is a real shame because, while it certainly has not gone far enough,

our state does have a history of evidence-based and nature-positive policy. In the past we have led and other states have followed, but now it appears we are going backwards.

Ending native forest logging presented us as a state with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to protect our forests. It gave us the opportunity to expand our national park system, to protect habitat and to protect animals. We had a chance to safeguard unique and rich biodiversity, and it has been turned down. Despite this government's hesitation, support for our parks is stronger than ever before. If they are going to backflip or try and slowly move away from protecting them, Victorians at least deserve to know why. I commend the motion to the house.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (10:00): We have got millions and millions of hectares of bush in Victoria, and it should absolutely be open to all Victorians to enjoy, to appreciate and to get amongst. Whether it is hiking, fishing, camping, hunting, mountain bike riding, birdwatching, walking – whatever it might be – there are so many activities and there is so much public land for all Victorians to be amongst, to enjoy, to appreciate and to value. It is something that we should all strive for. Our bush is the lungs of our state. We are very fortunate in Victoria to have such a beautiful natural environment. It is the Labor Party that historically has made those wins and those gains to protect our natural spaces and keep them as the beautiful places they are. It is these places that also feed the water that we all drink. The beautiful water that we have here in Melbourne, some of the best in the world and around our state, comes from these places that we have kept clean and pristine.

So it is a shame that we see political scaremongering and division come into these subjects, whether it is the Greens who say not one tree in the whole of Victoria can be cut down or whether it is the Nationals who want to take bulldozers out and level everything in sight – or the scaremongering that goes on between the two. It is Labor that sits in the sensible centre. We have hunters that have some of the most incredible knowledge of caring for natural places. We have environmentalists that can be some of our best firefighters in the bush. And I think we have been seeing, particularly in recent elections, that Victorians and Australians want us to come together in the sensible centre to meet and have logical, rational discussions on a whole range of issues, and how we care for and use our public places and spaces is another one of those. To think that we should go in and absolutely pillage a place over a couple of generations and the idea that we should lock something up so that current generations cannot use it are both misguided and, as I said, unfortunately divisive.

Given that my time was a bit stop-start, I will leave my contribution there. But I would just implore everyone in this debate to think about ways that we can bring people together, not divide them and not separate them, and ways that we can get the best outcomes to manage biodiversity and the best outcomes to have people use, value, appreciate and love our open spaces.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (10:04): I rise today on behalf of the Nationals and Liberals to support this motion 949 standing in Ms Purcell's name, and I do so because it is the habit of the house to ensure that the short-form document motions providing information sail through and call for some transparency from the Allan government. In particular I am interested in the Great Outdoors Taskforce and to see some of the detailed responses, reports and submissions to the Engage Victoria survey and to read the correspondence, advice, instructions and meeting minutes. I very much am. What I also might like to suggest to Mr McIntosh, who we have just heard from, is for him to go and get some ear candles and give his ears a bit of a flush and also to go to the optometrist to see that his sight is okay, because if he listened to the things that the Liberals and Nationals are saying and if he read *Hansard*, he would see that what he just said is completely untrue in relation to our position.

What I always find very interesting with the likes of the Animal Justice Party is that they lament and cry in a certain small space and have no vision or breadth of the landscape-wide management of our public land. Indeed this outdoors taskforce was set up in April last year, and the statement that the minister put out was about looking at the entire land that had been under logging and under forest harvesting – 1.8 million hectares. Then as time evolved, with the workings that some of these documents might show, the government on its website put up the location that is the area of the Great

Outdoors Taskforce's focus, and that only included areas of East Gippsland and north-east Victoria in the eastern part of the state. It did not actually include what the statement said originally, which was that area that also covers areas like Toolangi forest, Healesville, Warburton and Yarra Junction. I put that on record because I approve of the Great Outdoors Taskforce, and overwhelmingly the Liberals and Nationals do as well, for its response back and its recommendation to create no new national parks. We endorse that. But my concern is that that taskforce did not look at that region in the Central Highlands, which is the footprint around which some would seek to establish the great forest national park. So I still have those concerns. The government is giving me no encouragement or confidence that that will not happen in the future.

But let me go to the Great Outdoors Taskforce now. The eminent panel, a similar body, had consultations, as did the Great Outdoors Taskforce. They brought sticky notes for consultation. They were overwhelmed with people saying, 'You do not understand the realities of the need to have better land management and the need to still have people in the forest and to have bush user groups', and we could list them all in that forest situation. The Great Outdoors Taskforce also said – I am looking at their website:

We know that the greatest threats to the sustainability of our forests and the environment are ... bushfires ... as well as ... pest plants and animals.

These threats don't obey lines on a map and occur across all land tenures. The Taskforce understands that good conservation management to mitigate these threats must be a core function of all public land managers ...

This government has been atrocious in doing that. In 2019–20 there was a 1.8 million-hectare bushfire. No, the government did not strike lightning, but their policies over the last decade have not been about supporting the mitigation of massive out-of-control bushfires. What did that do for flora and fauna? Threatened species were annihilated. They were annihilated – 3 billion critters. Flora and fauna were wiped out because of those out-of-control bushfires.

We on this side know that there needs to be sensible reform. We would like to see some of these documents, but we also do not support Animal Justice's narrow focus on, 'Let's shut everything down and lock people out. That will then automatically create a better environment.' Having active management, people in the environment conducting their recreational activities, conservation and no more new national parks will help better management of our current public land.

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (10:09): I will make a quick contribution here. I, like the Liberals, Nationals and government, will support this. There is nothing to be afraid of from my point of view. The great forest national park was originally dreamed up by non-government people to protect the environment – these are their thoughts, not mine – from the native timber industry. The native timber industry is gone. It was killed. Daniel Andrews did that. Right now one must wonder why this keeps on happening. Why does this whole thing about the great forest national park keep on happening? What is the point?

The problem I see now is that creating a national park will stop a lot of the people that can go to a state forest from doing what they want to do. There are a lot of people that tend to forget that it is not just about us looking for shooting and hunting. There was this statement made about shooting lobby groups and all that. You cannot take a dog into a national park, but you can into a state forest. If you just want to go for a walk with your dog, if it is a state forest, you can; if it is a national park, no. It is as simple as that. This is about locking people out from somewhere that is being used. Public land is for the public. It is not for shutting up. I would love to see what the Great Outdoors Taskforce got to see. It was set up to look into this, and there seems to be this perception that it was set up just to rubberstamp a national park and that there would be no other outcome. Now that there is another outcome there is all this hysteria and carry-on like it is a great big conspiracy. We will find out, but I am quite confident that we will see that the right decision was made.

I am going to finish up on one last thing: the duck-hunting inquiry. It keeps coming up time and time again. The government did not ignore the duck-hunting inquiry recommendations. It ignored one; the other seven were taken into account and/or are being implemented. I need to correct that. They did not do number 1. They did do numbers 2 to 8.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:11): I also rise to make some remarks on Ms Purcell's motion today, with the added benefit that the chamber will be able to see Ms Purcell's reactions to my speech in real time – perhaps not all that positive; we will see. In line with the standing orders and the conventions already outlined by other speakers, the government will not be opposing this motion today, noting Ms Purcell's significant interest in advancement of the environmental cause has seen her bring forward this motion before us. We know that Victoria's forests are the heart of our state. They are spaces for families to experience their favourite activities, whether it be camping, fishing, hunting or walking. In fact I was speaking with Mr Bourman just this morning about all the ways in which people can go camping in our great outdoors in Victoria.

We do need to see a future where these spaces are preserved for environmental protection as well as for the enjoyment and benefit of all Victorians. They are places to be experienced and admired, not merely locked away, so our focus is bringing more families to the bush and more jobs to the regions whilst making sure that we protect Victorians and protect what Victorians most love about those bush environments. On local projects that I have been able to work on recently I have had some similar and very productive conversations about ensuring that local assets in and around my region are able to be used as much as reasonably possible for the public to enjoy whilst preserving what makes them so special, as have many other colleagues on this side.

We know that it is an important thing for us to get right. There has been a taskforce, and the chair of that taskforce has made it clear that accessing our forests for recreation and tourism and improving our biodiversity and conservation efforts can go hand in hand and that planning for these shared objectives can usher in a new era of state forest management. They have noted that they will not be making any recommendations in relation to large-scale changes to land tenure, and we will always ensure that Victorians can access and enjoy our beautiful natural environments. I note as well that a significant piece of consultation went into this work. We had more than a thousand people attending nine different open community drop-in sessions which took place across towns as diverse as Noojee, Healesville, Warburton, Yarra Junction, Gembrook, Wandong, Marysville, Drouin and Alexandra. Again, important work that is being done.

As other speakers have referred to, we know that when it comes to our state's visitor economy the regions play a very important part. The fact that we have the lowest payroll tax in the nation in regional Victoria is another thing that helps to drive investment in the regions and to keep unemployment down. It is one of a range of factors that come into the work in this space that the government is doing, and this is a government that is committed to continuing that work and to continuing to work with stakeholders to make sure that balance, which sometimes can be trickier to land than others, is always striven for. As a member of that government, I very much look forward to continuing to do my bit when it comes to issues that may come up from time to time in my local region and working with stakeholders to get the best possible outcome. As I said, the government will not be opposing this motion today, and I acknowledge Ms Purcell's keen interest in the environment.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (10:15): You have not given me much time to talk about this, but that is all right. I thank the chamber for that. I will be supporting this motion, but similar to Ms Bath, I restate our commitment that there be no new great forest national park. I want to particularly use this opportunity to acknowledge Paul Gaynor, a resident of Wallan who has done a lot of work organisationally for the Hands Off Our Forests campaign, and the advocacy that he does.

Motion agreed to.

Payroll tax

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (10:16): I move:

That this house, in accordance with standing order 10.01, requires the Leader of the Government to table in the Council, within three weeks of the house agreeing to this resolution:

- (1) briefs provided to the Treasurer since 1 December 2022 relating to the state government's payroll tax arrangements as applied to general practitioners and other health professionals;
- (2) briefs provided to the Minister for Health since 1 December 2022 relating to the state government's payroll tax arrangements as applied to general practitioners and other health professionals; and
- (3) assessments and/or analysis, including projections of revenue receipts by the Department of Treasury and Finance and/or its agencies on the implications, costs and impacts of the state government's general practitioner and health tax.

I rise to speak to motion 950. It relates to an important issue that I have raised a number of times in this house in relation to GP payroll tax. The Victorian public and those directly involved – meaning GPs, essentially – need to understand exactly why the government has done what they have done. They keep saying nothing has changed. This is actually a patient tax, because those general practitioners who are going to be taxed will pass this cost onto their patients. The health booking platform HotDoc, when they did a survey of general practitioners that they are responsible for, said 95 per cent of clinics in Victoria would increase patient fees in response to additional payroll tax obligations, with the average increase around \$12 per standard consultation, bringing out-of-pocket costs up to around \$52. That was quite some time ago, when I first raised the issue. No doubt, with costs increasing right across the board, those figures are slightly out of date now. But we do need to understand what the State Revenue Office (SRO) and Treasury have forecast, given the Parliamentary Budget Office was unable to provide that assistance to me when asked because they could not get the information out either. The HotDoc platform also found through their survey that 28 per cent of patients would make fewer visits to their GP if fees increased, and 7 per cent would stop going altogether.

We know we are in a cost-of-living crisis. The health and wellbeing of Victorians is absolutely critical, and we are seeing more patients fall behind because of delays in treatment and management. We have got record numbers of people languishing on the elective surgery waitlist, the planned surgery waitlist. Those people have to go back to GPs and be managed and get prescriptions for their pain relief. All of these aspects are really, really very critical.

I want to just make the point that stakeholders are still very concerned about this. I spoke to the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners last week, who are still very concerned. I had a GP come into my office sometime ago and say that they were audited by the SRO. The SRO said they were fine, there was nothing there. Three months later they received another notice saying they had to have another audit. They said they had already been audited. Out of that subsequent audit they had a bill of a million dollars. It is extraordinary that this is what is going on. This is another tax grab because of the dire financial situation this state is in, and this government will go anywhere. But that just shows you the disarray and –

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: Well, it is, Mr Batchelor, disarray when a GP has been audited by the SRO and told they do not have to pay anything and then reaudited and told to pay a million dollars. Then, by the way, do you know what the SRO said when they said, 'We can't pay that'? They said, 'Oh, don't worry, just pay \$200,000 or \$300,000.' That is what is happening in this state. That is an absolute disgrace and it is why this motion needs to be supported: so we can actually see what is going on. I look forward to the government providing those documents.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:21): I rise to speak on the motion put to us today by Ms Crozier. Again, in reiteration from the previous discussion, I note that the government

will not be opposing this motion, as is our practice. But it does give me a terrific opportunity to talk about some of the many investments that we have made, not just in our healthcare system more broadly, which we often talk about in this place, but in primary care specifically. We note the rollout of the 29 priority primary care clinics, which are now known as Medicare urgent care clinics, providing much easier access for people to obtain those really critical services right across metropolitan Melbourne and indeed regional Victoria. This was an initiative by the Victorian and New South Wales governments in concert, necessitated by the complete vacuum and failure of the former federal Liberal government to invest in primary care.

We know a significant burden on GPs was caused by the freezing of the Medicare rebate. That has now changed under the Albanese federal Labor government, and it is something I particularly welcome. The federal government needs to be pulling its weight when it comes to investing in our primary healthcare services, which is why I welcome those increases to the Medicare rebate, which will help both patients and GPs. I also welcome the rollout of what were originally priority primary care centres, now known as urgent care clinics, and the fact that we now have a federal government that is actually prepared to invest in those primary care facilities as well, as it should be. I look forward to seeing continued investment in those facilities that were an initiative of this state government in concert with New South Wales.

We also know that access to care comes in all sorts of different ways, and this government has also been pioneering when it comes to the rollout of the community pharmacy pilot, providing opportunities for people to get simple – especially repeat – prescriptions for a variety of things that they will need, not by having to go through the whole process of booking a GP appointment to go through the same conversation when they know exactly what is going to happen but by being able to talk to a specially trained pharmacist and get that medication directly from the pharmacy. This week there was a further announcement that the community pharmacy program will now include treatment for 22 everyday health conditions, including asthma, nausea, ear infections, wound management and type 2 diabetes. We know that this is a very significant investment. It is an \$18 million investment that will deliver free consultations for these conditions. Also, particularly on that point, Victoria will now be the only state where these consultations will actually be free. In other states they have rolled out similar programs, whether for UTIs – which Victoria has also rolled out – or for resupply of oral contraceptives, treatment of shingles, flare-ups of mild plaque psoriasis, travel health vaccinations and all those sorts of things.

Different states have been implementing this program in different ways, including Victoria. But with the announcement in the state budget last week, we have seen both a significant expansion of the conditions and treatments that are covered by this but also Victoria being the only jurisdiction in Australia where you will get these consultations free of charge. It is a very significant development, and I know it is one that has been welcomed by the Pharmacy Guild of Australia. They have been very enthusiastic about this. It has been great to speak with them and also to note their comments made in the public realm enthusiastically, making note of the fact that Victoria is the only state or territory where you will be able to access these important services without any out-of-pocket cost whatsoever. We know that this program is effective. The pilot program has already demonstrated a satisfaction rate of 97 per cent, with an independent evaluation finding that 88 per cent of patients supported pharmacists being able to prescribe treatment for these sorts of everyday health conditions, which indicates strong public support for the sorts of measures which are now being undertaken and even further undertaken by a government that is committed to making cost-of-living pressures easier on all Victorians, particularly when it comes to accessing important, vital and everyday healthcare needs.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (10:26): I am pleased to work with this motion in my name moved by Ms Crozier. This is under standing order 10.01, and it seeks a set of documents from the government. These are important documents. They relate to the government's decision to put a payroll tax on GPs and health clinics. It is an outrageous and extraordinary new tax, let us be clear.

Ryan Batchelor: It's not a new tax.

David DAVIS: It is indeed. You have done it. Do not for a minute try to say it is not a new tax. It is a new tax. You go and ask one of your GP clinics. I have been to GP clinics in our mutual electorate, and they tell me they were not paying the tax until your government brought it in. That is the truth of the matter: your government brought it in.

Ryan Batchelor: What law has changed?

David DAVIS: The State Revenue Office's approach changed. Let us be clear: the SRO's approach changed, and we know what that is like. We understand precisely what it is like. We know exactly how this operates. The SRO changed their approach, and they are going after doctors, they are going after dentists, they are going after physiotherapists, they are going after every health professional group that is in a major –

Members interjecting.

David DAVIS: I am sure they would. I am no longer a registered chiropractor, but I am sure they would be if they could. And certainly the SRO is happy to go after anyone, as you well know.

The point here is: will this help with the current crisis? Will this help with the shortage of GPs? Will this help with the decline in bulk-billing? In the last three years, under Labor, it has gone from 80 per cent down to 70 per cent in big parts of my area – and your area, Mr Batchelor. That fall in bulk-billing under Labor is going to be exacerbated by a new tax that has been imposed on these doctors and dentists and physiotherapists and other health groups that are providing very important services to the community. The solution to the bulk-billing crisis is not to put a brand spanking new tax on it. The solution to the bulk-billing crisis is to support doctors.

Members interjecting.

Richard Welch: On a point of order, Acting President, I cannot hear.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): Mr Davis to continue without assistance.

David DAVIS: The point here is that the government has been very secretive about this matter. It has tried to slide this through. Doctors and dentists and other health professionals have pushed back. They have said this is wrong. The modelling on all of this will be held by the SRO. It will be held at the Department of Health and it will be held in the Treasurer's office. We should see that information. We should understand how the government sees this going around. And there is no question: in New South Wales and Queensland they have stepped back from this approach.

A member interjected.

David DAVIS: In Queensland we are talking about the coalition. Yes, we are. In the case of New South Wales, we are talking about the Labor state government that have stepped back from this approach. But the Labor government in Victoria has not stepped back from this approach. That is the point. This is the government that is going after doctors, going after dentists, going after physiotherapists –

Tom McIntosh: On a point of order, Acting President, I was going to raise this yesterday because it was a bit late in the day and my ears were just dealing with the volume. Mr Davis is yelling repetitively. Yesterday there was no-one on this side saying even one word, but we will not talk about yesterday. But right now, Mr Davis just pointed at me, and it has been –

Members interjecting.

Tom McIntosh: Mrs Deeming makes a good point to remind me that I point, so I will endeavour to refrain from pointing, and I would appreciate it if Mr Davis would do the same.

David DAVIS: I am happy to concede the point of order, Acting President. I should not point, but I was tremendously provoked.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): I will note your provocation.

Members interjecting.

Renee Heath: On a point of order, Acting President, Mr McIntosh just swore in the chamber.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): I did not hear that, and he is no longer in the chamber to withdraw.

David DAVIS: If he did swear, that is unfortunate, but I did not hear it. There was a lot of noise. The point here is that these documents that we seek are documents that will lay out the government's plans, modelling and examination of these tax changes. They are changes. They are a new tax. The fact is the government have gone after doctors, they have gone after physiotherapists and they have gone after dentists to try and clobber these professionals in clinics at a time when we have a shortage of health practitioners and a shortage in many particular communities. There is no way that a big new payroll tax put on top of the cost structures will assist in ensuring that we get the supply of doctors, nurses and other health professionals that we need. The solution is not a big new tax. The solution is for the state government to step back from that. But in the first instance we need to see precisely what is going on, and that is why these motions are here. We think that it is in the public interest.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (10:31): I am pleased to rise to speak on the documents motion relating to briefs provided to the Treasurer and the Minister for Health relating to payroll tax arrangements applicable to general practitioners. There was a lot in Mr Davis's contribution that was just wrong, and I will attempt to go through some of it in the short time we have available. Mr Davis repeatedly insisted that there had been some legislative change that had brought this about. He said that there was a new tax, and Mr Davis should know that the power to levy taxation in the state vests in the Parliament through its laws. What he was unable to do in the contribution that he made – not the only error that he made and not the only concern with the contribution – was actually point to where that law had changed. He cannot, because it did not. The issue that he is dealing with is the applicability of existing laws to certain types of practices as they have been implemented by the State Revenue Office, matters that were thoroughly dealt with in previous debates by the former Treasurer quite extensively and by arrangements that were put in place by the current Treasurer, who is obviously well across these matters.

The second point I will make is that at no point should anyone take any advice about how to improve access to health care in this state from the Liberal Party – ever. They get up here with their – I do not know what the appropriate word to describe it is, so I had better fall short of saying something that will get me into trouble. But no-one should believe that the Liberal Party has any interest in making sure that patients have access to accessible and affordable health care. Look at all the Liberal Party has done, whether it is at a state level in terms of cuts that they have made in the past and the closures they made to hospital services when they were in charge of this state, or whether it is what the federal Liberal Party has done in the past and continues to advocate for, which is abolishing things like the Medicare urgent care clinics that were a Labor initiative – in this state there are 27-odd. Labor initiated a policy that was then recognised for the benefit it could bring and spread around the country in partnership with the Commonwealth.

Last year's state budget invested in those urgent care clinics. This year's state budget invests in urgent care clinics that are providing free, accessible general practice services to Victorians who need them most. The Liberal Party at the federal level wanted to get rid of them. The question Mr Davis and the Liberal Party have to answer now is: is that state funding at risk too? Because they have said that they are going to abolish this tax, which means they are going to forgo the revenue that is being raised from GP services. The question is: if they are going to forgo revenue, where are the cuts coming from? We know that the Liberal Party at the federal level wanted to cut Medicare urgent care clinics. The Liberal Party at a state level needs to come clean. Are they going to pay for their promises to 'scrap this tax'?

by cutting the urgent care clinics that are funded in the state budget? Unless they can answer that question, we should not believe a word they say on health.

Motion agreed to.

Motions

Economy

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (10:37): I move:

That this house:

(1) notes:

- (a) the Bracks government introduced a debt ceiling of 6 per cent of gross state product (GSP) in 2004;
- (b) Victoria's general government sector (GGS) debt has increased from \$21.7 billion, 6 per cent of GSP in the 2014–15 budget update, to \$155.5 billion, 24.5 per cent of GSP in the 2025–26 budget;
- (c) the Andrews Labor government increased the debt ceiling to 12 per cent and then removed the debt ceiling entirely;
- (d) Victoria's debt-servicing burden has increased significantly;
- (e) the state's extraordinary indebtedness will reduce the opportunities of younger Victorians;
- (f) the Andrews and Allan governments have squandered over \$40 billion in unscheduled cost overruns in infrastructure projects, contributing directly to increased borrowings and surging debt;
- (g) the Auditor-General's report titled annual financial report of the state of Victoria, 2023–24, noted:
 - (i) debt for COVID-19-related expenditure totalled \$31.5 billion, 18.7 per cent of the government's current outstanding debt;
 - (ii) \$137 billion of GGS gross debt relates to investment in infrastructure programs;
 - (iii) 'the state has not articulated a clear plan for long-term fiscal management ... Current strategies are short term, reactive and do not address both the existing financial challenges and emerging financial risks';

(2) calls on the government to:

- (a) establish a fiscal repair plan with quantitative measures to provide a certain budget repair path; and
- (b) re-establish and publish a debt ceiling.

I am delighted to move this motion, but I also wish that it were not the case that I needed to move a motion that drew attention to the state government's failures, its fiscal failures, its failures on debt. We know the huge interest cost per day, and I will say something about it shortly. This is the sad story of Victoria's debt position – that it does reduce future opportunities for all Victorians, including young Victorians. The Andrews and Allan governments have squandered over \$40 billion – in fact I think it is up to nearly \$48 billion now.

I want to step through this motion carefully because there is a lot of information in it that has never been gathered together in one place in this approach. What is first important is that a Labor government, the Bracks government, introduced a debt ceiling in the early 2000s. It was 6 per cent of GSP. It was a Labor government that introduced the debt ceiling, and the Andrews government under Tim Pallas as Treasurer increased that debt ceiling to 12 per cent and later abolished it. The week before the 2018 election the government said, 'We're going to go to 12 per cent. We're going to double the debt-to-GSP ratio.' They did that immediately before the state election and said, 'We're going to spend a truckload on certain infrastructure.' But they did not even stick to that. They then abolished the debt ceiling entirely, and it is clear that that has been a loss of some guide rails, some indications. The Bracks government believed it was worthwhile having those guide rails, and the early Andrews government believed it was worth having those guide rails.

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

David DAVIS: I am just trying to step through this carefully and methodically. These are all facts. They may be inconvenient facts for some on the other side of the chamber, but they are actually facts. It is true that the Bracks government put a debt ceiling in, it is true that the Andrews government lived with that debt ceiling, it is true that the Andrews government lifted the debt ceiling to 12 per cent, and it is true that the Andrews government threw away the debt ceiling completely and utterly and got rid of that in a policy decision that they were going to go for a very, very high level of debt.

The other thing that is important here is this enormous growth in the debt. When the government came into power in 2014, we got a budget update. Very close to \$21.7 billion was the figure, a very modest debt level. I was part of that government. We worked hard to keep our debt under control whilst expanding in a number of areas – in my portfolio of health and in other portfolios we did a hell of a lot and we did it within the debt parameters. We did not add immeasurably to debt in the way the current government has, and now we see debt at \$155.5 billion but heading over the forward estimates to \$194 billion. This is an historic level, and we have seen the credit agencies circling. The credit agencies are peering down. The credit agencies are looking closely at the books in Victoria, and they know that Victoria is a poorly performing state under this government. They know that the budget estimates cannot be trusted. We know that year after year a set of estimates is put forward and the final outcomes bear little or no relationship to the estimates that are put forward at an early point.

I think what is also important here is that the Auditor in his very important report from 2023–24 looked at the government's so-called plan, and the plan has not fundamentally changed from what Tim Pallas had. It still talks about the four steps and so forth. But the Auditor canned it. In Auditor speak he said this is not really up to scratch. He said:

... the state has not articulated a clear plan for long-term fiscal management. Current strategies are short term, reactive and do not address both the existing financial challenges and emerging financial risks ...

He pointed at where the debt had come from. A lot of people say it is all because of COVID. Let me tell you something. The state government's operating budget was in deficit on 31 December 2019. It was already in deficit BC, before COVID. COVID around the world obviously had a significant impact on budgets. But the Auditor has usefully quantified that impact, and he says COVID expenditure totalled \$31.5 billion, 18.7 per cent of the government's current outstanding debt. The debt has grown more, and the COVID share of the debt will have consequently, as a comparative part of that, shrunk, not in absolute terms of course – the state government does not pay down much debt in this state – but as a share of the overall expenditure it will have become a lesser percentage. But the point here is that even at the time the auditor looked closely 18.7 per cent of the debt was due to COVID, but most of the debt – a huge share of the debt – was due to investment infrastructure programs. We just need to be clear: you hear government ministers and others say, 'Oh, it was all COVID. It was all COVID.' No, it was not and it is not. It is because of the state government's failure to control these programs.

We all know these programs, these large infrastructure programs, whether it is level crossing removals, which have gone billions and billions and billions of dollars over budget, or whether it is the Metro, which is currently more than \$4 billion over budget but likely to chip in at well over \$5 billion over budget. Let us be clear: it was a \$9 billion project costed up, with a cost-benefit analysis done. It is a good project. I support the Metro Tunnel – I think it is a good project – but it looks very different at \$14 billion or \$15 billion. It looks a very different project.

They do not seem to have the capacity to control the cost blowouts. Out in Mr Welch's area there is the North East Link, beginning in the northern corner of my electorate. That project was initially scoped at just a bit over \$5 billion, but when the government signed it, it was about \$10 billion – \$10,000 million. But now the project is over \$26 billion – \$26,000 million.

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

David DAVIS: It is very difficult to stop, as you know, but the point is the government should constrain these costs. The government has allowed these costs to blow out. The government seems to have no capacity to actually keep the costs under control.

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

David DAVIS: I will tell you what we are going to do: we are going to keep the costs of these big projects under control.

Members interjecting.

David DAVIS: A proper oversight committee would be a good start. We have tried to move a parliamentary oversight committee in this chamber, which you blocked – a public works committee that would have oversight of these projects and try and keep the projects on track. That would be one very simple start – proper costings at the start, honest costings, instead of the Suburban Rail Loop that they have run out and there is no business case. Make no mistake, there is no business case on the Suburban Rail Loop. There is what the previous Premier called ‘an investment case’. ‘Oh no, no, no,’ he said on radio, ‘it’s not a business case.’ That is what Daniel Andrews said. ‘A business case is a thing that you do,’ he said, and I am paraphrasing, ‘when you’re looking at options and alternatives. Now we’re doing this. It’s only an investment case.’ The alternative would have been to look at the options properly.

Looking back at the North East Link, it is \$26,000 million. It is a good project in the sense that we need that road. Whether we needed precisely the road that they have chosen is another question. Whether you would have done it differently is another question, and whether you would have used the alliance model that they are using. I mean, let us be clear what is going on with these alliance models: they are all a little group, and it is like a cost-plus model. You have got your house, you have signed the contract, the amount is X but it is ‘cost plus’. If there is an overrun, the builder gets more, and strangely, the builders have a slight interest in getting a bit more, so these projects splay across the land in cost overruns. It is shocking. It is adding to our debt, and we have got to control it.

The opposition has already talked at length about the need for a public works committee, an old-fashioned public works committee. We used to have such a committee. The old Public Works Committee in Victoria oversighted the underground loop and all the major dams. All of those major projects were oversighted by the old Public Works Committee. My point is: a lot of the costs here and a lot of the debt are because of the government’s inability and incompetence to manage major projects. If you want to build major projects, build them. We want to see major projects, but we want to see the costs controlled. We want to see the costs constrained. We do not give you a blank cheque to go out and write whatever you want, because if you use your money wisely, you can do more. This motion about debt recognises that the state government used to have guardrails. The Bracks government had a 6 per cent limit – a 6 per cent debt ceiling was put in.

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

David DAVIS: We want you to publish it. We want you to re-establish a debt ceiling and we want you to publish it. We want you to publish it. You are in government. I will give you a tip: you might not realise it, but you are in government. We are not in government.

Members interjecting.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): Order! Mr Davis to continue through the Chair without pointing and with interjections to be kept to a minimum, please.

David DAVIS: I say that the job of the government is to actually get in there and control these projects. We need to get those projects lassoed in so that the costs are not out of control. It is completely unacceptable to see a project go from \$10,000 million to \$26,000 million.

Jacinta Ermacora: On a point of order, Acting President, you did request he continue through the Chair, and I think Mr Davis should speak to the Chair.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): I uphold the point of order. Mr Davis, to please continue through the Chair.

David DAVIS: Ms Ermacora should be worried about the expenditure of so much money in the city and so little in the country. That would be something that she should focus upon. More than \$40 billion, and closer now to \$48 billion, is the cost overrun. This is not the cost of the projects; this is the overruns. This is the tabulated overruns on these projects. You wonder why our debt is so far out of control. As the Auditor-General said, \$31.5 billion of the debt is related to COVID-related expenditure and \$137 billion of it is related to the infrastructure blowouts.

Members interjecting.

David DAVIS: Acting President, just on a point of order, you might want to ensure that there is not this constant barrage of interjections.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): Noting that interjections are quite common when provocations occur, Mr Davis, I will ask that the volume in the room be kept to a minimum and ask that members do not interject from outside their seats.

David DAVIS: The truth of the matter is that the state's extraordinary indebtedness will crimp the future for so many Victorians, younger Victorians in particular. There will be a reckoning. The debt will have to be repaid in due course, and there is no doubt that there will be challenges in that process. But the start of this process is to make sure that we get control of the spending on these major projects. Good projects should have good cost control. Good projects should be managed properly. Good projects should be kept within their budgets. That is the first step in controlling the state's debt position. We do need the guardrails, like the Bracks government had and like the Andrews government initially had, but then they jacked the debt ceiling up and then abolished it completely.

It is a task for the state government to sit down, to work out how it is going to manage these major projects and to establish a proper fiscal repair path, with quantitative measures, that provides a certain budget repair path. I have very rarely seen the Auditor be so directly damning as in that report that I have quoted, so directly damning in terms of the ability of the state to deliver and the lack of confidence that he has in the state government's projections and approach and its ability to articulate a long-term plan. Let us requote what he said:

... the state has not articulated a clear plan for long-term fiscal management. Current strategies are short term, reactive and do not address both the existing financial challenges and emerging financial risks ...

This is right. He is absolutely right. We have said the state government has got to establish that proper fiscal path forward, with quantitative measures to provide certain budget repair path steps, and we have said that they should re-establish and publish a debt ceiling. That is a job for the state government, with Treasury, and perhaps consulting the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee and working with other agencies, but particularly for Treasury to help. Our plan is to say: you should do it right now. You should do it now. We are not in government. I will give you the tip: we are not in government. You just might want to understand that. I cannot do this. I cannot establish a fiscal repair path, nor can Mr Newbury – he is not in government. All we can do is say 'This is what the Auditor is saying.' He is giving us a very clear warning. There is a history of the state putting in place sensible steps and actually working our way forward.

We know that the state's future is in the balance here. The state government needs to really settle down and actually focus on what is important here. We have had the warnings from the ratings agencies. The Treasurer yesterday wanted to try and reject these points about the ratings agencies. But the truth of course is that the rating agencies are going to have an effect. If the interest burden grows because our credit rating is downgraded, that affects our debt level and it affects our ability to go forward. It

affects the future for young people. It affects the options of so many people in this state. It is not a coincidence we have got the highest state tax level of any state. It is not a coincidence. The reason is because this state government has jacked tax up and up and up. They have done it because the state's debt has blown out, because they appear chronically unable to control the major projects debt. It is not COVID – that is not the primary point, and the Auditor made that clear in his report. Do not let us try and put the COVID excuse in place. That is not the reason. The reason is the failure of the government. We need a proper plan before we get to \$194 billion, which is where it is projected to go.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:57): I rise to briefly contribute to this debate on motion 817 in Mr Davis's name. This issue might be the one thing that Trump and Joe Biden agree on. I say that because we already have a perfect example of just how bad the Liberals' debt policy is, and it is over in the United States. What is proposed here, a so-called debt ceiling, kneecaps a government's ability to function, having to beg, steal and borrow just to pass budgetary measures that are in the public interest, struggling to fund core services that people rely on purely because of an arbitrary rationale and ideological political reasoning from the Liberal Party. It is nonsensical to try to import this flawed mechanism from the US when the US itself is trying to stamp it out – they are trying to stamp it out. The Liberals proposal that Victoria introduce a US-style approach to debt is frankly ridiculous, and I have yet to hear a sound argument as to why we would introduce this broken system right now here in Victoria.

What is proposed is a tool of bureaucracy. It slows down government, forcing it to go back to Parliament every time it wants to spend money. If the debt ceiling is not raised each time, the government shuts down. This means services do not run, it means laws are not passed and it means public service workers like teachers and our nurses have their pay frozen. If people in this place are genuinely worried about our state's debt, I point them perhaps to the Greens suggestions in the past about measures to raise more money for government, to bring in more revenue to fund services and programs that people need, to fund our hospitals and to fund schools – measures like taxing the big banks through a quarterly levy. We have talked about this in the past and yet the Liberals have not been supportive. So, sorry, I am seeing some crocodile tears here from the Liberal Party on debt. In summary, this is a dud pitch from the Liberal Party which the Greens will not be supporting.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (10:59): I rise to speak on the responsible economic management which the Allan Labor government has demonstrated in the 2025–26 budget. I want to congratulate Treasurer Symes on her first budget, which restores the Victorian budget to an operating surplus for the first time since before the pandemic. There are many things that we need to speak about as parliamentarians if we want to be taken seriously on the economy, because these matters are very, very rarely as simple as those on the other side of the chamber would like you to believe.

Firstly, it is a fact not often mentioned, generally forgotten and rarely spoken of by those on the other side of the chamber that since first being brought to office, this government has cut or abolished taxes, putting money back in the pockets of Victorians and making it easier for Victorian businesses to create jobs. Another thing that we do not hear mentioned very often from those on the other side of the chamber is the fact that Victoria is the only state in the country which currently has a fiscal strategy – a fiscal strategy, mind you, which unlike the economic plans of those opposite is not just an idea, not just a concept of a plan, it is setting goals and is meeting them. The fiscal strategy was first created in the 2020–21 budget, responding to debt which accrued as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a long-term strategy coming from a government which has the foresight and the attention span to look past one budget or deficit or even one term of Parliament, to look for the best interests of Victorian people and the best interests of succeeding generations of Victorians.

But a budget is not a simple thing. A whole fiscal strategy cannot be contained within a TikTok or tabloid article. It takes serious work from serious people. So far we have had five budgets worth of sticking to this fiscal strategy, and the budget handed down last week was the sixth. The return to an operating surplus did not happen overnight, it took years of hard work.

The first step of the Allan Labor government's fiscal strategy was to create jobs, reduce unemployment and restore economic growth. We have seen this not only in the Allan Labor government's investments in infrastructure, delivering more train services, including the Sandringham line in Southern Metropolitan Region, new schools, hospitals, homes – everything a growing state like ours will need over the next few decades. We have also seen this succeed in the fact that last year Victoria had the highest business investment growth anywhere in the country. Since June 2020 when the fiscal strategy was first announced, 113,000 new businesses have been created in this state, and our economy is growing larger than ever before. That is the first step – getting the economy growing properly after COVID. The second step is to restore the budget to an operating cash surplus. For the past two years the state has achieved this, and the projected operating cost surplus over the forward estimates is expected to reach \$5.8 billion in the 2028–29 budget. The third step is to restore the budget to operating surpluses, which are projected in 2026–27 to the degree of \$1.9 billion and in 2027–28 to the degree of \$2.4 billion. These figures announced in the recent budget are a significant improvement on what was projected previously in the 2024–25 budget and are a credit to the hard work and prudent economic management of the Treasurer. The fourth step is to stabilise debt as a proportion of the gross state product by improving the state's operating cash flow surpluses year on year while growing the economy. Last week's budget projects that this will be achieved in next year's budget. The fifth step is not just to stabilise net debt as a proportion of the gross state product but actually reduce it. Projections in last week's budget look good on this front, with decreases in debt to gross state product expected in the 2027–28 and 2028–29 budgets.

There is something to be said about the government's strong fiscal management during the difficult economic times we have all been through since the pandemic. Making enormous investments like operationalising the Metro Tunnel, \$1.5 billion for school buildings, and opening and operating nine new and expanded hospitals all in one budget is certainly one thing; doing it while also delivering a budget surplus of \$600 million is certainly another. But making those investments while delivering a budget surplus under the economic circumstances which have faced us since the pandemic is quite another thing. Treasurer Symes and the former Treasurer, Tim Pallas, certainly deserve a lot of credit for the hard work over the years – not months, but years – which has gotten us to the point which will take us further as the Allan Labor government fulfils the promises laid out in the fiscal strategy.

It is worth making the comparison between the last 10½ years of the Andrews–Allan Labor government and the previous four years of the chaotic Liberal government when those on the other side of the chamber sat on the Treasury benches. Instead of making important investments which are growing the state like Victoria needed, they made cuts. They cut \$300 million from TAFE. They could not even deliver a single one of the rail projects. They picked fights with nurses, they picked fights with teachers, and in the end they still delivered back-to-back deficits. They refused to fix the roof while the sun was still shining and refused to make the investments that growing states like Victoria need. Our record, on the other hand, tells a different story. Prior to the pandemic, this government was making the big investments in level crossing removals, the Metro Tunnel, the Suburban Rail Loop, delivering more trains more often, delivering on our commitment to build 100 new schools and new hospitals, and delivering free TAFE. Mind you, this was all during the time of the Abbott–Turnbull–Morrison federal coalition government – back when they had a coalition. They may have changed leader again and again, but they always held on to one fairly backwards idea: they thought it was fair to give Victoria, the fastest-growing state at the time, only 7 per cent of the federal infrastructure spending. All this, and we still managed to hand down surplus after surplus after surplus.

Since the pandemic and the significant costs which were left to be carried by the state, we have had more than a difficult situation. This was immediately recognised by the government. That is why we devised the fiscal strategy. But budgets are not all about the past; they are about the future. It is perfectly legitimate for us to compare present budgets with past budgets, but I think we can get more value out of taking a look at what those opposite would do if they ever found their way into government again. Historically Liberal governments have never liked announcing what they would like to do in government before an election, preferring to wait until after the election to make announcements on

big issues, so a little bit of speculation about what they might do with power is warranted. Perhaps, instead of doing what requires grit, hard work and discipline, like sticking to the state's long-term fiscal strategy, they would bring back the former Shadow Treasurer's idea of privatising the sewerage system and draining the Future Fund, short-term policies which can only deliver the worst outcomes for Victoria.

So far in this term of Parliament those opposite have had only one idea for how they will fix the budget, and that is to kill the Suburban Rail Loop. It is to kill the biggest housing project anywhere in Australia, which is going to deliver 70,000 extra homes in the direct vicinity of the new SRL stations. Any young Victorians hoping one day to have a home in suburbs close to public transport would be told to forget all about that if those opposite have their way. Their policy is also to sack the 4000 construction workers who are hard at work delivering this project as we speak. The Suburban Rail Loop is a project which will reduce traffic congestion in the suburbs while creating the public transport connections that people need to get to key locations, particularly for education and health. Students from all across Melbourne will be able to use the brand new stations of SRL Burwood and SRL Monash in the Southern Metro Region to get to Deakin University and Monash University. Other stations in the Southern Metro Region include SRL Clayton and SRL Cheltenham. These would also be cut and cancelled under the naive and short-sighted proposals of those opposite.

For a party that never stops having a go at some of the people who I represent in the inner city, it seems strange for them to say they will cancel a project which will bring more homes, more transport, more jobs and more business investment out of the CBD and into the middle suburbs like Burwood, Clayton and Cheltenham. When the new public transport connections make it viable for more big businesses to base themselves far away from the CBD, more small businesses will also be set up to serve residents living in the area and new commuters going to and from work. In opposing the Suburban Rail Loop, those opposite are also rejecting the economic growth in the suburbs that this project will generate, creating more jobs, more homes and more opportunities. At the end of the day the Suburban Rail Loop is not just a policy for growth; it is our public transport network, it is a policy for housing growth, it is a policy for economic growth and it is a policy to deal with population growth. These are not issues the government can just ignore; they are central, they are crucial and they are unavoidable. We on this side of the chamber in the Allan Labor government have a plan to address these issues, and those opposite have no plan whatsoever. That is why they cannot be taken seriously.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:09): I am pleased to rise to speak on Mr Davis's motion 817. Mr Galea, I think maybe you gave ChatGPT the wrong prompt, or it was clearly hallucinating when it came up with the idea that your government has cut taxes and any other number of things. People raise capital for all kinds of purposes – for business, for charity, for buying a home. What is always interesting is to observe how people behave with that money. There is a very clear set of behaviours when it is your own money. There is an obvious discipline around that – the sensitivity to cost and appreciation of value – because it was you who had to accumulate it, had to work for it and had a purpose for it when you decided to accumulate it. We see very different behaviours when it is not your own money. We all know stories of the entrepreneurs who get the big investment and then go and blow it all on cars or fancy offices rather than the purpose it was raised for, and on all kinds of accolades for the appearance of success, with increasingly more creative accounting to justify that expenditure. But there is an underlying reality to all of that. You do not acquire virtue just by spending other people's money and calling it investment. It takes absolutely no talent to spend other people's money. It takes even less talent to spend other people's money badly, but it takes a very special kind of talent indeed to spend other people's money you do not even have yet badly. That is what we have in the state of Victoria – a government that spends other people's money badly and spends money it does not have badly. It does so while adopting the worst traits of those who do this, claiming the virtue of it and claiming the achievement born of other people's sweat.

State debt is a very dry topic; it is about numbers. It ceases being dry when the investor comes back and asks the entrepreneur where the money went or when the charity does not pass on the money it

raised for its cause. When you run out of other people's money everyone loses. In Victoria it ceases to be a dry topic when we look at the cost to everyday life. On the one hand it is what we lose – education, school buildings, health services, roads, policing, mental health services, fisheries officers, drought support; on the other hand it is what it costs. It costs us higher taxes, higher levies and paying specific fees for things that were previously accounted for or already paid for or things that your parents' generation fought hard and worked for that cannot be passed on to the next generation.

It takes a special kind of talent to spend other people's money that you do not even have yet. In Victorian terms it is known as the Cain–Kirner doctrine. This was the explicit position of the Cain–Kirner government, which last bankrupted Victoria: that future generations should pay for our excesses today, that future generations should be on the hook for what we want now and that there is some kind of virtue in this. It is an incredibly dangerous doctrine because it starts with small good intentions, but as the money of this generation runs out it is impossible to stop. We are at the tipping point where the next generation will be paying more for present projects than we are. In human terms we are taking away their choices, their priorities, and imposing ours. That is the legacy they inherit, and it is wrong.

In economic terms we are doing two things. It is inherently inflationary. While the government may not be able to print money, uncontrolled lending and injecting that money into the economy has the same effect. In needing to service that debt our interest liability increases further and further to consume our income. State interest on debt is at \$9 billion annually; under the debt strategy of this government this will increase to \$10 billion annually in coming years. Consider this simple maths: there is \$10 billion interest, and each of the three single highest tax revenue sources we have in the state – payroll tax, land tax and stamp duty – is less than that interest we are paying per year. In the last figures I have got here from the budget office from 2023 – I know it has gone up – payroll tax is \$8.2 billion. We are paying \$10 billion interest. For land tax we are paying \$5.3 billion. It is going up a bit more, but it is not going to reach \$10 billion. Stamp duty is \$8 billion, and we are paying \$10 billion. Tax from all other revenue sources for the state was \$9.9 billion. We will be paying more in interest than the top three individual tax sources of the state.

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

Richard WELCH: They are taxes, taxes, taxes. These are Parliamentary Budget Office figures here saying that is what we take. It is tax. If you did not have the debt, you would not need the tax; that is the principle. Maybe that is a bit hard to grasp over there because you do not feel accountable for it. They are dry figures. And if we describe the human cost, the human cost is felt in the family of every business owner who is struggling to keep their head above water. It is seen because they have to meet the tax. It is seen in the human cost to farmers and their families, where the tax impost has reached for many the final straw. If you do not think state debt has consequences and you do not think tax has consequences, just look at the situation in the regions. Debt demanded tax. The more debt you have, the more tax there must be. The more tax there is – there must be the point where it destroys lives, and I mean literally. When your local medical practice is told to pay payroll tax and has to close, that is a human consequence. When the government has to roll out 50 activity centres and throw away all sensibilities of urban design and planning in communities in order to get its hands on windfall gains tax, that is a consequence for those communities. And it would be bearable, perhaps, if there was a sense that not so much of it was just being absolutely wasted, made of bad management and waste.

The government has missed its budget every single year by an average of \$14 billion. We have had at least \$40 billion of project overruns, and there is absolutely no sense that it ends there. The costs of the Suburban Rail Loop have not been updated for five years. The true cost of the SRL is probably the state's worst kept secret, because we all know it is going to cost more than \$34 billion. We also know that in that same budget the federal funding is absent. We know that the project's value capture does not arrive for 10 years, and when it does, the net present value will be roughly a third of the \$11 billion required, so it will require more value capture tax. In fact by the time the project is completely rolled out, under the modelling, if you do a net present value of 7 per cent, the \$10 billion budgeted is worth

\$3 billion in present value terms. Victoria's debt is budgeted to blow out to a record \$194 billion by 2028. We are going to pay and we are going to pay again and we are going to pay again.

It is absolutely beholden on the government to get control of debt, not through semantics, not through describing things that are taxes as being not taxes when they are taxes in practice, not by shifting things around on the balance sheet through statutory bodies and not through any of the mechanisms that a shoddy entrepreneur might use to pull the wool over the eyes of his board or something of that nature. There is a time for a reckoning. The fact is that as much as the government is fond of creative accounting, at the end of the day an auditor comes in and looks at the books, and the numbers do not lie. The threat to our credit rating is no joke. It is no joke. I think you know that too. I do not think in your heart of hearts you can pretend otherwise. There is going to be a consequence we are all going to pay. I support the motion strongly. We should have greater fiscal control. We need to rectify this for the sake of this generation and for the sake of the next.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:19): I also rise to speak on this motion by Mr Davis about debt in Victoria. Yes, we do have a big debt problem, and yes, part of that debt is due to COVID. I mean, when we went through COVID, I was constantly asking about how the money was being spent, whether it was being wisely spent and who was going to pay it eventually. Of course eventually some future taxpayer is going to pay it. As was pointed out by Mr Welch, it is an astronomic proportion of our current budget for just repaying this debt. It is a huge proportion of our budget which is only going to get bigger.

I note that the Treasurer outlined a cash surplus of around \$600 million in the budget. That is pretty slim, and I do not think it would take many blowouts or much mismanagement for that to disappear to nothing. I also note in the budget that we still have this mysterious Treasurer's advance of close to \$10 billion. I hope that the budget surplus, if one is delivered, will not be just through slimming that back. What is that going to be spent on? We are not in COVID emergency anymore. That was the justification for it during the pandemic: we had lots and lots of things that had to be done immediately and were not planned for in the budget. Things happen, and sometimes money needs to be spent that was not planned for, but why does the government still need \$10 billion in a Treasurer's advance? There needs to be better parliamentary oversight on what is happening with that. I think many Victorians do not like the idea of just having this money allocated to whatever the government feels like at the time. It is not good enough.

Some of the messaging from the government I have actually liked. They are saying they are focusing on what is important and this sort of thing. That is good. Maybe we should focus on what is important in government and do that right before we try and do everything else that the government is trying to do. One of the primary functions of the state is maintaining safety – policing and crime. Crime is out of control. Organised crime is absolutely out of control in this state. If the government cannot get these things under control, then what are they doing with all this other stuff? These are some of the most basic functions of the state that the government is failing at, yet they have got all these other extravagant things that they spend money on. The government really should be focusing on things like getting crime under control and getting education, health and basic functions that the government is meant to be doing under control before doing all of these other things.

The messages that I am getting from manufacturers in the south-east and also from others in the business community in Victoria is an incredibly difficult place to deal with. You do not have to read the comments from the CEO of Santos talking about Victoria this morning; this is the attitude that lots of people have to this state. I will give you one example. I have brought this up many times. We have a Japanese consortium who wants to invest \$2 billion in Victoria through the Hydrogen Energy Supply Chain project. What is the government doing with this? Why hasn't there been a decision on this? This will raise tax revenue. They will be paying payroll tax and probably land taxes and God knows what other taxes, and not only that, it is foreign capital coming into Australia. Why hasn't the government just said yes to this already? It just seems crazy to me that we have got foreign capital wanting to invest in our state, and the government is fluffing around because someone might not like it or whatever. I

do not know. It just seems nuts. I really want the government to say to the world, 'Yes, we're open for business.'

One of the problems I have seen with the opposition's response to the government is that every time the government does cut back on something, which I think is a good thing, the opposition complains about the cuts. You cannot have it both ways. I am not complaining. If the government wants to make cuts in expenditure, I am not going to criticise it. I am going to cheer it on because I think the government needs to be doing that. One thing that I think the government and the opposition are both too scared to talk about – but I will talk about it – is that one way you can get a stepwise reduction in debt is through asset sales. I think the government should be running over its balance sheet and looking at whether there are things that it can sell. If they can sell it, they can directly and immediately reduce debt and reduce the burden on future taxpayers. I think that the government should be looking at that.

Another thing which I am very sceptical about is, frankly, the asset valuations that the government has on some of these projects. I have got a lot of experience in looking at asset valuations and this type of thing. There has been a lot said about the budget blowouts on infrastructure projects, and undoubtedly that is a true thing, but there has not been much talk about the actual value of these projects once they have been completed or what their current value is. Frankly, I do not believe that they are worth as much as they say on the balance sheet. I think that the Auditor-General will be looking at that, and we will see what the Auditor-General has to say about it, but I am very concerned about it.

The government needs to send a very clear message that it has spent a lot of money. The government has to take ownership of that, that they have this huge debt burden. When you have a debt burden, you have to do what people in families do: you have to make cutbacks. That is what families are doing across Victoria at the moment, and one of those big costs is tax. The government cannot raise taxes much further. They have reached the limit. We saw what happened when they brought in the emergency services levy: everyone went wild. The land taxes that have been raised have had big effects on investment, especially in areas like manufacturing. This is a big problem. And now the government wants to think that they are going to have a publicly run electricity supplier. Like, really, the government is going to start running businesses now? It is just beyond a joke. The government needs to focus on the basic functions of government, because if they cannot manage basic functions of the state, how on earth can they manage anything else?

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (11:25): I am very pleased to rise and speak in this debate on Mr Davis's motion, because it gives us in this chamber a real opportunity to look at the contrasting approaches between the government and the opposition on the question of the best fiscal management strategy for this state. What we have from the government – delivered in the budget last week, building on the fiscal strategy that was first outlined in late 2020 – is a considered, detailed, five-step fiscal plan to get the finances of the state back into a strong position post the pandemic. What you see is the government delivering on each of the steps in that fiscal strategy since it was laid out. Methodically delivering – that is what this government's fiscal strategy is doing. Creating jobs, getting back into surplus and stabilising debt: these are the key features of this government's fiscal strategy, and it is working and it is delivering.

What we have from the Liberal Party is a quite frankly unbelievable mismatch of contributions that seem to not understand what the Liberal Party's policy is in respect to debt, because we heard today from Mr Davis a different position on the question of a debt ceiling than we heard from Mr Newbury in the other place yesterday. We heard Mr Welch talk about elements of the state budget that he did not even seem to understand – the sources of revenue that come into the state's finances. We are not going to take any advice from them about the best approach to fiscal strategy for this state, because Labor's approach is considered and it is working, and it is clear in the budget papers that it is.

I want to go to just some of the issues that underpin the complete lack of credibility that we see from the opposition on the question of their fiscal strategy, their fiscal approach, and some of the more outrageous claims that have been made during the course of this debate. I want to start not with the

Labor Party's analysis of the opposition's plans but some independent analysis of the opposition's plans. Obviously the Shadow Treasurer in the other place had a moment yesterday to articulate the Liberal Party's response to the state budget. To quote the headline from the *Australian Financial Review* today, 'Economists pan Liberals for no plan to repair Vic budget'. The article goes on to quote noted economists David Hayward and Saul Eslake saying that the coalition had not offered a credible alternative to reducing and paying down net debt. This is a quote from Mr Hayward:

For all the things they could come up with, this is the worst possible idea.

They are not our words but the words of an independent economist saying that the Liberal Party's plan, which was basically the basis of Mr Davis's motion today, is the worst possible idea. The quote goes on to say – and I think this lament at the end sums it up:

... what on earth are they doing?

I think that is a sentiment that we can wholeheartedly endorse.

We obviously had the *Herald Sun* today – the opening paragraph of the analysis in the *Herald Sun* today from Shannon Deery says:

Shadow treasurer James Newbury has dusted off a Howard-era election losing slogan to sell his plan to repair the Victorian economy.

I think that is a far-from-resounding endorsement of the approach of the Liberal Party – an election-losing slogan from the Howard era. I will get to the other point, which was made in the *Age*, which I tried to elucidate a response from Mr Davis on. In the debate earlier today he said the Liberal Party's plan was not to impose a debt cap themselves. He said that they wanted us to do it. He was quite clear in that. I asked him via interjection a couple of times, 'What are you going to legislate? What is your cap going to be?' And he said, 'No, no, no.' Their plan is not to introduce one themselves. That is not their policy, but he was suggesting it is something that we should adopt. But that is not what Mr Newbury said in the other place yesterday. He said:

We will put into law a cap ...

But what Mr Davis has failed to do in the course of this debate and what Mr Newbury has failed to do is to actually say what their cap would be. They are refusing to come clean with the Victorian community about where their cap would sit. Why you need to know that is Victorians deserve to know where the Liberal Party's cuts are going to start coming from, because the proposal that Mr Newbury put to the other place yesterday, that Mr Davis either did not listen to or forgot about in the last 24 hours, is to impose a limit on the amount of debt on issuance that the state has. We think that it is only reasonable that if he is going to promise that he is going to legislate a cap, he is going to have to promise and come clean as to where those cuts are coming from.

A couple of other points on the cap, very quickly: firstly, it is such a bad idea that Tony Abbott got rid of the cap on federal debt in 2013. We know it is a bad idea, because we see how it operates in the United States. A point that Mr Puglielli made well earlier is that when you have got a debt cap, you spend all of your time cutting services to fit under it. In particular the design feature that the Liberal Party has proposed – to link it to a percentage of gross state product – is potentially the worst option that you could come to in terms of being able to adequately predict and budget for the future. I will not go into that any further; there are a couple of further points that I want to get to.

Mr Welch spent a long time in his contribution talking about the dangers of governments borrowing to invest in infrastructure, which is what this government has done in the past few years. He talked about the Cain and Kirner governments, and he talked about it being at unprecedented levels. He is just wrong. I invite Mr Welch to go and have a look at budget paper 2 from the 2021–22 budget, page 9. There is a really good chart about levels of Victorian government debt as a percentage of gross state product at 10-year intervals for the last 120 years. Under Henry Bolte the debt was 56 per cent as a percentage of gross state product, and it was just slightly below that under Rupert Hamer. Why?

Because when the state was growing those governments knew that they had to invest in infrastructure to make sure that the state's economy could continue to grow. If governments do not invest in productive infrastructure, the state cannot grow the way it needs to. So if Mr Welch wants to have conniptions about levels of debt, then he should go back and have a look at the actual history of this state and see that the predecessors that they so revere understood what was needed to make the right kinds of decisions about how to invest in the future of this state. If those governments had not made those decisions, we would not have the city loop, for example.

I am going to have to leave my contribution there because time is beyond me; I cannot go on. I would love to. This debate could go all day, and I absolutely think that we are going to come back to it over the course of the next 18 months.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (11:36): I am pleased to rise on behalf of the Nationals in support of this motion. This motion is very much focused on our state debt. It is important that Victorians know: they need to know how their money is being spent and they need to know where their money is going. But what we see from the state budget papers and what we have seen over the last 10 years is that Labor cannot manage money and that Victorians, all Victorians, are paying the price. Labor love to tax. They love to tax, and they just add tax after tax after tax. They did say 'No more taxes in the state budget' – and we have heard it before as well – and yet we had the emergency services tax introduced, coming into effect 1 July this year, with further hikes in bills. But the government did find a way to make it someone else's problem. It is incredible. They have put it on local councils. The bills will go out from local councils. You will see it on the bottom of your rates notice. We are going to see household bills there double. We are going to see industrial rates going up. We are going to see commercial rates going up. Businesses are going to be paying for it and households are going to be paying for it, and it will flow on to people that are renting as well. But it will look like it is local councils that are sending you that bill. If you have got a complaint, 'Oh, yes, go to your local council again.' It is just extraordinary.

If someone cannot afford to pay, guess whose problem that becomes. Local councils need to follow a process to recover the debt, and in some cases people can lose their property. I find it extraordinary. Councils have said – I have been contacted by many of them – they do not want to be the bad guys in this, but the government are going to extraordinary lengths to prop up their budget. With that tax, the government like to sell it like it is a tax to help volunteers, but the reality is it is paying our public servants. It is paying people that have previously been paid within the state budget. We are talking about the State Control Centre, Triple Zero Victoria, Emergency Management Victoria and Emergency Recovery Victoria. They were all once covered in the budget. Now there is going to be an extra \$3 billion coming from households and from businesses right across the state.

The Treasurer and the Premier were very pleased to announce a surplus, a forecast \$600 million surplus, but I am not sure how accurate that is when you consider how out this government has been. They have been well off the mark for quite a number of years – about \$14 billion on average off the mark. To quote a *Herald Sun* editorial – I think it was quite interesting – and their comment about the high-taxing state, referring to Victoria, it says:

The Victorian government's rather thin \$600m surplus forecast this year is itself down almost \$1bn from what it projected six months ago. But even that is a result of increased revenue from property taxes, including land transfer duty, land tax, an almost doubling of a congestion levy (a tax on off-street parking in areas of Melbourne) and the much-loathed Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund.

Stamp duty is expected to claw in \$9.562bn in 2025–26 (a \$362m increase); land tax, including the Covid-19 debt levy will drag in \$7.554bn (\$358m increase); a growth zone infrastructure contribution raises \$223m (up \$44m); the congestion parking levy brings in \$222m (up \$94m); and the controversial emergency services levy pulls in a huge \$1.623bn (up \$590m).

It goes on to say:

The property tax burden has led to investments in tens of thousands of new homes go elsewhere, while the imposts simply add to end-price property costs.

The upshot of being the biggest taxing state in the nation is a hike in housing prices and a handbrake on business investment and employment.

Under this government we have seen the introduction of over 60 new taxes, so they are bringing in more revenue, but their costs continue to blow out. They like to say that this is because of COVID, that it is so hard because of COVID. But the Auditor-General's report – and it is mentioned in the motion – titled *Auditor-General's Report on the Annual Financial Report of the State of Victoria: 2023–24* notes debt for COVID-19-related expenditure totalled \$31.5 billion – 18.7 per cent of the government's current outstanding debt – while \$137 billion of gross debt related to investment infrastructure programs. It goes on to state:

... the state has not articulated a clear plan for long-term fiscal management. Current strategies are short term, reactive and do not address both the existing financial challenges and emerging financial risks ...

State debt is incredible: \$194 billion within a few years. That is nearly \$29 million every single day in interest, or over \$1 million every hour. What happens if our credit rating is downgraded? It is certainly going to cost a lot more. There is not much of a buffer in this budget for a downgrade in the credit rating. But let us talk about the Treasurer's advance. That is extraordinary – it is like a hidden credit card that your spouse has that you did not know about. It was meant to be used for urgent expenditure claims that were unforeseen at the time of the budget. But this government have used it for everything.

I do want to thank David Limbrick for hosting a night with the Centre for Public Integrity, which shared some of the information about this. According to the Department of Treasury and Finance, the estimate for 2024–25 is over \$12 billion in the Treasurer's advance. That is 12.7 per cent of the total appropriation for government. What is it being used for? Urgent items? That is what it should be used for, but no. The *Age* previously revealed that in 2023–24 Treasurer's advances were used to provide \$1.36 billion for the Suburban Rail Loop, a \$1.45 billion top-up to public hospitals and \$380 million to meet the contractual penalty for dumping the Commonwealth Games. There you go. What does that show you? It shows you that this Labor government has lost control of Victoria's money.

The state election is not far away, next year in November. I would certainly like to highlight that we do need a change of government, because this Labor government love to come up with plenty of spin, they love to come up with headlines and announce new things. We have heard it before. They say, 'We're going to build new hospitals' – we are still waiting; 'We're going to build childcare centres' – we are still waiting; 'We're going to fix our roads' – we are still waiting; 'We're going to build over 80,000 new homes every year' – we are still waiting; 'We're going to get more teachers' – we are still waiting; 'We're going to add to our police force' – yes, well, we are still waiting; 'Regional rail revival: we're going to fix our rail' – we are still waiting; 'On mental health, we're going to do a lot of work in that space' – we are still waiting.

I did note earlier that Mr Batchelor loves to say, 'What are you going to cut? What are you going to scrap?' I will tell you what we are going to cut. We are going to cut the emergency services tax. We are going to cut the school tax that Labor has introduced. We are going to cut the tourism tax, the holiday tax, that Labor has introduced. We are going to cut Labor's GP tax, and we are going to cut the stamp duty for first home buyers on all homes up to \$1 million. We are 74 weeks away from the next state election, in November next year, and I am looking forward to a change of government.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (11:45): I rise to absolutely oppose the motion moved by Mr Davis. It is a motion steeped in economic revisionism and political theatre, rather than a genuine effort to strengthen Victoria's fiscal future. The Liberal Party's obsession with an outdated and discredited debt ceiling is not only economically incoherent but, frankly, dangerous. It is a proposal that would make our state less responsive, less prepared and ultimately less fair. This government is proud of its clear, deliberate and transparent five-step fiscal strategy – a strategy that is absolutely working. It is grounded in sound economic management and backed by results, not rhetoric. The five steps are clear: job creation and economic growth, returning to an operating cash surplus, returning to operating surpluses, stabilising debt levels and then reducing debt levels as a share of the economy.

These steps have underpinned every budget since 2020 and have been publicly reported and scrutinised.

We have already met the first two steps. Victoria's economy is growing strongly, and we have returned to a cash operating surplus. The most recent budget delivers a forecast operating surplus of over \$600 million in 2025–26, with average surpluses of \$1.9 billion per year over the forward estimates. That is our step three – it is well, well on track. And what else about debt? Well, net debt as a share of gross state product is now forecast to stabilise in 2025–26 and fall thereafter. In fact Victoria is the only state where net debt to GSP is projected to decline over the forward estimates. That is right – the only state. And let us be absolutely clear: our debt in this state is manageable and it is sustainable. It is deeply ironic that those opposite are now calling for a debt ceiling when it was their federal counterparts who scrapped the Commonwealth debt ceiling in 2013, when then Treasurer Joe Hockey – we remember him – put it this way: 'We must have a realistic debt limit.' Apparently what was self-delusion in Canberra is now economic gospel here in Spring Street.

This motion ignores the reality of modern fiscal management. Just as a family might take out a mortgage to buy a home or invest in their child's education, governments borrow to invest in public infrastructure and services that benefit not only the present generation but also the many generations to come. What matters is our capacity to repay, not some arbitrary percentage plucked out of the air. It is no coincidence that Victoria's debt grew in the years following the pandemic. We made conscious decisions to use the balance sheet to protect lives, to protect businesses and to protect jobs. The alternative – the Liberal alternative, I have to tell you – would have been to let the economy fall into some deep recession, to leave workers jobless and small businesses without the support that they so desperately needed. If we had imposed a rigid debt cap, as this motion before us proposes, we would not have been able to act to save the economy as we did, to fund our COVID health response or to support schools, hospitals and community services when Victorians needed them the most.

Let me take this time to remind the house of the current gross debt figure cited by Mr Davis. More than \$137 billion is for infrastructure investment, and just 18.7 per cent was related to COVID. These are not wasteful expenditures; these are roads, these are rail lines, these are hospitals, these are schools – schools, rail, roads and hospitals that Victorians rely on every single day. Those opposite throw around figures about cost overruns – and I have heard it before – but they conveniently forget to mention that the cost of inaction, the cost of delay and the cost of dithering and doing nothing is always, always higher. And we saw that. We saw that during the last Liberal government, when not a single major transport project was delivered. If those opposite had their way, the Metro Tunnel would not be opening this year, the Suburban Rail Loop would not be underway and 84 dangerous and congested level crossings would still be slowing down our transport system and putting lives at risk. Victorians made their choice time and time again, and they chose a government that builds, not one that cuts and blocks, and a government that invests in the future, not one that prioritises political – I do not know – accounting tricks is probably the best way to put it.

Let us talk about what a debt ceiling would actually mean. The United States has had one for decades, and the result has been political brinkmanship, repeated government shutdowns and public servants stood down without pay. It has never delivered budget outcomes that are better, it has never reduced debt and it has only created crisis after crisis. I have had, frankly, the misfortune to be in DC at the time of a shutdown, and I tell you, the feeling over that town is hard to take. It is hard to take seeing public servants without pay and the uncertainty in the community there that it puts on unnecessarily. UNSW economist Professor Richard Holden put it plainly: 'The US debt ceiling is a form of self-delusion,' he said. Australia rightly abandoned its own debt cap, and Victoria should not resurrect such a failed policy idea. Yet here we are with the Victorian Liberals once again borrowing bad ideas from Republican politics. I would think that recent events would have taught those opposite that copying Republicans does not work out for them so much.

I can perhaps go through some other decisions made by those opposite to follow in the footsteps of the US Republicans. They have not worked, and 94 seats absolutely tells you that. Let us address the

supposed need for transparency. This government's fiscal strategy is published, it is detailed and it is benchmarked. Our budgets are audited by the Victorian Auditor-General, something no other state mandates to this level. We publish quarterly financial updates and midyear reports. Our commitment to transparency and fiscal discipline is second to none. Indeed the global credit rating agencies have endorsed our approach. Standard & Poor's highlighted Victoria's commitment to controlling operating costs, delivering promised savings and slowing down growth in debt. Moody's called our strategy fiscally responsible and sustainable. These are independent experts with no political axe to grind. The government has also introduced the Financial Management Legislation Amendment Bill 2025, aimed at strengthening financial oversight and fiscal discipline across the entire public sector. It enhances capability, accountability and risk management. These are real outcomes driven by real reforms; this is what modern fiscal management looks like.

Those opposite seem to think that the answer to every problem is a cap, a cut or a closure, but let us look at their own record. They have made billions of dollars of unfunded promises: \$1 billion for stamp duty concession, \$2.9 billion for emergency services and hundreds of millions in short-stay levies and payroll tax giveaways. They have not explained how they will pay for any of it. These billions-of-dollar black holes are in their costings already, and if they were in charge – let us know this clearly today – that would mean cuts to teachers, to nurses and to ambos, because they cannot say how else they would make the numbers add up. They are asking us to believe in the fantasy of debt caps while quietly – or not so quietly – plotting the return of austerity to our state. In contrast, the government on this side have made over 65 tax cuts since coming to office. We have almost doubled the payroll tax threshold, taking 6000 small businesses out of the tax net entirely. We have slashed the regional payroll tax to just 1.2 per cent; that is the lowest in the country. We understand the balance between raising revenue and encouraging growth.

This motion is not about accountability, it is about ideology. The Liberal Party is fundamentally opposed to public investment, to public services and to the role of government in shaping a fairer, stronger society for us all. They are seeking to impose restraints not for economic necessity but for some sort of political convenience and storytelling time. I absolutely reject this motion. We do not need a debt ceiling. We need responsible government, targeted investment and a long-term plan, and that is exactly what we are delivering. Our current fiscal strategy is clear and credible, and it is working. To vote for this motion would be to undermine this strategy, to put at risk the investments that matter most to Victorians and to turn our Parliament into the stage of political theatre imported from DC. I have been there; I have seen it firsthand. It is a disgrace, and I do not want it on these shores. We will not be drawn into that kind of dysfunction. We will continue to manage the state's finances in a responsible, modern and strategic way, ensuring always that at the centre we are putting the needs of Victorians first. I absolutely without hesitation oppose this motion.

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:54): I have never heard so much drivel and fearmongering in this house over a motion in my entire life. This is actually a really serious motion, because it is talking about keeping this government to account – which is our job as the opposition – and offering an opportunity for you to be able to stay within your budget. That is what this motion is doing. It is simply saying, 'Hey, in Labor governments in the past, you have had debt ceilings.' It was brought in by the Bracks government. It is right here in the motion and it is all fact-checked. It goes to the comprehensive operating statement of December 2024. It goes to the consolidated general government sector balance sheet of December 2024. It looks at Victoria's four biggest Big Build blowouts in recent times and the annual financial report of 2023–24 from the state of Victoria. That is in the Victorian Auditor-General's Office reports. It even has the page numbers listed. It is all available. This is all based on research and fact, and I applaud David Davis for bringing this motion to the chamber because it is looking at the fact that it was the Andrews government that removed the debt ceiling. First, he increased it to 12 per cent and then he removed the ceiling entirely. Now you are a free-range, out-of-control, budget-blowing party that is in government and destroying our economy, and every Victorian is paying for it.

Only this morning I was listening to the absolute appeals on the ABC from farmers who were in tears because they are struggling to feed their cattle. They are struggling in areas that this government has not even declared affected by drought. This is an appalling situation where this government is only interested in helping its own, and every Victorian is paying the price.

I can categorically say that the Liberals and Nationals have come up with an economic plan. We are still working on it, but we have come up with some very, very stable things.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Ann-Marie HERMANS: We are not in government. This Labor government is letting every Victorian down.

Melina Bath: On a point of order, President, the member deserves to be heard in silence, not the barrage that we are hearing from the government benches.

The PRESIDENT: I uphold the point of order. Can Mrs Hermans be heard in silence, please, government members.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: This motion should be heeded. Shame on this government that it is not prepared to take the debt ceiling it had when it was a responsible, sensible Labor government, one that was willing to work within its budget. This government is not working within a budget. It is blowing it out, and it is making farmers go to the point where they are fearing for their own lives and their own mental health because they are at the brink of absolute desperation. These land taxes are driving people into the ground, businesses are closing and nobody wants to invest in Victoria.

Business interrupted pursuant to sessional orders.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Dame Phyllis Frost Centre

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:00): (925) My question today is to the Minister for Corrections. Minister, we have heard reports of the overuse of lockdown at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre for about a year now. Reports indicate that these lockdowns are not due to individual behaviour but are due to rostering, understaffing and changes in administrative processes. Reports indicate that the lockdowns have been worsening over the last few weeks. Minister, why are women prisoners being forced into prolonged and frequent lockdowns simply because Corrections Victoria cannot manage its rosters, and what are you planning to do about it, noting your duty of care for all people incarcerated in Victoria?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:00): I thank Ms Copsey for this question on an important issue that I can say as minister I have had a number of discussions with Corrections Victoria and the department about. I had the opportunity to visit Dame Phyllis Frost only a few weeks ago for the second cohort of graduates as part of our twinning program and see the work that program has done in building the women's confidence, leadership skills and teamwork skills that we hope will put women in a better place when they leave Dame Phyllis Frost.

This issue has been going on for a number of months now. I must admit that as minister I have been quite frustrated too, understanding that the staff there – I just want to thank them – are very passionate about making a difference, all the CV staff at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre. Lockdowns are sometimes required in our prison system. It is necessary to maintain the safety and security of prisoners and staff. We do expect them to be kept to a minimum and to make sure that people have access to all the essential services that can be delivered during these times. We continue to invest in additional staff, and that is why the announcement I made last sitting week was so important. The majority of those

moneys, the \$700 million, will be about additional staff and to make sure we can also take out the kinks from the rostering issue. In the meantime we have had additional staff come across from other prisons within the Corrections Victoria network to assist at Dame Phyllis Frost. This should not be happening, and with the additional staff – as we speak, there are additional squadrons being trained – this issue will be resolved shortly.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:02): Thank you, Minister, for that answer. Clients of community legal services who are currently incarcerated in Dame Phyllis Frost Centre have reported that lockdowns do remain ongoing, despite your discussions, with women locked down on 11 days so far in May alone. Prolonged isolation, as you would know, affects physical, mental and psychosocial health, and it impedes access to justice and participation in the programs that you rightly called out as being very important to people's rehabilitation and journey towards release. As legal appointments get cancelled with little or no notice, it also impedes access to justice. Is it true that record keeping for reductions in out-of-cell hours is so rudimentary that it is impossible for you to distinguish between people being locked down for 15 minutes during a day or being locked down for a full day?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:03): I thank Ms Copsey for her supplementary question in regard to this issue. I have been pretty up-front that there have been recent lockdowns. I do not make any apologies for prioritising the safety and wellbeing of staff and prisoners and the necessity of this in a correctional facility from time to time. I know the department is working to provide greater flexibility and looking at some of the industrial arrangements to resolve this issue going forward. In terms of the record keeping – I think that was the second part of the question, Ms Copsey – I do get a record of all disruptions when they are above 15 minutes, more broadly, but you are right, there is a range within that, because someone could be locked down for 15 minutes while others could be locked down for 2 hours at a time. There is a bit of discrepancy. The way that data is kept is another gripe of mine since coming to this portfolio, as is the level of data and the need to digitise a lot of this work. I think that is something that, across government, technology could assist us with, and hopefully with Western Plains opening these issues will not be so rudimentary.

Suburban Rail Loop

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:04): (926) My question is for the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop. The Suburban Rail Loop early works package is currently going through a pricing reset, with Suburban Rail Loop authorities contracted to factor in items that were unknown and uncertain at the time the contract was awarded. This was expected to be finalised by June 2024. Has it been completed?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:05): Thank you, Mr Mulholland, for your interest in the Suburban Rail Loop and the pricing work that we are doing. We want to make sure that as contracts are awarded and as we proceed with discussions around negotiations, we are delivering not only best value for taxpayers but also a return on the investment that will see delivery of nation-building infrastructure in accordance with the parameters of negotiations. We are continuing to work through contract negotiation processes, and as we do that we will ensure, again, we are moving toward delivery of tunnel-boring machines later this year, tunnel-boring machines being launched next year and trains running across the network in 2035.

Mr Mulholland, one of the challenges that we had with your lack of understanding of the budget from 2019–20 and that \$300 million there was that you then went on to talk to shortfalls in delivery of anticipated outputs in terms of the allocations that had been delivered for early works. It is good to see, Mr Mulholland, that you have developed some understanding of the way in which the contracts have been developed and are being negotiated and finalised, and we will continue to do that work so that the project remains, as it has to date, on time and on budget.

Evan Mulholland: On a point of order, President, it was a narrow question on the pricing reset and whether it has been completed.

The PRESIDENT: On the point of order, and as I said, it is dangerous for me to paraphrase, but my understanding is you asked the question ‘Has it been completed?’ and the minister said, ‘We are continuing the process,’ which seems to me to mean it has not been completed. But that is why it is dangerous for me to paraphrase. You can call a point of order at the end of question time, and we can review if the answer was there.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:07): On a supplementary question, President, I will take your interpretation of the minister’s comments that they are continuing that work to say that it has not been completed, and I ask the minister: when will the pricing reset be completed?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:07): Thank you, Mr Mulholland. Again, you did not listen to the answer that I provided to the substantive question. I would have thought after your blunder, where you failed to understand what was delivered –

David Davis: On a point of order, President, the minister is floundering, and she is not able to get out of that by attacking the opposition. That is not required. She is to answer the question, not attack the opposition.

The PRESIDENT: As far as the point of order goes, it is not for the minister to attack the opposition during an answer. I call the minister to the answer.

Harriet SHING: As I was saying, with the refresh that you have undertaken of the 2019–20 budget in understanding what has been allocated, we are pressing ahead with delivering this project. All expenditure will be accounted for in the usual way in the budget, and the value of contracts will be disclosed once awarded. That includes making sure that we continue to work with proponents, continue to work with industry, around delivery of the contract.

Evan Mulholland: I simply asked when the pricing reset would be completed, and the minister has not come near that answer yet.

The PRESIDENT: I will call the minister back to the question.

Harriet SHING: Again, Mr Mulholland, we will continue, despite all of your opposition to this project that you will never support, to deliver it in accordance with the usual mechanisms that apply through the state budget and other frameworks.

Ministers statements: early childhood education and care

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:09): I rise to update the house on how the Allan Labor government is supporting Victorian families with continued investment in our kinders. In last week’s state budget the Allan government delivered \$15 million for the Building Blocks improvement and inclusion grant streams, because we know that every child deserves to attend a kinder that has the facilities and equipment they need to grow, learn and play. This funding is designed for projects that upgrade, refurbish and renovate kinders so that our littlest Victorians can learn in inclusive and modern classrooms – first-class facilities. Since 2020 the Building Blocks improvement and inclusion grant program has delivered record investment in our state’s kinders. To date, our government has invested \$81.8 million into the improvement stream, supporting 433 infrastructure projects and 4027 information technology projects. In addition, our government has delivered \$39.2 million for the inclusion stream funding for 204 infrastructure projects, including playgrounds, and 1087 equipment projects. It is this side of the house that is focused on what matters. While those opposite want to charge families for free kinder, it is this side of the house that invests in Victorian children and education.

Last week I visited site works for the nearly completed Keysborough South Community Hub with the member for Mordialloc Tim Richardson. The new integrated children's centre has received \$4 million from this government, including \$3 million from a Building Blocks capacity grant. Families do not work in silos and neither should government. This fabulous integrated children's centre will provide four new kinder rooms and 221 new kinder places. It will also have a playgroup, maternal and child health services, parenting support rooms, allied health services, a library and a cafe. This centre is a great example of bringing together services to help families, and I cannot wait to see the hub when it is complete and ready to welcome kids for day one, term one, next year.

It is this Labor government who has invested \$2.7 billion to build and expand hundreds of kinders across the state – more than in any other state in the country – and it will continue to invest to give –
(Time expired)

Greyhound racing

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (12:11): (927) My question is for the minister representing the Minister for Racing in the other place. In December last year the New Zealand government announced that they would ban greyhound racing, citing high death and high injury rates, although it is important to note that their death and injury rates are actually still lower than here in Victoria. A committee was formed to help manage a 20-month transition, including rehoming the roughly 2900 racing dogs exiting the industry and to prevent the killing of dogs. The racing minister clearly stated that 'relocating dogs to another country for racing will not be permitted'. However, a chartered flight containing 80 New Zealand greyhounds arrived in Queensland in April, with the intention for them to be raced in the state. Will the minister commit to ensuring that no New Zealand greyhounds will be accepted into Victoria for the purposes of racing?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:12): I thank Ms Purcell for her question and her passion on this issue. I will make sure that is passed on to the Minister for Racing in the other place for an appropriate response.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (12:12): Thank you, Minister, for referring that on. Greyhound racing has all but ended or is being wound up around the world. On top of New Zealand, Wales recently announced that they would also ban greyhound racing. It is already banned in China and Vietnam, and the United States, which once had 70 tracks across 19 states, now has only two tracks. Seven American states have outlawed remote wagering on dog races, including on our own races here in Australia. Recently a group of US legislators wrote to racing ministers in Australia urging them to consider an end to greyhound racing on the grounds of welfare. Can the minister advise if he received this correspondence and if he will be responding to it?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:13): I thank Ms Purcell for that supplementary question, which I will also pass on to the Minister for Racing in the other place for response in line with the practices of this place.

Budget 2025–26

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:13): (928) My question is to the Treasurer. Minister, your budget speech says:

... around the world and here at home, families are making hard choices.

They're weighing up what they can go without and holding tight to what matters most.

This budget meets them at that moment – with care, with discipline, and with determination.

Minister, the multicultural affairs policy and programs budget will be cut savagely by 25.4 per cent in 2025–26, from \$60.5 million this year to a measly \$48.2 million in 2025–26. Minister, this is the

lowest budget allocation to the multicultural affairs portfolio since 2017–18. Were multicultural Victorians targeted because they did not matter?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:14): Mr Mulholland, we take a whole-of-government approach to our support for multicultural communities –

Members interjecting.

Jaclyn SYMES: and I think the interjections from my colleagues are a testament to that. When it comes to how the budget is formulated in relation to a number of programs that may have been completed and finished their task, whether there were programs where it was identified they could be performed either by another area of the department or indeed more of a collaborative approach across government, that was an opportunity to identify savings in relation to consolidation. It did not necessarily mean the end of programs. Some of them were moved around and the like. This is responsible, disciplined decision-making. It is about identifying your priorities and making sure you can continue to deliver them but also at the same time making sure that you can continue to deliver the services that Victorians rely on. I would also like to say that the multi stakeholders have actually come out and supported the Victorian budget. I am not sure if you are talking to them, but I would take my advice from them and their views and what they think is important, rather than you being the stakeholder on their behalf.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:16): Treasurer, why did you allow such a savage budget cut to the very programs that support policy advice on multicultural affairs and social cohesion at a time of increasing global and local tension and unrest?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:16): We will continue to support multicultural communities at every juncture. The anti-vilification legislation was all about social cohesion. The minister, who is absent from the chamber today, has her strategy, which has been fed in, in conjunction with those multi communities and various faith organisations. We will always stand up for multicultural Victorians as a government. As I said, in relation to the number of initiatives, we take a whole-of-government approach, and I reject the premise of your question.

Ministers statements: Green Links grants

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:17): The Allan Labor government is funding more projects to protect our urban waterways through the Green Links grants program. The Green Links grants were established to improve water quality, strengthen and preserve habitats for native wildlife and provide more open green space for the community to enjoy. It was a pleasure to join the member for Laverton Sarah Connolly MP on Monday and to meet the deserving grant recipients. The Friends of Kororoit Creek are doing an amazing job revegetating their slice of nature in Sunshine West and transforming this green corridor for families and native animals to enjoy. A special shout-out to Jessica, the president, and her fellow Kororoit Creek volunteers for the tour of the ‘bug rug’. It is clear that this latest grant will further support your important revegetation work.

Last Friday I also joined the member for Geelong Christine Couzens and the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority to see how \$177,000 will support revegetation and weed management works at five key sites at the Barwon River, Sparrowale Wetland and Lake Connemara. \$350,000 will also transform a section of the Barongarook Creek through Colac into a thriving natural asset, building upon decades of restoration efforts.

This latest round of Green Links will enable 10 projects, with a total of \$2 million of funding, and target over 70 hectares of land, with 75,000 tube stock and seedlings planted and over 100 kilograms of seeds, supported by roughly 2000 volunteers. Waterways and parklands play a crucial role in

supporting community wellbeing. The Allan Labor government is backing in local communities to deliver high-quality, thriving, natural open spaces for everyone to enjoy.

Firewood collection

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:19): (929) My question today is for the minister representing the Minister for Environment in the other place. Can the minister explain to the residents of the Moira shire why in 4045-square kilometres there is not a single firewood collection point?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:19): I thank the member for her question, and I will obviously refer that to the Minister for Environment for a response, consistent with the standing orders.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:19): I thank the minister for her reply. Will the minister commit to making firewood available to the 30,522 residents that live in the Moira shire before the firewood collection season closes?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:19): Again, I thank the member for her supplementary question, and we will seek a written response from the Minister for Environment.

Disability services

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:20): (930) My question is for the Minister for Disability. Disability sector groups advise they believe there are discussions taking place on the government's already announced plan to absorb the disability services commission, the Victorian Disability Worker Commission and the Victorian disability registration board into the new Social Services Regulator. Given the minister's own disability plan has the slogan 'Nothing about us without us', can the minister outline which specific disability groups are involved in these discussions?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:20): I thank Ms Bath for her question. On this side of the house we make absolutely no apologies for ensuring that we have a system of regulation for all social services that recognises the interconnectedness and the complexity of the different issues that people seek to resolve through social services regulation, be they disability issues, be they housing issues, be they children and family services issues. What our government is looking to see in the Social Services Regulator is a simple one-stop shop, uncomplicated version of regulation for social services, as was discussed in the house and with your spokesperson for disability last year. The discussions that we have continued to have with people both in this place and outside of this place are about how we best achieve a simplistic system of social services regulation. That means that somebody who has a disability issue and who also has a housing issue has one place they need to go to ensure that it is regulated appropriately.

Melina Bath: On a point of order, President, on relevance, this question is very specific. It asks which specific groups has the minister consulted with.

The PRESIDENT: I believe the minister was being relevant.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I was seeking to be as relevant and as helpful as I possibly could for Ms Bath, because I am sure that she is genuinely interested in the same outcomes that I am, which are that vulnerable people in the Victorian community have a system of regulation that they can rely on that goes across all social services and that when they have issues with a service that they might be accessing, be it a regulatory issue, a compliance issue or a service delivery issue, there is a simplistic way in which a person who often has complex needs and multiple points of vulnerability and difficulty accessing government services and systems can actually resolve those. There have been broad-ranging conversations, including with the opposition spokesperson for disability, the shadow minister for disability, as to how we can best achieve that. That is an ongoing conversation that we will continue to have, and at some point we will put a proposal to this Parliament in terms of how we resolve that.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:23): I thank the minister for her response. But she did not identify which groups of those that she needed to consult with she had consulted with, so we are still in the dark.

David Davis interjected.

Melina BATH: That is right: if any. The disability sector has made it clear it wants a standalone, disability-focused regulator led by people with disabilities, in line with the relevant recommendations from the disability royal commission, not a service absorbed under the umbrella of the Social Services Regulator. Minister, can you provide families with a guarantee that there will be a standalone entity as a regulator, not a service that sits under the Social Services Regulator?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:23): I would note that Ms Bath is now conflating two different issues. The disability royal commission absolutely recommended –

Melina Bath interjected.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Sorry, President, I believe I have the call. The national disability royal commission made recommendations about regulation of disability services, and there are continuing discussions at the Commonwealth level with all of the disability ministers around the states as to how we can best achieve that. That is an ongoing conversation, absolutely, and we remain committed to those same objectives. Here in Victoria what we would like to see is a simplistic, easy-to-understand, easy-to-use, easy-to-access system of regulation of all social services that recognises interconnectedness and complexity of issues. As well as with the shadow minister, we have had conversations with VCOSS, with unions and with plenty of others, including continuing to have conversations with the opposition about how that might best be achieved.

Ministers statements: Marlene McKay

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:25): I am pleased to take this opportunity to pay tribute to an incredibly valued and loved member of the community in South Melbourne, Marlene McKay. Marlene sadly passed away on 21 May after a battle with cancer. Her friends have told me that she had lived in public housing since 1987 and was key to the close-knit community in South Melbourne. She was a fierce community advocate and an integral part of the Park Towers Housing Tenants Association for more than 25 years, giving many years of her life serving in roles, including chair. Throughout this time she championed the rights and interests of tenants on the Park Towers estate in South Melbourne, even leading the development and upgrade of the estate's community facility. The work she did not only helped to serve her community but will continue to set the standard for how public housing renters are treated for years to come.

Marlene also invested countless hours of her time in training and mentoring. Those volunteers who were the beneficiaries of her wisdom continue to do their work with the benefit of her expertise, and she worked to develop information in the languages spoken by local renters. Anyone who knows our rich and diverse communities across our high-rise estates knows that the communication of information in language is absolutely critical, and Marlene's huge volume of work did not go unrecognised. In 2016 she won the Frances Penington Award, which celebrates social housing renters who have made an outstanding voluntary contribution to their community – a much-deserved commemoration of a lifetime of service. And last week I met with the South Yarra Public Tenants Association, who spoke very highly of Marlene's life and work. It is clear that her loss is and will continue to be felt keenly by the community that surrounded her. She was loved by her family, her friends and her community. She will be forever missed, and her legacy will go on.

Waste and recycling management

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:27): (931) My question is for the Minister for Environment in the other place. In 2022 the annual cap on the amount of waste that could be burnt in Victoria was set at 1 million tonnes. Since then the cap has steadily increased and, pending the outcome of recent consultation, it is likely to rise again to 2.5 million. This represents a 150 per cent increase in just three years. The Victorian Auditor-General's Office recently reported, in *Recycling Resources from Waste*, that once the four waste-to-energy facilities that are currently under development in Victoria come online and reach full operating capacity, up to 87 per cent of waste in Victoria will be burnt. My question is: is the government planning to abandon a circular economy to make way for large-scale waste incineration?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:28): I thank the member for the question and her interest in this particular issue. This matter will be referred to the Minister for Environment for a response.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:28): Thank you, Minister, for referring my query on. By way of supplementary, the Victorian Auditor-General's Office report warned that Victoria is not on track to meet its target of diverting 80 per cent of waste away from landfill by 2030. In fact the proportion of waste going to landfill has not changed in the four years since the Victorian government started their circular economy policy. It was also unclear if the government is meeting their target to halve the amount of organic material that is going to landfill. Can the minister advise what they are doing to address these failures?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:29): Again, I thank the member for her question, and I will refer the matter to the Minister for Environment for a written response.

Energy policy

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:29): (932) My question is to the Treasurer. I refer to comments today by the Santos chief executive Kevin Gallagher in a blistering critique of Victoria's energy policy. He likened the state's attitude toward investment to that of North Korea and warned the state's approach is indicative of why major projects are going offshore. Treasurer, I ask: do you accept Victoria's attitude to investment is like North Korea and that major projects are indeed going offshore?

The PRESIDENT: I am concerned that might be asking for an opinion.

David Davis: 'Do you accept that Victoria's attitude to investment is like North Korea and that major projects are going offshore?' is a very direct question about factual matters.

The PRESIDENT: The second part might be. I still think it is an opinion, but the Treasurer can answer as she sees fit.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:30): I think the best response to Mr Davis's question is just to go through some stats. Business growth and investment in Victoria are the largest of any state. That is Victoria – bigger than any other state in the country. Victoria's economy is strong because we have added more than 113,000 businesses since June 2020. That is an increase of 18 per cent. Business investment has grown by 30 per cent in the past three years. We continue to ensure that business settings in our state are strong, because we have payroll tax free thresholds, which will increase again to \$1 million from 1 July 2025, up from the \$700,000 threshold of two years ago; we have abolished stamp duty on commercial and industrial property, replacing it with the more efficient annual tax base on unimproved land value, which is something that investors, including foreign investors, were interested to learn about; and businesses located in regional Victoria will receive a 75 per cent discount on payroll tax, being the lowest tax rate in the nation.

There are a number of initiatives that you might want to review in relation to the *Economic Growth Statement*, which I tend to carry with me because it is a counter to some of the rhetoric that comes. You referenced gas in the beginning of your question. I just want to point out that one of the initiatives in the *Economic Growth Statement* refers to exactly that point. It is all about fast-tracking new gas projects through the development facilitation program. This means that all new potential gas projects can access the accelerated assessment pathway for new planning permits, delivering faster decision-making and approvals for gas extraction, storage and transmission for important projects, helping to ensure reliable access to gas for Victorian businesses. Hopefully that is useful context for you.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:32): The Treasurer might want to stick her head in the sand like an ostrich, but the fact is you have got a major investor here who is critical of the state's investment framework and critical of the state's approach. Mr Gallagher went further, highlighting the frustration of the resources sector – I am glad she mentioned that document, because he does not put much store in it – over Victoria's aggressive stance on fossil fuels, even as the state remains reliant on gas to power industry and heat homes. Minister, isn't it a fact that, whatever your document says, Victoria's anti-gas stance, its war on gas, is driving away investment, and I ask: do you thereby accept responsibility for this anti-investment stance in parallel with North Korea?

The PRESIDENT: There were two questions. I will let the minister pick one.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:34): I know you have been around for some time, Mr Davis, but I have obviously been around long enough now that I can pre-empt your question before you ask it, because I answered it.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:34): The minister might want to flippantly try and reject points that are put to her, but we have got a major investor here, and because of that I move:

That the minister's answer be taken into account on the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Ministers statements: housing

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:34): I would like to take the opportunity to update the house on how the Allan Labor government is getting millennials into homes. First, you have got to build them. It is a pretty important step. Whilst others take all measures to block development, our government's housing and planning policies are delivering the homes that buyers and renters want to live in. It is too long to read, but we have got activity centres, the development facilitation program, the greenfields plan – the list goes on and on, and it is all about delivering the certainty required to build homes people want to live in and where they would like to raise their families.

We are making sure that homes are more affordable for Victorians to buy and rent. Our Victorian Homebuyer Fund was so popular that it is being rolled out across the country. It has helped over 13,500 Victorian households buy their own home, and it is still going strong. Our housing and planning policies are getting more and more buyers into their first home. More than 40,000 households accessed first home buyer stamp duty savings in the last year.

The Victorian budget has built on this commitment. We have invested \$61 million to slash stamp duty for off-the-plan apartments, units and townhouses for another 12 months. This is cutting up-front costs, speeding up building and saving home buyers an average of \$25,000. Victoria is the number one state in the country for approving and completing new homes. We are the number one for first home buyers in the country. Our housing policy is disciplined, it is effective and it builds on all of our previous work. Those opposite have only got two things in their plan: cutting services and blocking homes.

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (12:36): Minister Tierney has committed to Mrs Tyrrell and to Ms Payne responses in line with the standing orders from the Minister for Environment to both of their questions, and Minister Erdogan to Ms Purcell on the two for the Minister for Racing. As far as Mr Mulholland's question to Minister Shing goes, I will ask Minister Shing to give a response on her supplementary question in line with the standing orders. I apologise; I should not paraphrase. I will rely on the substantive question having been answered.

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, President, I asked a question to the Treasurer on 18 March, and at that time you ordered that a response be made on 19 March. It was not forthcoming. I spoke about this in the last sitting week, and you again requested that an answer be provided. It still has not been forthcoming, so I would request that either the minister provides a ministerial explanation or she provides the answer to me as directed by you.

The PRESIDENT: I think there was a bit of confusion at the time, but the minister has committed to follow that up. A response is forthcoming.

Constituency questions

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:38): (1595) My constituency question is for the Minister for Children. The Allan Labor government is providing the City of Casey with \$6.75 million of funding to expand the Clyde north-west family and community centre. This project is expected to deliver 178 more kinder places, which will help families of kindergarten-aged children in Clyde North. This new integrated family and community centre will support essential three- and four-year-old kindergarten services and maternal and child health and provide flexible community spaces to support the delivery of other lifelong health and support programs for children, families and the surrounding community. Through the partnership between the Victorian government and the City of Casey we are delivering kinder places, improved facilities and amenities for families in and around Clyde North. Minister, how is the government supporting kinder children in Clyde North and the broader South-Eastern Metropolitan Region?

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:39): (1596) My question is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. Will the minister commit to providing more parking at Donnybrook train station? There is simply not enough parking at Donnybrook train station. 150 parking spaces were added five years ago, but that is a drop in the bucket compared to the current demand. I was recently contacted by a constituent who lives on Springs Road, directly adjacent to the station. Every morning the car park fills up quickly, forcing commuters who miss out on a parking spot to park on Springs Road. This means there is no space to park for the whole working day at the front of my constituent's house, which makes it very difficult for her elderly nan and others to visit or tradesmen to park. As an interim measure, my constituent would like to see parking on Springs Road restricted to permit-holders, but that cannot be a long-term solution and it disadvantages commuters further. This is one of the fastest growing suburbs in all of Melbourne, and the minister must take immediate action to get more parking built at Donnybrook station.

Southern Metropolitan Region

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:40): (1597) My question is for the Minister for Education. South Melbourne Park Primary School has again missed out on budget funding. The school community is appalled that while a third of a billion dollars is being gifted to the grand prix, an overseas private corporation, the primary school that shares Albert Park is left in the slow lane begging for essential funds. One of those upgrades is simply a pedestrian crossing that will let their children

CONSTITUENCY QUESTIONS

Wednesday 28 May 2025

Legislative Council

2107

safely cross the road to school. School council president Katrina Walker has outlined how seven years of campaigning for modest funding has yielded nothing, saying:

The recent announcement of \$350 million to be spent on redeveloping the Albert Park Pit Lane complex is galling and worse is the fact that the state government secretly ripped \$2.4 billion from state schools.

Minister, when will you provide essential funding for upgrades at South Melbourne Park Primary School?

Southern Metropolitan Region

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:41): (1598) My constituency question is for the Deputy Premier in the other place in his capacity as the Minister for Education. Can the minister provide information and greater detail on the positive impact of the Allan Labor government's investment of \$490,000 into the Malvern Primary School, which helps the broader community in Malvern? I had the pleasure of visiting Malvern Primary just last week to deliver the news of the 2025–26 budget investment to help the school build a new toilet block as part of their efforts to modernise and upgrade their senior student facilities. This investment will help student hygiene and cleanliness, while also giving the school facilities exclusively for them. This investment of \$490,000 will go far in providing modern facilities for the school and the community in Malvern, giving families the assurance that their children are being given the very best.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:42): (1599) My constituency question is to the Minister for Police. In light of a recent vicious and terrifying attempted carjacking attack on a 29-year-old female at a Princes Highway service station in Dandenong, where the victim was confronted by three men who subsequently attacked her with a machete, Minister, what steps are being taken to upgrade policing amid safety concerns in Dandenong? With countless stories of crime and assaults in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region, what steps are also being taken to upgrade policing amid safety concerns in Cranbourne, Narre Warren and Frankston? In recent years violent crime increased by 2.7 per cent to 4444 incidents per 100,000 residents in Greater Dandenong alone, and this latest incident has just reinforced the community's fears, along with other events that have taken place in my communities.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:43): (1600) My constituency question is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport. My constituent is a resident of Dandenong and has mobility issues. She relies on public transport to get her to her retail job at Chadstone. My constituent usually catches the 804 bus, which does not run on Sundays. Although an alternate route does exist, the stop is too far away for her to access. Most metropolitan bus services run until 9 pm seven days a week. Melbourne's western and northern suburbs have received significant funding in the state budget for service improvements. Despite its significant social needs, Greater Dandenong remains one of Melbourne's most under-resourced bus networks, so my constituent asks: will the minister commit to funding bus service improvements in Greater Dandenong?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (12:44): (1601) My question is to the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. How is the Allan Labor government supporting the Sephardi community in the Southern Metropolitan Region? Last week I had the pleasure of visiting the Sephardi synagogue in Balaclava. Sephardi Jews are those predominantly from the Middle East and Africa, originating from the Iberian Peninsula. The Sephardi synagogue received \$126,000 last year from the Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund, and the money was used to make important upgrades to the synagogue, including to their outdoor and kitchen facilities. It also enabled a museum space to be created to showcase, for the first time, some of the rich history of the Sephardi community here in

Melbourne. This is the only Sephardic synagogue in Melbourne, and it was a pleasure to visit, talk to the president and see the joy that the small contribution from the Allan Labor government has brought in recognising and preserving the culture and the heritage of this important part of Melbourne's Jewish community.

Northern Metropolitan Region

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:45): (1602) My constituency question is for the Attorney-General, and it relates to the shocking machete brawl we saw at Northland Shopping Centre over the weekend, on Sunday. My constituents were horrified to see Northland, a shopping destination and community hub, become a scene of extreme violence that left people fleeing for their lives. I was there with my kids the day before. It has since been revealed that at least three of these violent offenders were out on bail, and those that were on bail were arrested again after this incident and were released again on bail. Labor's bail laws remain weaker than what they were in March 2023, when Jacinta Allan weakened them. My question to the Attorney-General is: how can Victorians have any trust in our bail laws when offenders who break bail do not face jail?

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:46): (1603) My question is to the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. The North East Link toll road is going to cost us over \$26 billion, not to mention the cost of environmental destruction and years of disturbance, damage and pollution caused by these works. Every dollar spent on this toll road is money that cannot be used for other things that people in our community need. Mental health services are stretched. Homelessness services are stretched. Public schools are underfunded and public housing waitlists are far too long. Our ecosystems are in decline and threatened species face extinction. Governments make choices about what they prioritise and how they spend our money. We have just seen a state budget handed down, so I ask: Minister, can we expect further blowouts in costs for this project in the near future?

Northern Victoria Region

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (12:47): (1604) My question is to the Minister for Health on behalf of rural Victorians who rely on the Victorian patient transport assistance scheme and who need to travel long distances to access life-saving medical care, such as at the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre. A constituent from Strathfieldsaye submitted a claim on 4 April. He contacted VPTAS, and his correspondence states that:

VPTAS ... could not tell me after 7 weeks if they had received my claim, could not say when I would be advised, could not say when any reimbursement may be forthcoming ...

and that it could take weeks or months. This is not an isolated case. Their website used to promise processing times within six to eight weeks, yet many rural patients are waiting for longer, with no communication. Looking at their website just before, I noticed it has been updated. It now states:

We are currently experiencing longer than normal processing times. We apologise for any inconvenience.

This issue is not about red tape, but I ask the minister: what immediate steps will you take to restore timely, respectful service to those who depend on this scheme?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (12:48): (1605) My constituency question is for the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. Minister, how will the Victorian government's 2025–26 state budget allocation to the Migrant Workers Centre provide support to migrant workers in the Northern Metropolitan Region? Funding to the Migrant Workers Centre helps reinforce its commitment to safeguarding migrant workers' rights across the state. This funding enables the centre to continue its vital work, including educating workers about their rights, recovering unpaid wages and supporting those facing exploitation or unsafe conditions. The Migrant Workers Centre's initiatives, such as training community leaders to disseminate workplace rights information in multiple languages,

directly empower local communities. Additionally, the centre had a role in developing the workplace justice visa, which provides a safety net for exploited workers, allowing them to seek justice without fear of losing their residency status. There are many things to talk about with the centre, but this sustained support ensures that migrant workers are better protected, informed and equipped to assert their rights, fostering a more equitable and just working environment for all.

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:49): (1606) My question is to the Minister for Emergency Services. The government promised to spend \$50 million annually from the new \$1.6 billion Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund tax to support CFA and SES volunteers with new trucks, training and equipment. Yet last week the 2025–26 budget failed to allocate any clear funding for replacing the CFA's ageing tankers, leaving volunteers in the dark and orders delayed. In Western Victoria, Gazette CFA still operates three fire trucks over 30 years old, part of a statewide fleet where 230 are over 30 years old and another 743 are more than 20 years old. How can the minister justify slapping farmers and Victorians with this massive new tax while delivering empty promises, cutting frontline capability and keeping vital funds for government projects rather than the volunteers who actually fight fires? Where is every taxpayer dollar of the emergency services tax really going?

Eastern Victoria Region

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:50): (1607) My question is for the minister for families and fairness. A local food relief centre is facing growing demand, not just from unemployed people but from people who are working and simply cannot make ends meet. Last week they were nearly empty within an hour of opening, and now they have to wait another two weeks for Foodbank Victoria to make a new delivery. Despite applying for grants, they were unsuccessful due to high demand from food bank centres. Minister, how many food relief centres across Eastern Victoria Region have applied for government grants over the past 12 months, and how many were successful?

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:51): (1608) My constituency question is for the Minister for Health. HealthAbility is a vital non-profit health clinic, a substantial operation in the heart of Box Hill in my electorate. Due to being part of a Suburban Rail Loop activity centre, the property in which it operates is being sold and will be redeveloped. HealthAbility are very deeply concerned at the cost of relocation, where that relocation may be and the fact that, as they are in a central location, whether they will be in a catchment where they can serve their existing clientele and patients. This has been on the radar for more than a year, two years even, and they still have not been given certainty or clarity. So, Minister, will you please commit to consulting with healthAbility? Will you please clarify what commitments you will be willing to make to their relocation?

Eastern Victoria Region

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:52): (1609) My question is to the Minister for Environment. Minister, in March this year you stood with the member for Bass and said that you were solving coastal erosion emergency situations in Bass. You said:

... we are going to do really important coastal mitigation works to make sure our beaches and our coastal areas are safe and accessible ...

Well, the reality is vastly different. Six weeks ago the department laid what could be called large tea bags – rock-filled bags – along the Silverleaves beachfront, not the geotextile sandbags that were requested through a government department report. Since then they have had high tides and surges, and the bags have categorically failed, and the Inverloch Surf Life Saving Club's clubhouse is teetering on the edge because its sandbags have failed. Minister, what are you doing to save Silverleaves and the Inverloch Surf Life Saving Club?

Southern Metropolitan Region

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:53): (1610) Last night at the Independence Day celebration for Israel's birthday, its independence, which is held every year for MPs and community leaders, Premier Jacinta Allan I thought made insensitive and unfortunate comments. She should not, in my view, have made the comments she made attacking the Israeli government at such an occasion. This is a government that is anti Israel. Many members of this Labor government do not have the interests of Israel and the Jewish community in Victoria at heart. The government was slow to deal with on-campus issues. What I am asking, and this is for the attention of the Premier, is that she correct this statement and backtrack on the statement.

Enver Erdogan: I have a point of order, President. Mr Davis, if you are going to make an allegation against this government, I think there are many people in the chamber – we have got Mr Berger and Mr Batchelor right here – who are strong supporters of the Jewish community. To make a slur about the government and especially against individuals, including the Premier, should be done by way of a separate motion. This is just inappropriate.

David DAVIS: On the point of order, President, I was there. I heard what she said, and I am going to ask her to retract it. That is what I am about to do: will you step back from your statement?

The PRESIDENT: Mr Erdogan is correct. If you are going to make an accusation against a sitting member or members, it should be by way of substantive motion. I might just review what Mr Davis said. I am not too sure if you put it at the level of an accusation, but Mr Davis, you are talking about international affairs during a constituency question.

David DAVIS: My community has the largest Jewish community in Australia, in Southern Metro.

The PRESIDENT: If you had started with that –

David DAVIS: Yes, and I am about to say exactly that.

The PRESIDENT: Okay. Do it.

David DAVIS: On behalf of my community in Southern Metro, the largest Jewish community in Australia, I ask that the Premier retract these comments and step back from this anti-Israeli stance.

The PRESIDENT: The member's time has expired. I will take up Mr Erdogan's point of order at a later time. In general, this is a reminder to the whole house that if there is an accusation about a sitting member, it has to be done by way of a substantive motion.

Sitting suspended 12:55 pm until 2:03 pm.

Motions**Economy****Debate resumed.**

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:03): The tax revenue has increased by 133 per cent since Labor took office. Victoria's net debt will reach \$194 billion by 2028–29. Interest payments on Victoria's debt will cost taxpayers \$36 billion over the next four years. That is \$29 million every day and over \$1 million every hour. Labor has shown that it has no capacity to control cost blowouts. They are continually dipping into a slush fund of about \$10 billion that they have set aside for their own personal decision-making, and we do not see where that money goes for a couple of years.

A fresh start for Victoria will come from the Victorian Liberals and Nationals in our coalition. We have a plan to restore financial integrity and accountability. We guarantee no new taxes or charges. We will publish honest, transparent budgets and introduce a public real-time dashboard so every Victorian can see how their money is being spent. We will safeguard Victoria's credit rating, we will

keep borrowing costs low and we will support long-term growth. We are interested in cutting red tape for businesses. We want to remove barriers to unleash the private sector for growth and job creation. We want to support workers and make life more affordable. We want to scrap unfair taxes like Labor's school tax, holiday and tourism tax, GP tax and the emergency services tax, which will help families and small businesses keep more of what they earn. We will scrap stamp duty for first home buyers on properties of up to \$1 million and end the gas ban, helping Victorians buy their first home, keep the lights on in their homes and their energy bills down, and we will support households and industries alike. We will protect workers by tackling union corruption and misconduct, fostering a fair, competitive environment that attracts investment and rewards hard work. We will secure Victoria's future by tackling debt responsibly. We will stabilise debt. We will introduce a debt cap for Victoria, and we will reduce the amount of taxpayer dollars being spent on interest payments. This motion needs to be supported because it is a way of holding the government to account using its own methodology and enabling it to stay within reasonable budget limits so that every Victorian does not have to continue to pay the price for Labor's mismanagement of money.

I applaud our colleague Mr Davis for his hard work in bringing this particular motion to the house. It is important that people support it, because we need to have this budget back under control. This government is completely out of control with its expenditure.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (14:06): This is a very straightforward motion. It has got a lot of detail in it, and these are facts. The motion simply reads that the Bracks government had a debt ceiling of 6 per cent of gross state product. That is a Victorian government, an Australian government; it is not an American government. So a Labor government introduced a debt ceiling in the 2004 period. It points to the increase in debt, up to 24.5 per cent of GSP in the 2025–26 budget period. That is a huge increase in debt for the state. It points to the fact that the Andrews Labor government changed the debt ceiling first to 12 per cent and then got rid of it. This was a decision of this Labor government – or the Labor government led by Mr Andrews, of which many of the current ministers were a part. It looks at the issue of the debt servicing and the challenge of that. The interest rates have gone up. The interest rates are now really hurting, and we are going to see more and more challenges in servicing a very, very large debt. And our credit rating is at risk. There is no doubt that our credit rating is at risk.

We pointed in the motion to the extraordinary amount of money squandered by unscheduled costs, by cost overruns on projects. I mean, good projects should be managed properly and held within their budget. Who thinks it is a good idea to just let these projects blow out without control? That is what appears to have been happening. We also pointed strongly to the Auditor-General's report from 2023–24, where he pointed to the fact that 18.7 per cent of the debt at that time was due to COVID, but a much greater share, \$137 million of the general government sector gross debt, related to the government's infrastructure blowouts and programs. He said the state government did not have an articulated, clear plan for long-term fiscal management, and he called for it.

That is why we are making a very simple call: establish a fiscal repair plan with quantitative measures to provide a certain budget repair path. That is not a lot to ask. The Auditor-General said the government's plan is not up to scratch, and it is not. The costs are blowing out, the debt is increasing and the state is in a weaker financial position than at any time indeed in my lifetime. We have said 're-establish and publish a debt ceiling'. We have said that is a job for government. It is a job that involves Treasury. It is a job that likely involves consulting the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. It is a job that involves consulting broadly and understanding how this could operate properly. It is not something that you can so easily do from opposition; it is something that a government should do. But we are saying: do what the Bracks government did; do what Brumby's Treasurer did; do what even Andrews and Pallas did in their first few years – they did have a debt ceiling then. They did operate within that. We operated in government within that Brumby–Bracks debt ceiling and successfully did that for the state's benefit. We are aware that these projects need better oversight; that is why we have called for a public works committee. We have been very clear that you cannot control this until you

get these projects within the parameters you are authorised to spend rather than just having them splay everywhere.

This is a very thoughtful, modest motion that looks historically. Every statement is backed up very well, directly from primary sources. Nothing there can be challenged in terms of the facts. And what the Auditor said are simply facts. All we have asked for is that there be a repair plan with quantitative measures and that they re-establish and publish a debt ceiling, and that the government do that – the Treasurer do that, the Premier do that. That is what is important for the state's future.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (14): Melina Bath, Gaele Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Evan Mulholland, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Noes (19): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Motion negatived.

Drought

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (14:17): I seek leave to move motion 925 standing in my name in an amended form.

Leave granted.

Bev McARTHUR: I move:

That this house:

- (1) acknowledges that western and south-western Victoria is experiencing severe drought, with Bureau of Meteorology data showing rainfall over the past 24 months in the lowest 5 to 10 per cent of historical records, with many communities enduring their driest 15-month period;
- (2) identifies that other areas of rural Victoria, including the north-east, central Victoria and parts of Gippsland, are also experiencing significant drought conditions;
- (3) appreciates Victorian primary producers as the cornerstone of the state's economy and food security, with Victorian agriculture accounting for approximately 23 per cent of the nation's gross agricultural output, supporting over 150,000 jobs and supplying essential food, fibre and dairy products;
- (4) expresses concern that prolonged drought places severe financial and emotional strain on farm families, with leading farm organisations reporting that feed and water supplies have become scarce with financial pressures mounting for many producers;
- (5) notes warnings that without additional support these hardships could have devastating effects on rural communities and Victoria's supply chains;
- (6) commends the South Australian government's vital support to drought-affected farmers;
- (7) calls on the government to provide immediate, targeted help to drought-affected areas, including but not limited to:
 - (a) subsidised water supply for agricultural purposes;
 - (b) financial assistance with fodder and water delivery; and
- (8) emphasises that assistance is urgent and needed to help sustain agricultural productivity and support the resilience and wellbeing of Victoria's farming communities.

I want to start by stating how grateful I am to have the opportunity to move motion 925, because this is a very serious issue. Farming is a cyclical business, and no sector is more capable of taking advantage of the good times and adapting during lean periods. But this is beyond normal circumstances. It is not a once-in-a-decade drought; it is once in a century. The Bureau of Meteorology

has produced a detailed update as of this month, and it makes truly alarming reading. In western and south-western Victoria rainfall over the past 24 months ranks among the lowest 5 to 10 per cent of historical records, with some areas experiencing their driest 15-month period on record. Coastal regions including Warrnambool and Cape Otway have recorded the lowest rainfall since 1900. Soil moisture levels are critically low, and streamflows at some sites are among the lowest recorded since 1975. Water storage levels have plummeted. The Wimmera–Mallee system stands at just 37 per cent capacity, down 19 per cent from last year. The Hume Dam is at a mere 21 per cent, a 40 per cent decrease from the previous year. These conditions are not isolated. Other areas of rural Victoria, including the north-east, central Victoria and parts of Gippsland, are also experiencing severe drought conditions.

What does this mean for farmers? It basically means that they have to handfeed stock, they often have to cart water and in many cases they have to liquidate their herds. Some are even having to walk off their properties, unable to re-enter the farming market. It is a tragedy for many families. Farmers love their animals, and they have to look after them in order for them to be productive. It is absolutely crucifying for a farmer to have to liquidate fine breeding herds and to send to slaughter the animals that they have worked hard to produce in a good fashion and for good purposes. It is tragic that healthy livestock are being shot and not even going to market simply because farmers do not have the fodder or the water to keep them alive; slaughter is the most humane option.

Quite apart from the economic impact, this has horrific mental health consequences for farmers, their families and the community. No-one goes into farming for this. The pressure these people are under is intolerable. I have heard reports of GPs in regional towns who are overwhelmed by the mental health impacts on patients, and that is just those who seek help. Unfortunately, there are many more who do not, and I am sorry to say that a number of farmers have seen no way out but to take their own lives. A tax on top of this crisis has been the last straw for many. The financial and emotional toll on families is immense, and it is beginning to have a serious impact on the future of the industry.

That really matters for Victoria and for Australia. I honestly think we are seriously complacent. We are very lucky to have the farming sector we have. We take it for granted in this country, but our farmers underpin something incredibly precious: trust in the quality and safety of our food. That might seem basic, but it does not exist everywhere else in the world. It is one of the reasons why our produce is in such demand globally. People recognise the quality of our product, and they trust it. Our farmers do not just grow crops or raise animals; they uphold some of the highest food production standards in the world. From paddock to plate, we can have confidence that what we are eating is clean, safe and produced ethically. This is no coincidence but the result of generations of hard work, innovation and commitment to best practice. This does include – though you would not know it to hear from some activists – a serious commitment to animal welfare. Victoria's farmers care deeply about the wellbeing of their stock. Their animals are not just units or assets but the basis of their entire enterprise and the whole focus of their lives. When animals suffer, so do farmers. That is why it is so gut-wrenching to hear of cases where healthy animals are being sent to slaughter simply because the feed and water is not there. Not only is that an economic loss, it is a moral tragedy.

Then there is the larger issue of food security. Victoria's agricultural output does not just feed us here at home. Western Victoria alone produces 30 per cent of Australia's food, from just 1.5 per cent of our national land mass. What happens to farming in our state matters to everyone and for everyone. This is not just a local crisis, it has national consequences. The sector also underpins a vast number of jobs. Around 154,000 people across Victoria work in agriculture and related manufacturing, and more than 75 per cent of those jobs are in regional areas – the very areas being hit hardest by drought. When farmers go under, so do the supply chains, processing plants, local contractors and small businesses who rely on them.

That also hits the economy. In 2021–22 Victorian agriculture was worth \$20.2 billion, nearly a quarter of the entire nation's agricultural output. Victoria plays a central role in the export economy. In 2022–23 our food and fibre exports were worth \$19.6 billion, a full 24 per cent of the national total.

These exports support trade with key markets like China and Japan and help pay for the goods and services that Australians depend on. All of this – the food we eat, the jobs we rely on and the income we earn as a state – stems from farming. Farming is not just an industry or an economic component of an area, it is the foundation of our regional communities. In many cases it is what built them in the first place. It still supports them today. The farm gate is not the end of the story, it is the start. Victoria is full of towns and regions with schools, health services, small businesses and civic life, all of which depend on a thriving agricultural base. When we talk about farming, we are talking about the bedrock of rural Victoria as well as its heart.

This motion does call for urgent action to provide immediate, targeted help to drought-affected areas, including a subsidised water supply for agricultural purposes – at the moment there are people spending at least \$1000 a day to cart water for livestock purposes – and to provide financial assistance for fodder and water delivery. The added extra cost of transportation of fodder and water is a critical issue as well. The time to act is now – to safeguard our agricultural productivity and the resilience of our farming communities. This seriously is an existential crisis.

I mentioned earlier the cost involved for fodder imports, paying for water, the cost of lost crops or the future losses which will result from sending stock to slaughter. And I thought I probably should highlight just exactly what we are talking about when we are talking about figures for animals going to slaughter. A week or two ago the figures were 3200 cows a day and nearly 16,000 weekly, mostly productive dairy cows, were going to slaughter – going to slaughter, not relocated on another dairy farm somewhere, because there basically are no farms that can take them. And Victoria is the major producer of dairy products. So 16,000 cows, largely dairy cows, are going under the knife. In one week 2400 cattle were sold at five markets, basically a one-way ticket to the slaughterhouse. This has already, as I said earlier, put some farmers out of business, and sadly, the damage already done will mean that in coming months and years others will follow them. On this, just in the last day or two we have seen an opening milk price for dairy farmers which is beyond disappointing. It is simply unsustainable given the situation on the ground, and if it is not improved we will undoubtedly see many more farmers coming out of production. As I touched on earlier, it is, tragically, not just an existential crisis financially – some have chosen suicide. Farming has always had a disproportionately high suicide rate, and the current circumstances are a perfect storm. I have already spoken about the severity of the drought, but I want to turn now to why I have described it as the perfect storm.

Our farmers are facing a convergence of pressures, not just one or two but multiple overlapping crises that are compounding the hardship. In addition to the drought, bushfires have devastated parts of western Victoria. Fires in the Grampians and Little Desert regions have destroyed farmland, vineyards and even livestock. The emotional and financial toll on affected farmers is immense. While the government has offered \$5000 recovery grants, a dollar-for-dollar grant, the scale of the damage far exceeds this support; \$10,000 when you are investing in infrastructure in farming does not go a long way, I can assure you.

Farmers are also grappling with the expansion of transmission infrastructure, including the VNI West and Western Renewables Link projects. These high-voltage lines are planned to crisscross productive farmland, disrupting operations, reducing land values and fragmenting properties. Moreover, the establishment of renewable energy zones is leading to significant land use changes. Farmers in regions like the Wimmera, Loddon Mallee and Central Highlands have expressed strong objections. These transmission lines go right through the Western Victoria Region. They have expressed strong objections, citing inadequate consultation and concerns over the impact on agricultural land and community wellbeing. They feel they have no control over their future. Their communities are having these transmission lines imposed on them for the benefit of city dwellers, and they are paying the price.

Another familiar theme is the state of rural roads. An estimated \$1 billion is needed for repairs, but funding is insufficient. Poor road conditions hinder farmers' ability to transport goods to market, increasing costs and reducing competitiveness.

Finally, there is the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund, which we have spent so long discussing in recent weeks. Extracting \$3 billion across the state and disproportionately affecting rural and farming communities already battling severe drought is just the last straw. Primary producers will bear the brunt, with an average 154 per cent rise in the amount owed.

In summary, our farmers are contending with a multifaceted crisis: severe drought, bushfires, infrastructure projects disrupting land use, deteriorating roads and increased financial burdens from new levies. Each of these issues alone is significant. Together they constitute a perfect storm, threatening the viability of farming in Victoria. Immediate and targeted support is not just necessary but imperative to sustain agricultural productivity and support the resilience and wellbeing of our farming communities. In conclusion, I ask for the support of this entire chamber. It is important that everybody appreciates the plight that our farming communities are in, and governments at this point need to step up. These farming communities bear the brunt of all these issues, but they are feeding the nation. They are feeding the people in this city and they are feeding the export markets of the world.

We do not want to waste money. We want to see it properly spent. Unfortunately, we cannot eat infrastructure, but we do need to eat fabulous food that our farmers produce. The action I need from the government is to act urgently. We cannot delay this support that we are calling for today. It is imperative. I gave one example yesterday where with the stroke of a pen the government could solve a problem – permitting road trains just for this drought period, just to transport fodder, to come into Victoria without having to offload one trailer and then go back and get it and bring that down again, actually doing more damage to the roads if you want to add up the amount of kilometres they have got to travel to do two trips instead of one. It adds almost \$5000 in transport costs to the cost of that load of fodder, which is probably about \$20,000 worth in itself. At the moment many are spending tens of thousands of dollars a week to keep their animals alive. The least we can do is assist them with the transport costs of water and fodder and at least provide water so that these animals can live.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (14:37): I rise to speak in support of this motion before us today. While I do not necessarily agree with every single thing Mrs McArthur said, I think the sentiment underlying this motion is one that I very strongly agree with and wholeheartedly support. My heart goes out to all of those who are affected by drought currently. It is absolutely devastating, particularly for those in my electorate that I share with Mrs McArthur in western Victoria. Seven months ago I stood in this place and warned the chamber about the green drought that was being experienced by communities across western Victoria, and at the time I asked the Minister for Emergency Services what the government was doing to support people living on the land in the lead-up to what was going to be a very challenging summer. The minister outlined the steps being taken to prepare for bushfires but mentioned nothing of the drought. Well, we are no longer in a green drought. This is an extreme drought and is as much a part of the climate emergency as floods and fires. To quote my federal colleague Barbara Pocock:

Droughts are different to floods and bushfires. They are long and slow and painful.

Farmers work every day to adapt to the environment changing around them, but it is getting harder as the environment changes more rapidly. Right now we have farms that have been devastated by record-breaking floods in northern New South Wales and are being ravaged by a record-breaking drought further south. Extreme weather and changed rainfall patterns are becoming the new normal. They really are the new normal, and it is clear that adapting to farming in this changed climate is no longer something that farmers can and should be shouldering alone, which brings me to this motion.

Recently the government announced an extension of their drought relief package, which is certainly welcome, but the package covers assistance such as business support and infrastructure upgrades, and the feedback I have received from many constituents is that it does not extend far enough to cover the things that they really need to survive at the moment. This motion calls on the government to provide immediate targeted help to drought-affected areas. It does not call for infrastructure grants or offset schemes. It plainly and clearly lays out what farmers might need in terms of practical support during

a time of drought. These are fair and reasonable asks. I can imagine there may be other practical supports required by landholders, depending on the type of farming they are doing on their land, but what is obvious is that this list is not about building a new shed or updating machinery. People need support to get by day to day, to feed livestock or to source new water supplies. It is frustrating that this is not already being provided.

While the Greens were able to support an exemption from the new higher emergency services levy rate for all drought-affected farmers so nearly all of south-west Victoria will be exempt from paying the higher rate – they will only pay the former fire services rate for the duration of the drought – we would like to see more areas included in this exemption. I know of several municipalities or local government areas where what they are experiencing on the ground looks very much like what south-west Victoria is experiencing, but they have not yet been declared drought-affected areas. They too need to be declared drought-affected areas so they can benefit from that exemption.

I would also like to argue that once the drought eases, which hopefully it will soon, the Treasurer must ensure that whatever primary production rate she decides to set enables these farmers to get back on their feet. It is entirely within the Treasurer's remit to set that rate, and I think, given the circumstances we are in and given the impacts of the drought on these communities, that needs to be taken into consideration in any future rate that is set for these communities.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge the amazing and continued work of all our rural organisations. There are many, and I will not be able to name them all, but I would really like to acknowledge the work of organisations like the Rural Financial Counselling Service, Rural Aid, the National Centre for Farmer Health and the many local councils who are out there on the ground for their communities right now. What is key to many of these organisations is they are acutely aware of the impact of drought on increased farmer stress and decreased mental wellbeing. Mrs McArthur has already touched on this, but we know the toll that drought takes on farmers' mental health. If you do not know someone who has personally battled with depression after the decades of uncertainty that farming brings, you do not have to look far to see that the statistics paint a heartbreaking picture.

Beyond immediate relief, this drought should serve as yet another message that we need to be doing more to reduce the impacts of climate change, both by rapidly transitioning away from fossil fuels and by ensuring that all of our essential systems, including food production, are more climate resilient. It has been 17 years since Ross Garnaut's review examined the impacts of climate change on Australia's economy. It found that there would be a 97 per cent decline in irrigated agricultural capacity along the Murray–Darling Basin by 2100 without significant global action on climate change. Yet here we are again facing extreme drought across much of southern Victoria, while the federal and state Labor governments continue to approve new coal and gas projects. It is absolutely beyond comprehension that this continues to occur. I am aware that we have just found out today that federal Labor has approved Woodside's North West Shelf extension. This is a climate disaster. If we are going to on the one hand talk about helping out our farmers who are experiencing these floods and droughts and on the other continue to approve new fossil fuel projects, all of those words and all of those offers of support really ring hollow. We need to be taking meaningful climate action now, and that means no new coal and gas projects.

We are without a comprehensive statewide or national food security plan, which is something we also desperately need and have long been calling for. We need this to continue to produce the food we need sustainably in a changing climate. We need to recognise that we are in a climate emergency and start taking the steps we need, firstly, to avert the worst impacts of climate change by not opening new coal and gas projects, but on the other hand, by preparing for what we know is to come, getting ready for what adaptation means and thinking holistically about how we are going to continue to feed ourselves in a changing climate. Our capacity to feed ourselves, our health as a community and our ability to thrive and live long and happy lives must be the focus for this and all governments. But so long as Labor lines its pockets with donations from fossil fuel companies we will continue to see completely inadequate action on climate change and more taxpayer money spent subsidising the fossil fuel

industries that cause droughts than on proactively and genuinely supporting the communities that suffer from them.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (14:45): I rise to speak on Mrs McArthur's motion 925 on drought relief. I will not be opposing the motion. I would like to start off by acknowledging all farmers in rural and regional communities that are suffering through this prolonged drought and all the implications it has, whether those are farmers across the east, the north, the west or various parts of the state. There are pockets of the state that are in significant drought, like Omeo and Benambra in Eastern Victoria in my electorate and, for Dr Mansfield, Mrs McArthur and Ms Ermacora, in Western Victoria, where the effects of the drought are far more obvious on a much larger and broader scale. When it comes to drought, a state border does not stop the impact or the effects of drought; in fact it magnifies them, particularly when we are talking about being able to get supplies of fodder or grain, being able to sell livestock or crops and what those market conditions are like. When we see drought impacting numerous states at once, everybody is more significantly impacted.

I am sure Mrs McArthur has a similar lived history over time. I grew up on a farm where in 1983 we sold half the farm and then in the millennial drought we sold the rest of the farm, so I am definitely very aware through lived experience of the impacts of drought, not only on farmers themselves and their families but also on surrounding businesses and local communities.

We know that agriculture is incredibly important to this state. Mrs McArthur noted the \$20 billion in produce exports that come out of this state. We are incredibly fortunate to have pristine agricultural land that our farmers and businesses are able to work and produce from, whether that is in dairy, beef, sheep, crops, grains or various horticulture vegetables. We have such diversity for a small state geographically compared to the rest of Australia. We have such diversity in our agricultural product, and we have such high quality in our agricultural product, which means we are able to export a high-value product to markets around the world. That is something I am incredibly interested in and obviously something we all keep a focus on.

We had the first \$13.5 million of the drought package some time back and an additional \$15.9 million was announced on 15 May along with a variety of supports, whether that is farm infrastructure or whether that is financial counselling. I worked at the peak body for financial counsellors a number of years ago. The regional and rural counsellors are an important part of the financial counselling network. They are important to people, no matter where they live in Victoria, in times of hardship.

I am very proud that there are people living and working in our communities and supporting rural and regional Victorians and Australians in times of hardship, because while we are talking about this drought now, there are other times when other agricultural producers are hit. We have had recent wind events and flood events, and farmers are hit at a variety of times. It might be a small population who get hit by different events, but that does not change the disastrous nature for them and their financial situation at that time. Farmers are able to access that support, along with technical specialists, depending on what type of farming business they are running – support to not only deal with immediate drought resilience in the situation they are in but also to look at how they are going to get through this time and into the future. There is also federal assistance available. The rural and financial counsellors are federally supported and funded, along with low-interest loans and a variety of other supports through the federal government, which individuals or farms will look to.

I just wanted to go to the time that this drought has extended across. I was just chatting with Ms Ermacora about how it has built up over time, but it is really, really biting now. I think both sides of the chamber are probably guilty – perhaps we should have been having this debate months ago in here. It is important that we are having it now, and it is good that we are having it now, but perhaps we could have had it earlier. It is a drought that –

Wendy Lovell: Don't blame the opposition for the government's inaction.

Tom McINTOSH: I am sorry, do you want to show me where in *Hansard* you talked on this issue? It is not on the record that the Liberals or the Nationals were standing up and talking about this drought until about two weeks ago, so do not yell across the chamber –

Wendy Lovell: You're in government.

Sonja Terpstra: On a point of order, Acting President, Ms Lovell should direct her comments through the Chair. She was yelling across the chamber and directing her comments to Mr McIntosh. She should direct her comments through the Chair.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger): Perhaps I will ask both parties to direct their comments through the Chair.

Tom McINTOSH: I think it is imperative for all of us to advocate for regional and rural Victorians and for our farming communities – those being the families, the farmers and the surrounding businesses. Something I am very proud of is being part of a government that invests in rail infrastructure, so we have the freight and the networks to move product around and to move regional Victorians – move people into the regions to spend money and allow people from the regions to be able to get into metropolitan centres, whether that is for study or health care. I mentioned in my members statement this morning, as an example, Lakes Entrance and the investment we have made in the new kinder on the primary school site, the \$6 million for the school and the half a million dollars for the high school, ensuring there are education pathways so that our young regional and rural Victorians are getting the best education possible and are then able to come into the TAFE system, where they can get the training locally and work locally in businesses that support our incredibly important \$20 billion agricultural sector. Because for us collectively to prosper, we need a productive state. We need productive people. We need emotionally strong and well-developed people to support each other, and we need economically productive individuals that form communities that support farm businesses. As Mrs McArthur said, we are competing against other states and we are competing against other nations, so we need to be our absolute best.

I am proud to be part of a government that is putting those investments, those supports, into our regional and rural towns that help to hold the fabric together. I will not talk about my experience in the 1990s because I have done that often enough in this place, but when you have the investment in education, in health, in transport and in the local businesses, which are part of the fabric that holds it all together to keep the sports clubs, pubs and shops open, that is critically important at times like this. But it is also critically important that we support our farmers and associated businesses at a time like this so they come out the other side – so that we can all prosper, so that we have got top-quality food on our plates and we have got that export capacity that supports the entire state economically.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:55): I attended at lunchtime today a forum in the library – thank you to the library staff, and I note Dr Mansfield was there as well – on farming, agriculture and food security in a global context in terms of a changing climate. We had two people there, both of whom I have met. One was Professor Richard Eckhart, whose family I know very well. He is a professor of carbon farming. The other one was a Gippsland farmer whose farm is not far from where we had one a long time ago. What they agreed on is that our Victorian farmers are world class. This particular discussion was concentrated on dairy farming, but the theory remains across our Victorian farmers that we are world class. We are mature in our operations, we are efficient, we are effective and we put quality food on tables not only in Victorian kitchens and restaurants but across the nation and internationally. We are some of the best in the world.

This discussion was about global emissions and reduction of those. We have been leading the way through our normal, good farming practices for over 30 years. That was the discussion, and I put that on record because it is really important to acknowledge our domestic use, our interstate use and our production for international markets. Our farmers deserve respect, our farmers deserve acknowledgement and our farmers deserve our praise and gratitude for their endeavours over time.

What they do not deserve is a government that is not listening, a government that is burdening them further with more taxes and in fact a 100 per cent increase on a current levy, the so-called Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund.

Turning to the main substance of this debate and this motion, I thank my colleague Mrs McArthur for raising this and her passion for particularly her region as well. It is important to have specific acknowledgement that these conditions are impacting our farms – that reduced weather and weather deficiencies and the lack of rain over prolonged periods of time, prolonged months, have made a significant impact on the levels of dams. It is right across Victoria. Probably the only patch where it is not, which is unusual, is far East Gippsland. In the late 1990s they were on their knees. In Western Victoria and in parts of my electorate of Eastern Victoria – in Bass, South Gippsland, West Gippsland and stretching even further according to an email I had from a farmer in Yinnar – unfortunately, some of those good farmers cannot access any of the offerings of the state government at the moment because it is LGA based, but they are still struggling.

We have had those dry conditions. Our dams are dry, drying up or near dry. The soil moisture is fast evaporating. It is hardening, and therefore it is hard to grow grass or crops anyway. In many cases, particularly in the west but certainly still in my patch, there are paddocks that have crumbling dirt and no fodder, no grass whatsoever. We have seen these deficiencies over the last 15 months, and what does that do? What impact does it have? One thing that farmers know is that they have some controllables, but they cannot control the weather – they have to mitigate its effects as best they can. What they are doing at the moment is facing some tough decisions. It was reiterated today: if you destock, it can have an adverse impact. You end up not being able to make a profit. You may not be able to bring next year's heifers into your herd. Certainly when there is flooding of stock into the saleyards – and there is one not far from me at Koonwarra, a large one – you have the impact that the price return on the sales of that destocking back to farmers of course is devalued due to the oversupply. These cattle are not necessarily going to abattoirs. Many of them are being shipped up to Queensland and the like, where there is further fodder. But truly it is a hugely stressful time. Farmers are having to make these very tough decisions, and it is imperative that government is listening.

What has Mrs McArthur asked for? It is about providing subsidies for water supply and financial assistance in terms of that delivery of water and fodder. We know that the price of hay is going up and the price of grain is going up and of course the farmers' capacity to turn a dollar is going down, so it is getting harder and harder and harder. I know that there are people who have been contacting me in relation to this. I would like to make a comment about rural financial counsellors. I was at Nex, as it is called now, in Leongatha, the Nex office, and they offer a range of services and have done for many years. But indeed they are seeing more and more struggle and kitchen table conversations about how farmers are going to continue on under these very adverse conditions. We thank them for taking that load and doing those hard yards as well.

One of the things that I spoke about earlier on was respect, and we heard in a previous comment that we need to advocate for our communities. Many of those farming communities were actually on the steps of Parliament last week and the week before and out the front of members of Parliament's offices, and various rallies have been held and continue to be held around this state. They do not feel the respect of this state government in terms of its emergency services tax. It is a tax. I have just explained many of the attributes of our farming community and the importance of them, and what is this government doing? This government is going to reach down into their pockets, which are already parched and bleached, and impose a whopping 150 per cent increase in a levy/tax. This is not advocating for our communities. This is not feeling the love for those communities. Indeed the Greens have also voted for that emergency services tax, so that is not advocating for communities and that is not showing that care and that support.

I will quote something that Shadow Minister for Agriculture Emma Kealy asked the Premier the other day. She asked the Premier: why is there such a big slug for farmers relating to this particular tax? The Premier took 2 to 3 minutes to get around to it. She said:

The advice I have from the Treasurer is that the increase in the levy for primary producers is the equivalent of 0.5 to 0.8 per cent of agricultural production ...

That is not a ringing endorsement for support. That was a justification for this new tax. I concur and agree with and support the Victorian Farmers Federation. They have been very strong in this. They have been working very hard to make sure that the government is listening to them and the measures that they are asking for. This is Brett Hosking, the president of the VFF, and he is talking about measures that must include:

... infrastructure and reseedling grants, municipal rate relief –

back to that topic where our local councillors are debt collectors for the state government –

water security initiatives, and dedicated mental health services.

These are the sorts of measures that the VFF is asking for. These are the things that are important to people on the land, and this government must do more. If this house is going to wholeheartedly support this motion – and I suggest that it does – it will also put the government on notice to do more for our primary producers.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (15:05): I would like to start by thanking Mrs McArthur for the motion. While I am not in agreement with everything that has been said in the chamber on this issue, I am substantively in agreement with most of what has been said in the chamber so far. So I am very pleased to be responding to this. I think it is a very important issue, and it has certainly consumed me over the last almost three months now, with meetings and visits that I have been doing to understand. I have got a photo of my parents' place, where I took a photo with the dog in April 2023, and the grass is green and it is this long. I just texted Mum and asked her to send me a picture of the same paddock, and it is unrecognisable. It is so dry, and this is nearly two months later, in May. It is still brown. There is a tiny, tiny bit of green. So we are in all sorts of trouble in south-west Victoria.

The south-west drought is now the driest period on record, and in a region which is blessed with regular, reliable rainfall, we have had no rain – although I believe it is a little bit wet down there today. We had the green drought last year, with almost no rain but just enough to put a veneer of normality over the landscape. But that is well and truly gone. It is heartbreaking to see the landscape so parched, with brown paddocks everywhere and dust clouds rising from what should be beautiful, damp, living soil. We need solutions, and I am pleased there are constructive conversations taking place both within my region and here in Spring Street. Over the past few months I have spoken personally to many farmers and heard from many, many more via email and phone calls, and I want to thank the Victorian Farmers Federation, United Dairyfarmers of Victoria and grain growers for their advocacy and time in recent months in meeting with me.

The drought is having a brutal effect on farmers and their families. The consequences for many communities and for our nation's economy must be urgently addressed. The Allan Labor government is listening closely. The Premier is meeting with the Victorian Farmers Federation this week to discuss what needs to be done. The VFF have also been working in consultation with Agriculture Victoria to develop a drought response framework. I and my other colleagues representing rural constituents and opposition members from rural seats have spoken up, and I truly hope and believe that we have all been heard, because the reality is grim.

On Monday this week at Deakin University Warrnambool a drought relief round table was convened by leaders associated with the farming industry from across the district. I was able to send a representative, which was very helpful given that it is a sitting week. What we heard is that there is no stockfeed left in Victoria or South Australia. Homegrown and purchased reserves were used last season, and as the drought continues to affect greater areas of Victoria, demand for fodder is only

increasing, further affecting supply. Pastures are currently in a worse state than if they were burnt out. Most farmers have spent as much on feed in three months as they did for all of last year. Feed costs now take up to 60 per cent of gross farm income for livestock farms, and this also means less money is spent on other areas of the farm. Young stock is being sold down, with farmers only keeping their core group – similar to comments made from others – and this will have flow-on effects next year, as cows already culled will result in less beef on our markets, less milk on our shelves et cetera.

Critically, unless we get the right amount of rain in the next two weeks, there will be no grass next summer – so we are looking six months ahead. There is so much certainty about the grimness of this situation right now even if it does start to rain now. Even then it will only be enough to feed stock now, not even to replenish hay stores or fodder stores. Just to be pessimistic for a minute, if it rains too much and there is no root structure in the soil from the grass to absorb the rainfall, the dusty plains will just turn to mud and then there will be floods. It sounds like ‘We’ll all be rooned’ from *Said Hanrahan*, but it is true. It will take at least two to three years for pastures to fully recover. Grass seeds already planted can easily be killed by frost or may never germinate at all if it does not rain. Farmers then need to reseed, with extensive costs associated with doing that. Dairy and beef cattle need large volumes of water. Those who can afford it are carting water, but this is not sustainable. Unfortunately, there is no option to trade out of trouble. I think others have mentioned this as well. In the south-west at this point the break-even point for the milk price is \$9.50. As Mrs McArthur mentioned, one of the large companies announced an offering of \$8.60 last week, another distressing blow. For all their backbreaking work, farmers are literally going backwards. Production is down significantly, at some farms more than 10 per cent, due to lack of feed. Even if the milk price goes up, they will not be able to take advantage until feed prices come down. It is a cycle, and all of the feed-in elements play a role.

Creditors are also at risk, with some customers owing \$400,000 or more on feed accounts. Local shops and communities and sports clubs suffer as well. This is not just a problem for those directly affected by the drought. The product produced by our farmers is critical for our national and state food chains. The south-west is a dairy powerhouse, with Moyne and Corangamite shires combined making up the greatest percentage of milk exports in the state. Corangamite alone is the highest milk producing local government area in Australia; I am not sure if you knew that, Mrs McArthur. This drought will inevitably have a knock-on effect. I will just list the economic impact: vehicle sales will be down; farm machinery businesses will be impacted; farming, scientific and veterinary services, infrastructure investment on farms and upgrades to other farm infrastructure will be affected; stockyards – no-one will not be investing in and maintaining them; and dairy machinery, shearing sheds, silos, transport costs and fuel businesses. All of those things will be restricted and reduced, if not already, over the next period of time. That is going to have a flow-on effect in the broader economy in the south-west, which will then flow on into the state of Victoria.

I want to close by also recognising the importance of mental health, as others have done in this space. We know that 75 per cent of farmers may not reach out for help. Much is being done to change that. There have been some farmer information evenings, and some are planned, which is really helpful. I think it is fantastic for so many of the region’s organisations to come together to sponsor these events and provide information. I think also it is really easy for the wrong information to head around our communities during stressful periods of time. That is a really important leadership role that organisations and businesses can play in our community, and this chamber can focus on making sure that we are accurate in what we are saying.

I want to acknowledge the amazing services of the Rural Financial Counselling Service and also say that in south-west Victoria, because it usually has high rainfall and has had dryland farming for decades – for more than 100 years – in our community, where the drought started, it has been a shock. It has crept up on us as a community. You just need to leave any town to see that the paddocks are drastic. All of us here have an important role to play. The state government and the federal government have roles to play, but non-farming communities also have a role to play. We all should come together and help our farmers through this rough time. I support the motion.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (15:15): I rise to join in this motion, and I congratulate my Liberal colleague Bev McArthur for bringing this very, very important motion before the house. We heard before from Mr McIntosh an absolutely tone-deaf contribution about drought and blaming the opposition for the government not having a position on helping our farmers through the drought. Mr McIntosh was absolutely tone-deaf. In fact he went on to talk about –

Michael Galea: On a point of order, Acting President, Ms Lovell is completely misrepresenting Mr McIntosh's speech.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Gaelle Broad): That is not a point of order.

Wendy LOVELL: Mr McIntosh tried to deflect from the issues of drought by talking about other issues, and he talked about investment in education in country Victoria. That does not help feed the kids. Yes, it helps to educate them, but it does not help to put food on the table to feed them. It does not help to feed the cattle. It does not help to feed the sheep. It does not help to water the fruit trees. It does not help our farming communities to survive drought. In fact the government like to crow about their investment in education in country Victoria, but actually in two very large and very important farming areas in my electorate the government have just closed the schools. There is the Waaia Yalca South Primary School; the government actually gave them in 2016 or 2017 a million dollars to upgrade all their classrooms. It took a few years for that to happen. They just got upgraded in 2020, and the government closed the school in 2021. Closed it – a school that had just been upgraded. What a waste of money that was. They also closed Katunga South Primary, and I am pretty sure they also got a grant to upgrade their school. The government closed that down – again, in a farming community – so they are not offering great education close to home for the farming families in those communities, Mr McIntosh.

Let us get back to drought, because this is really, really serious stuff. This is impacting so harshly right across the whole of Victoria in the regional areas. We did see a very inadequate announcement late last year from the government for some support in the south-west of the state, and we saw a few additional LGAs added to that just recently in the announcement with the drought. But in the entire Northern Victoria Region, which covers about 46 per cent of the landmass of this state, there is only one shire that has actually been included for drought assistance, and that is the Towong shire. Every other municipality has been left out. When you look at it, it just does not make sense. The government added Northern Grampians, but they excluded Loddon shire right next to it. They added Hepburn but excluded the Macedon Ranges shire right next door to it. They added Baw Baw shire but excluded Mansfield and Murrindindi. We really do not understand how the government can exclude local government areas that are seriously suffering.

The mayors of Murrindindi and Mansfield sent me a copy of a letter that they had sent to the Honourable Ros Spence pleading with her for drought support for their areas. The mayor of Mansfield says:

I can't walk down the street without hearing the financial and economic toll the severe drought conditions are taking on the community. Dams and other on-farm water storage has all but dried up. There is a lack of feed and hay. Every community member is praying for rain and every community member is feeling the impact of the hardship caused by the drought conditions.

We are at our breaking point and after yesterday's decision in the upper house to increase the cost of primary production through the increased ESVF, I truly fear that our community, which is resilient and has a history of getting things done despite challenging conditions, is no longer able to sustain itself without dire consequences.

The mayor of Murrindindi says:

Across our Shire, primary producers, particularly in the cattle sector, are being forced to destock due to the lack of feed and the near-exhaustion of hay supplies and on-farm water storages. The financial and emotional toll is growing, with broader impacts already being felt by rural businesses and local communities.

At recent livestock sales and regional meetings, the depth of the current challenge has been clear. We are hearing firsthand accounts of feed shortages, unaffordable transport costs, and comparisons to the early 2000s

drought, when hay trucked from interstate cost up to \$20,000 per load. Many producers are approaching financial and emotional breaking points.

The entire Hume region, 12 municipalities – Strathbogie, Alpine, Greater Shepparton, Mansfield, Moira, Towong, Wodonga, Benalla, Indigo, Mitchell, Murrindindi and Wangaratta – have written to the minister as well, pleading with her for some real drought support. What we have seen from this government with their initial announcements and the expanded announcements last week is support for things like on-farm infrastructure, grain storages et cetera. That does not help farmers to get through this drought, and you require them to actually have a co-contribution to that. That presumes they have the money to put in to build infrastructure that might help them get through the next drought. It might be drought support for the next drought, but it does not help them to get through this drought. What they need is real support now. They need support for transport subsidies. They need support to help them to feed their cattle, to feed their sheep, to water their pastures, to have water for their own use even – stock and domestic water – and they need help right now with real solutions that Mrs McArthur’s motion actually puts forward. These are sensible solutions that will give farmers the support that they need right now to get through this drought, but this government is absolutely tone-deaf when it comes to actually assisting regional communities.

I also have a letter from a constituent in the Macedon Ranges shire that says:

I am absolutely shocked and disgusted they didn’t open our LGA and a lot of other farming areas for drought relief.

...

It’s so unfair, discriminatory and absolutely deplorable, how can they say we aren’t in drought when we have had LESS rain than many of those LGAs on the government’s drought map ...

She goes on to name a couple of those shires, but I am not going to name those shires, because I am not advocating for them to get less. I am just advocating for those in my region who are not receiving drought support to receive drought support and to receive that in real and practical terms that will assist them to get through this immediate drought.

The government also need to recognise what they have done in northern Victoria. Normally LGAs that are in the irrigation district are the last to ever get any sort of drought support, because the farmers have access to irrigation water, but with the government reducing the footprint of the irrigation system – the rationalisation of the irrigation system – it means that there are many farmers that would have had access to water before via irrigation, even though they would have had their allocations reduced, that will not have access to that water now. That means that LGAs that might have some irrigated farms in them will have farmers that are not on irrigation that will desperately, desperately need help. Of course we do not know what our irrigation allocations are going to be for next season, but it is not actually looking terribly promising when you look at the closing from last year. Although most of the Goulburn and the Murray systems got 100 per cent of their high-security water, they got 0 per cent of low-security. That 0 per cent of low-security is an indication that next year high-security might also be at risk.

The Victorian Farmers Federation have come out and slammed the government’s announcement in the budget of the additional drought support that just named a few a few shires. They are saying that the limited scale of that package falls well short of what is required, especially when compared to more substantial efforts in other states such as South Australia. They go on to say:

Farmers are not asking for handouts. They are asking for meaningful recognition of the strain this drought is putting on their livelihoods, their families and their mental health ...

They need support now, and this government needs to start listening to our communities and provide that support.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:25): I also rise today to speak on the very important motion that is before us in relation to the ongoing drought that is affecting many parts of

Victoria, including quite especially western and south-western Victoria. I would like to acknowledge Mrs McArthur for bringing this important motion in today. Mrs McArthur has from time to time been accused of bringing crap into this building, but that is certainly not the case with this motion today. This is a very important motion, and I am pleased to rise to speak on it.

At the outset I would like to acknowledge the remarks of my colleague on this side Ms Ermacora. I had the opportunity to hear some of Dr Mansfield's remarks and Mrs McArthur's. As a member from the south-eastern suburbs, it was very illuminating for me to hear some of the specific circumstances and some of the specific challenges that people in the western region have faced. That has been very instructive for me. I do rise noting that some parts of my region, including the outer south-east where it borders with south-west Gippsland, have also been drought affected. It is nevertheless very illuminating for me to hear those perspectives from that part of the state. It is all too easy for us here in Spring Street when it is raining outside and the grass is lovely and green all around us to forget the situation that really exists out there. Ms Ermacora showed me the photos she referred to, and it was a completely stark contrast – rather than two months, you would think that was two years difference.

It is an important subject, and that is why the government has been taking action through the drought package. Just a couple of weeks ago we saw an expansion of that package announced, which I was very pleased to see, as I am sure all members were. I think there are a few elements of that that are important to touch on. Firstly, it did expand the number of LGAs which are covered by the direct and targeted flood relief, but it also made some changes in some of the implementation and some of the measures were also made statewide. It simply would not be fair to say that we have ignored any corner of the state, because measures such as the technical support and the mental health assistance have been expanded right across the state. I will make that note at the outset as well.

Turning to Ms Lovell's comments in terms of region by region, although I appreciate she is not in any way seeking to undermine the importance of those LGAs that did receive flood funding, I would make the point that the government has consistently said that it will continue to monitor and update and base these decisions on rainfall data and on the drought conditions. The proof of that is indeed from just two weeks ago when, in the expanded announcement, a number of LGAs were added to that list. In the Wimmera Mallee region we saw Northern Grampians, Horsham and all of West Wimmera; in the Central Highlands we saw Hepburn shire, Moorabool and the City of Ballarat; in the north-east we saw Towong; and in south-west Gippsland we saw the Mornington Peninsula, South Gippsland, Bass Coast, Casey, Cardinia, Baw Baw and the unincorporated territory of French Island.

I know that the Premier is on record saying that where more needs to be done we will do more, and I am very appreciative of those remarks, because it is important. There have been many speeches today talking about the importance of food production regions for our entire country. Indeed we are blessed in this country to produce far more food than we consume and to be a net exporter. Many, many such countries do not have that same benefit. It is a very valuable position to be in, and they are industries which we must continue to support.

I know other colleagues on this side have talked in more broad terms as well about some of the other support measures that have been in place. It is also important to reflect on other measures, payroll taxes and the like which we have reduced, particularly in regional areas. On 15 May this year we announced further practical support to farmers across Victoria, including particularly in those areas I just referred to, but also more broadly as part of a statewide response. This new \$15.9 million package builds and expands on the existing \$13.5 million drought package, which was announced back in September of last year. As I said, this will provide farm businesses with the technical and decision-making support where they need it, right across the state. It will also provide significant mental health support services, again, where they are needed right across the state.

As part of this, already included is some funding to support a small business financial counsellor in south-west Victoria specifically. The south-west regional drought coordinator role has also been extended until at least 31 October this year, which will enable collaboration across agencies and

organisations to ensure that the necessary support that is being invested in by this government reaches those most in need. We need to ensure that the support being delivered is being used as effectively as possible to ensure the maximum benefit for our primary producers. Of course these measures build on those statewide programs which are in place as well.

We are investing as well an additional \$12.5 million into the on-farm drought insurance grants program to assist farm businesses in the eligible LGAs to implement on-farm infrastructure that improves drought management and preparedness. A grant of up to \$5000 is also available for farm businesses as well. In some of those funds there will be some dollar-for-dollar contributions, and again, that is in order to maximise the effectiveness of this scheme. The grants can be used for infrastructure that will improve on-farm drought preparedness and better position primary producers for the future, such as stock containment areas; upgrades to farm water systems – dams, tanks, irrigation and the like; and grain or fodder storage. Indeed the rural financial counselling as well as the mental health supports will also be significant measures, not just in those specific areas but where they apply statewide as well.

I know that a lot of consultation has gone into the creation of this package by Agriculture Victoria, and it is of course an iterative process; it is not something that has been now closed off and finalised. The Premier has very clearly signalled her intention, and indeed the minister has also signalled her intention to continue to work and assess and reassess as needed and provide further support as needed. I do note and acknowledge that Agriculture Victoria is doing a significant amount of that work in terms of the consultation and the coordination so as to identify what is working, what needs to be done more and what perhaps may even need to be done differently.

There is ongoing engagement with industry bodies, primary producers, the Victorian Farmers Federation, local government, the Commonwealth government and other jurisdictions as well, to monitor the seasonal, economic and social conditions across the state, to ensure the most informed approach going forward that we can. It of course also aligns with the Victorian drought preparedness framework. We are no strangers to drought in this state – or in this country. It is perverse that we see a situation right now where just one state away they are experiencing horrific flooding – and we send our most sincere best wishes to them. It is perverse to see the dryness of many parts of this state while other parts are completely underwater, and people have lost their lives as a result. Indeed, as Ms Ermacora said, at this stage of the year, even if we were to get significant rainfall, the perversity of that situation is that we would be more likely to see floods than see grass growing.

There is much work to do. There is much work that has been done, and I do acknowledge the work that has been done and again reiterate our ongoing commitment that this is not one single point that we are concluding anything at. There is ongoing work, and I am very much pleased to see that work continuing.

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (15:34): I rise to make a small contribution to this. The drought is a very real problem we have got at the moment. Mrs McArthur has done quite a good job of the motion and I am not going to go through it bit by bit, because I understand there are other people that want to have a contribution after me, but I will point out a few things, which is probably covering old ground, but I will get to it. Stock losses are becoming a problem – not necessarily from starvation, but because farmers are no longer able to look after their entire flocks, so they are starting to cull them. I am old enough to remember the 1980s, when this first started happening, and the images of farmers having to shoot their sheep and just crying, because despite what some people think, they are not just a source of income. There were some realities of life, and still, despite that, they were quite unhappy. That stuck with me. I was living in the Wimmera, north-central Victoria, at the time and saw what the drought was like. The reality of living in it is lost on a lot of people in Melbourne. We might have to have water restrictions so we cannot wash our car, we have to be careful about taking baths and all that sort of stuff, but there are people who are having to truck their potable water in, and if you cannot afford that, you kind of have a problem. The government has been giving assistance – I think it was \$13 million and then \$15 million recently – but South Australia, as no doubt has been covered before,

with less people, has got quite a lot more. I urge the government to step it up and help these people. It can help them with water. It can help them with feed for their animals.

There are some ironies to this. Parts of Gippsland are not in drought, other parts of Gippsland are in serious drought and other parts of Gippsland are going to be in drought. So it also brings to the fore questions of what is a declared drought and what help we can give to people before it becomes a declared drought and their backs are to the wall. I note that it has been put to me that parts of Baw Baw, La Trobe and areas like the town of Benambra are suffering greatly, while not too far from that it is raining, but that does not stop them from needing help. That does not stop them from needing some assistance before it gets to the point of no return, and that brings mental health issues and all that sort of stuff.

Rural people, particularly farmers, have always suffered a lot from the vagaries of economies. If people do not want to buy their particular food, then their income drops, and all this changes from year to year. The price of something goes up and down and they do not know what they are going to get, so there is always a mental problem of not knowing what will come next year. Now we have just added a drought amongst geopolitical concerns and all those sorts of things. So mental health help is critical and its intervention at some points. I mentioned this years ago: one of my earliest recollections of the problems of mental health in regional areas was when a friend of ours suicided out of the blue. When I look back at it – I was a young teenager at the time – I still do not understand why she did it, but as time goes on you look and you can see stresses that are coming from here and stresses that are coming from there, and at some point in time it gets too much for some people. What I want is help for these people before it becomes critical.

I applaud Mrs McArthur for bringing this motion. I obviously support it. I would like the government to spend a bit more time with the people that are pre drought, for want of a better term, so that when it does become a drought it is not just that they have lost nearly everything and they are going to go under, but that they are in a position where they can keep it at least floating along until the drought breaks.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (15:39): I rise to support this motion because it recognises not just the economic cost of drought but the deeply human cost associated with it. In the few minutes that I have I just want to put on record that for the past 25 months Gippsland and parts of Eastern Victoria have been gripped by one of the harshest dry spells in living memory. The BOM confirms it: record low rainfall. It has been drier than in 90 to 95 per cent of years since records began in 1990. As Mr Bourman just said, it is not all areas of Gippsland, but some are very severe. This morning my office spoke to Karen McLennan from GippsDairy. She said that at least 240 farms across greater Gippsland are now in serious trouble. Current support helps a little, but it misses the heart of the issue. For the 20 farms already out of water a subsidy for a new tank means nothing if farmers cannot afford water to put in it. Farmers are not asking for handouts. I have heard a lot of people say that in this chamber today. What they are asking for is fair support. The government have said they are doing this and they are doing that. What they have done has not even been a drop in the bucket. Practical, fast-tracked assistance is needed to help farmers survive this drought with dignity and so there is still a future for them, their family and their farms. They need subsidised water for crops and livestock. They need financial help with fodder and transport. They need energy cost relief, especially for irrigation and storage, and they need mental health support to carry the emotional load, because this is beyond what a lot of people have seen in decades.

I want to share, in the time that I have, that I was at a GippsDairy meeting in Inverloch the other night. A bunch of farmers shared their stories about how they did not have warning about this, that government systems failed. The Bureau of Meteorology did not predict this. It did not give them the warning to prepare what they needed to for this dry period, and now they are just in terrible trouble. One of the speakers said, 'If we do not get significant rainfall within the next month or two,' then paused and said, 'we are in serious trouble.'

These farmers do not know what the future holds, and this is in an area that is just up in the country. When farms suffer, every single Victorian suffers, because every one of us relies on them. It increases the cost of living for every single Victorian, because if there is no water for farms and there is no food, that is going to hit the grocery shelves. It is not something that is out of sight or out of mind. I want to thank the incredible farmers for what they do for us, and I want to acknowledge that we need proper support, and we need it given soon. I want to thank Mrs McArthur for bringing this important and timely motion. I commend it to the house.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (15:42): At the outset I want to say how pleased I am that the government, Dr Mansfield and the Greens and Mr Bourman from the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party are supporting this motion. But support for a motion is not enough. What we need now is for the minister and the government to be on notice that they urgently have to move forward with what we will pass shortly, which is subsidies for water supply and subsidies for transport of water and fodder supply. That is what we are specifically asking for here; that is what the government must supply as we move out of this chamber today. They have to move forward, recognising that this chamber has passed this motion. We do not want to just say we have ticked a box and passed a motion and said nice things. We want action. Action means putting money on the table to help these farmers who are desperately in need.

Dr Mansfield reiterated what support is required, and much of the support that the government has given does not even touch the surface. The exemptions for farmers from the new tax also do not help, because you have got to have spent money on a drought package to be eligible for relief from the levy. It is all capped, and it does not even help in the slightest.

Mr McIntosh referred to the fact that we have not referenced drought here for a while. I can tell him that on 4 March I did just that. I called for help with the culling of kangaroos. If there is anything left on these farms, the kangaroos are eating it. They are drinking the water that many farmers are having to pay to supply, and they are wrecking all the fences. The kangaroo population explosion as they move into these areas is immense. The drought has been raised, Mr McIntosh, for your benefit. Ms Bath referred to the loss of breeding stock. That means that in the years going ahead there will be no income for these farmers. If they lose their breeding stock, they lose their ability to farm. Ms Ermacora reminded us of the importance of the Corangamite shire, and as a former councillor I am pleased she did. It is a very important area, producing the most milk in this country. Ms Lovell referred to the need for funding now and not just more infrastructure grants. These farmers do not have the money to do dollar-for-dollar grant matching from the government. And really, where would \$10,000 go in any case? You would be lucky to get a few metres of fencing and a fraction of a dam dug out. Mr Galea made reference to fertiliser. Now, I welcome Mr Galea for a visit. Come down to our farm, Mr Galea, and you can bag up, package up, any amount of fertiliser you would like – because that is all that is left on our farm. We just have dirt and dust and fertiliser, and you are most welcome to it. It will make your roses grow beautifully.

Mr Bourman and Dr Heath referred to the human cost that is involved in all this. It is significant. We have referred to it. We do not like having to refer to it, but in the end with drought, combined with the many other increased input costs that farmers are enduring, whether it is rates increases, interest rate increases, increased costs of inputs of fertiliser but also this extraordinary cost of trying to feed and water animals that will die if they do not bring in extra fodder and water, it is immense. It is sometimes the last straw for a farmer as they go out to shoot some dying stock – that there is nothing left. They feel helpless. They feel nobody is listening to them. But right now this government has the chance to listen and act. I look forward to the minister and the government acting on this motion and providing these subsidies that we have called for.

Motion agreed to.

*Bills***Retirement Villages Amendment Bill 2024***Council's amendments*

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Gaelle Broad) (15:47): I have received a message from the Legislative Assembly in respect of the Retirement Villages Amendment Bill 2024:

The Legislative Assembly informs the Legislative Council that, in relation to 'A Bill for an Act to amend the **Retirement Villages Act 1986**, to make minor amendments to other Acts and for other purposes' the amendments made by the Council have been agreed to.

*Business of the house***Notices of motion**

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (15:48): I move:

That the consideration of notice of motion, general business, 946, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

*Committees***Legal and Social Issues Committee***Reference*

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (15:48): I rise to move this motion in my name to address the concerning reports that have come out this month regarding a delay in funding for Victorian public schools over the next several years. I move:

That this house requires the Legal and Social Issues Committee to inquire into, consider and report, by 30 April 2026, on the impact of the Allan Labor government's decision to delay raising Victoria's school funding to 75 per cent of the schooling resource standard until 2031, effectively cutting \$2.4 billion from what was previously committed to Victorian government schools, including but not limited to:

- (1) the state and Commonwealth funding per student in Victorian government schools relative to funding in other states and territories;
- (2) the impact of this delay on Commonwealth funding;
- (3) the impact of this delay and funding cut on the education of students enrolled at Victorian schools today and those starting prior to 2031;
- (4) the consequences of this funding cut on Victoria's teaching and school workforce; and
- (5) the effect the funding cut will have on the ability of Victorian government schools to purchase educational resources, teaching materials and capital equipment, as well as fund much-needed building and school grounds maintenance.

In January 2025 the Victorian and Commonwealth governments announced that they had come to:

... an historic agreement that will put all public schools in Victoria on a path to full and fair funding.

This announcement was cautiously welcomed by public education advocates, who have been pushing for full funding since the Gonski review calling for fair school funding was delivered in 2012. Prominent education advocate Trevor Cobbold wrote last month in his *Save Our Schools* blog that while the funding agreements between the Commonwealth and state and territory governments were promising, following over a decade of failure to reach the Gonski standard they left a number of questions unanswered. Mr Cobbold pointed out that:

Much uncertainty remains because there is plenty of opportunity for the promise to be undone and there is little detail about the path to full funding.

Mr Cobbold's warning seems especially prescient now in light of this month's revelation in the *Age* that the Victorian Labor government has quietly stripped \$2.4 billion from our public schools by

delaying its funding commitments by three years. The bilateral agreement signed in 2023 between Victoria and the Commonwealth clearly stated that the Victorian final share for government schools would be 75 per cent of the schooling resource standard, or SRS, by 2028, but according to the *Age*, cabinet-in-confidence documents show that this state Labor government has made a secret decision to abandon this commitment, delaying the funds for three years to 2031. This decision, made behind closed doors away from parliamentary or public scrutiny, is an absolute betrayal of public school students, staff, parents and families, who rightfully expect that this government do way better. As the Australian Education Union puts it, funding delayed is funding denied.

Far from living up to the standard we set ourselves as the so-called Education State, this decision effectively cuts \$2.4 billion from public schools over the next six years. What that means is that a child who started prep this year will not receive proper ongoing school funding until their final year of primary school, while a child starting year 8 will miss out completely. Shamefully, according to the *Age*, the Commonwealth has responded by reducing funding it was previously planning to give to Victoria under this bilateral agreement. Effectively, our kids are missing out twice, and it is actually even worse than that. The AEU notes that Victoria rolled over its 12-month bilateral agreements in 2024 and 2025 with no growth in its share of SRS funding, despite what was agreed back in 2019. The AEU calculates that this has further short-changed Victorian public schools by around \$550 million in each of those years.

When asked about the three-year delay in Gonski funding, the Victorian Labor government has denied and deflected, citing capital works funding rather than the ongoing SRS funding we are asking about. Anyone who has visited one of the neglected, crumbling schools in my electorate of Northern Metro knows that this Labor government's inadequate capital works funding is really nothing to brag or gloat about. But that is not what we are talking about today. It is a distraction from what we are really asking about in this inquiry. We need answers. The government need to come clean about why they are stripping billions in funding from Victoria's public schools. They need to look families in the eye and tell them why this government thinks prisons and corporate luxury boxes at the grand prix are worth millions but their children – the future, the next generation – are not. They need to admit to public school teachers that they know they are constantly underpaid and overworked but they are just not ready to do anything about it. Prisons and race cars can have their millions now, but you – the parents, the teachers, the students, the community – are just going to have to wait.

We know that Victoria is in the midst of a teacher shortage. Labor wants to frame this purely as a recruitment issue, but essentially it is a retention issue, with Victoria's teachers the lowest paid in Australia and mid-career and experienced teachers exiting the profession in record numbers. The real shortage is of people who are willing to work in the conditions that Victoria is offering. With secretive decisions like this one stripping billions out of the funding that is used to pay for teachers and school staff, the Victorian Labor government is funding our schools to fail, not to succeed. We need this inquiry to answer the questions that this government will not. While Queensland has committed to fully funding their schools by 2028 and New South Wales has brought forward more funding to reach their benchmark this year, Victorian Labor has made closed-door decisions to slash funding from our public schools. In the so-called Education State, why is Victoria stepping back while every other state steps up?

Tom McIntosh (Eastern Victoria) (15:55): The Greens' grandstanding knows no bounds. Here they are again. The big toothbrush has been packed away, and education is the flavour of the day. I did not even work out that rhyme, but here we are. It is Labor that have always stood and invested, have spoken out, have campaigned on and have delivered in government on education. Julia Gillard and David Gonski did the hard yards on education. We may recall that the Liberal-Nationals – yes, they are a coalition – coalition were in government federally for nine years. It is Labor that have gone back and done the hard yards to enable this reform and investment in education, and in Victoria I am incredibly proud of the investment we have made in education.

I talk a little bit about that side sometimes – I will give them a break for a minute – but on this side as well it is the extremes of politics wanting to use an Americanisation of politics to divide people. Language has just been used about ‘crumbling schools’. I have got a very big list of schools here in Eastern Victoria and the investment that we have made through this government over recent years, and I am going to go through this as quickly as I can so I can get to them all. But I just really want to call out the Greens political party in the other chamber. They have had 2½ years for their members to raise questions with the Minister for Education, who is in there, and have they done that? No. And you would have thought the federal election would have taught the Greens a lesson or two about jumping in at the 11th hour on an issue, doing none of the sustained work and then trying to grandstand and trying to whip up fear and division in the community.

It was only yesterday that I was having a meeting with the education minister to talk about the great funding announcements that came out of the budget: Lakes Entrance Primary School, \$6.6 million; half a million dollars for Lakes Entrance Secondary; \$11.7 million for Leongatha Secondary; and \$11.7 million for Mount Eliza North Primary. In that conversation I talked about how I should have known better when I entered this place about three years ago, with my mother being a teacher and my auntie being a teacher. But I did not put the value on education that I have now, because in this role I have been fortunate enough to work with our early educators, to go and see the investment that we have made in early education facilities, to see the investment we are making in our primary schools, to see the investment we are making in our secondary schools and, for me, to have a much clearer picture and understanding of the pathway we are creating for young Victorians, as we say with Best Start, Best Life, to get that early education, that three- and four-year-old kinder that we are investing in. This sits slightly outside of this conversation, but Victoria has made incredible investments in early education that then flow into primary school and secondary college and into the workforce, and of course we talk about the investment we have made for years and years in TAFE being at the later stage of that pipeline.

I think the emotional intelligence and wellbeing we are setting an entire generation up for, and also the economic productivity of an entire generation, are so incredibly important to Victoria. That is why I am absolutely proud of and committed to the investment that the Victorian state Labor government has made in education and also the work that Minister Carroll has done in the federal space with other Labor – that is Labor – state ministers to get the outcome around the funding. The commitment to and the priority of a world-class education are absolutely resolute, and we are working to have the full and fair funding, the 25 per cent of schooling resource standard from the feds and the 75 per cent from Victoria.

I again want to acknowledge the effort and the work that education minister and Deputy Premier Carroll has put into that. In fact our recent budget grew \$2.9 billion on education and \$1.5 billion for school infrastructure. We are still negotiating the terms of the bilateral agreement with the Commonwealth. The referral motion comes forward for an inquiry when the Council’s Legal and Social Issues Committee has just had a comprehensive inquiry into the state education system – I am sure my colleague Mr Batchelor was on that and will probably speak to that – which dealt with the question of funding, so this would be a doubling up of the committee’s work.

I want to get to the funding that we are doing and not talk about those opposite. But again, the Greens political party could look at the bigger picture and remember what the Kennett Liberal Party did – close 350 schools. The Baillieu–Naphthine governments did very little; it was Dolittle and Nap Time. If you talk to the business community, not much happened in Victoria, but they ripped a billion dollars out of the education budget, and how miserable that they abolished Free Fruit Fridays in schools – that is not the pips but the pits. If you look at the work that went into getting this agreement with the feds, it was sustained work with parties of government working to achieve things, ministers going to Canberra, going to protest, going to take up the challenge federally, it is incredibly, highly commendable. As I said before, I see the impacts of this in my electorate day in, day out.

To those comments over there about crumbling infrastructure, I will give you examples from just four seats in my electorate of Eastern Victoria. As I said earlier, an \$11.7 million upgrade to Mount Eliza North Primary School; \$6.7 million to upgrade and modernise Mornington Special Developmental School – and we are upgrading all the special developmental schools around Victoria; \$5.7 million for Mornington Primary School; \$2.9 million for Mount Eliza Primary School; half a million dollars for Mount Eliza Secondary College; half a million for Mornington Park Primary School; \$393,000 at Osborne Primary School; and \$9.5 million for Eastbourne Primary School, a school that I am incredibly proud to go to and stand with their teachers, their school committee and their families and see the investment we are making into that community that is so incredibly important. There is \$13.77 million for upgrading and modernising Rosebud Primary School; \$10 million for upgrades and modernisation of Rosebud Secondary School – Lisa Holt is a Victorian Principal of the Year and the work she is doing at Rosebud Secondary is incredible, along with another Teacher of the Year out of Rosebud last year. There is \$9.7 million for Dromana Primary School; \$9.47 million for Peninsula Specialist College; \$2.3 million for Dromana Secondary College; \$2.8 million for Advance College of Education; half a million for Boneo Primary School; and \$330,000 at Rye Primary School, with Principal Featherston.

In Gipps South, there is \$12.8 million for Korumburra Secondary College – incredible facilities in Korumburra; \$11.7 million for Leongatha, as I said before; \$4 million to rebuild Yarram Primary School; \$3.6 million for South Gippsland Specialist School; \$750,000 for Fish Creek and District; half a million at Araluen Primary School; \$489,000 at Yarram Secondary College. In Gippsland East, \$4.4 million in Paynesville, and those works are happening as we speak; \$6.6 million for Lakes Entrance Primary School; \$6.7 million for East Gippsland Specialist School – incredible commitments we took to the last election to invest in our specialist schools; \$8 million at Bairnsdale Secondary College; \$8.4 million combined for Orbost Community College – Peter Seal and the team out there are doing incredible work; and the list – I am not even going to get through it all because I am running out of time. This government is committed to investing in education, and I am absolutely proud of the work we do.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (16:05): I rise to speak to Ms Gray-Barberio's motion, and it is an important motion. I have been sitting listening to Mr McIntosh over there trying to talk up the government's achievements, and he keeps going back to the Kennett years, and it is such a broken record –

Tom McIntosh interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: He interrupts. Let us just not forget what was happening in those years, Mr McIntosh. The Cain–Kirner years were quite historic in Victoria. The state was going broke; it is not dissimilar to what we are facing now. The debt is so huge –

Tom McIntosh interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: No, you are cutting. You are cutting \$2.4 billion from public schools and delaying funding as promised, and I will come to that. So the Cain–Kirner years –

Tom McIntosh interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: I do not know how old you are, but there are people in this chamber that do remember those years and do remember the 1990s, when Jeff Kennett turned this state around after the disgraceful management by Labor. And it is disgraceful management by Labor again.

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: Mr Batchelor, your family knows what happened in the Cain–Kirner years, and I can tell you –

Members interjecting.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): Order! Ms Crozier to be heard in silence. It is getting a little noisy. Mr McIntosh, in silence, please.

Georgie CROZIER: The point I am making is under the Cain–Kirner government the state was broke. It was a rust bucket. It was viewed by the rest of the country as being in real trouble. And here we are again. This motion is looking at a very serious cut to public education with delays in the funding. Around \$2.4 billion was previously committed – it was secretly stashed away in the budget papers.

Tom McIntosh interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: Mr McIntosh, I know you are chirping on over there, but I just want to read a little bit about your Deputy Premier. He was warning the current Premier and then Treasurer Tim Pallas that taking this money out of the budget through the budget program would damage the state’s reputation, embed Victoria’s status as Australia’s lowest funder of public schools and prolong disadvantage and inequities across the school system. That is the point of this motion. It is looking into what actually happened to that money and why it was taken out. It is not an insignificant amount. You did reference the Gonski review with Prime Minister Gillard, and that was 10 years ago. This is where this all started. This is actually the point about this motion and about this money that was meant to be put in place, but no, it has been pushed way out to 2031. Originally Victoria pledged to fully fund schools by meeting the schooling resource standard by 2028.

Tom McIntosh interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: I know that Mr McIntosh is very exercised over there, because these are the facts. I will say it again, because he was carrying on a bit. Originally Victoria had pledged to fully fund schools by meeting the schooling resource standard, the SRS, by 2028. This target has now been pushed back under a revised timeline, meaning that between now and 2031 – that is six years away – Victorian schools will receive \$2.4 billion less in state government funding than they otherwise would have. That is the point of this motion. That is the point about where this money from these funding cuts to public education has gone.

The delay also means that Victoria will receive less federal funding, as the Commonwealth’s increased contribution is contingent upon states meeting their funding commitments. Victoria has the lowest funding for government schools per student in Australia. Government documents reveal that, as I said, the Deputy Premier – the wannabe Premier – and Minister for Education was rolled by the Premier and then Treasurer Pallas in the budget and finance committee last year when he argued against the decision. He argued against this very decision that was proposed and proposed an alternative position where Victoria would have reached the required benchmark of funding under the Gonski model by 2029 – not pushing it out to 2031. He was arguing not to push it out to 2031: ‘If we can’t meet 2028, make it 2029.’ He was rolled, and there you have it. Talking of rolled, the delayed rollout of the Gonski reform agreement puts us six years behind New South Wales. New South Wales are rolling it out this year. They are doing it now. We are six years behind New South Wales. That is how hopeless this government is. This goes to the very point about the appalling economic situation we are in, because in everything – whether it is education, whether it is health, whether it is roads or whether it is anything – everything is pushed out. Delays in hospital infrastructure are pushed out, and I will be saying more on that in the –

Members interjecting.

Georgie CROZIER: Well, when you have got a \$194 billion debt and are paying \$29 million a day in interest, Mr McIntosh, that is on you. That is your government.

Tom McIntosh interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: You are already cutting. The AEU called the delay in this and these cuts – this \$2.4 billion cut and the huge blowing out to the never-never – a disaster for public school staff and students. You are responsible. You are in government. You are sitting on the government benches.

Tom McIntosh interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: Mr McIntosh, we will not lie to the people. We will not con people. We will not con the Victorian public. I will tell you what else we will do: we will manage the budget a bit better than what your hopeless Treasurer is doing. She asks people in property, ‘What’s your favourite tax?’ For goodness sake. I mean, they think you are a joke. But worse than that, you are sending the state broke, with \$194 billion in debt. \$2.4 billion –

Tom McIntosh interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: We are talking about the state, Mr McIntosh, not federal – you fool.

Melina Bath: On a point of order, Acting President, members deserve to be heard in silence.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): Yes, it would be good if we can be silent. But it would be awesome if we could just show a bit of respect.

Ryan Batchelor: On a further point of order, Acting President, I think Ms Crozier may have used an unparliamentary expression to describe Mr McIntosh, and I ask that she withdraw.

Georgie CROZIER: Yes, that is okay; I am happy to withdraw.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): I did hear that, which is why I knew what Mr Batchelor was on about.

Georgie CROZIER: He is a bit confused. We are talking about the state government, not federal, so he really is quite off the beam, and that is why I did refer to him with an unparliamentary remark. My apologies, Mr McIntosh, if you are a little tetchy about it.

Getting back to this important motion, this is \$2.4 billion being cut out of public education, and many students who are in school today will completely miss out on receiving their full funding amount because they will have finished school by the time Victoria meets the full SRS funding amount. There are kids in primary schools now that are going to miss out on this funding. They are going to be through the public primary school system when this funding finally gets there. This is teachers and other people that are providing the programs into the schools that are saying this. They are devastated. They can see through the government. They can see the government is failing them and failing Victorians right across the board.

Without this funding, schools cannot provide the essential resources needed to support their students, and Victorian students, parents and teachers are paying the price for Labor’s incompetence in managing taxpayers money. As a result – it does not matter what they touch; it is every portfolio they touch – there are blowouts, there is waste and mismanagement and there are roting and corruption in some areas. God knows how many areas –

Tom McIntosh interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: Mr McIntosh, I mean, you are a big unionist, but look at the CFMEU, look at the Big Build, look at the corruption and roting that have been found out by a whole lot of agencies, including IBAC, including the Ombudsman and including the Auditor-General. There is a whole lot of roting going on, and that is what I am talking about – the waste and mismanagement – because Labor cannot do their job. They cannot manage money, and it is Victorians who are paying the price.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (16:15): What a debate to be a part of. I always enjoy debating education policy and education funding, because it is one of the most important functions that a state has, and that is providing a world-class education for our children. Labor has

consistently delivered the school resources, the school infrastructure and the policy settings that this state needs to deliver a world-class education to our children. Ms Gray-Barberio in her motion is looking to refer a matter of schools funding to the Legal and Social Issues Committee. As a member of the Legal and Social Issues Committee, we had a chance in this Parliament to hold an inquiry into the state education system, and our report, which was tabled in October 2024, has an entire chapter dedicated to schools funding. The key recommendation in relation to schools funding from that inquiry that the Legal and Social Issues Committee already delivered to this Parliament was about advocating to the Commonwealth that the Commonwealth fund the remaining 5 per cent gap in the schooling resource standard (SRS) to bridge the gap with the fully funded non-government schools. That was recommendation 54 of the Legal and Social Issues Committee's report on the state education system tabled in October 2024, not even a year ago. Nine months ago that was tabled in this Parliament.

The government's response, which was also tabled in this Parliament, in April, so not that long ago at all, said that the government supported that recommendation in full and that in fact Victoria in January had signed the *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement – Full and Fair Funding 2025–2034* with the Commonwealth, which commits the Commonwealth to lift its funding from 20 per cent to 25 per cent of the schooling resource standard for government schools, and that this will provide 100 per cent of full and fair funding to government schools in Victoria and to students by the end of the agreement. That is in no small part due to the advocacy of the state Labor government, the work of the Minister for Education and his tireless efforts to get the Commonwealth to lift its offer and put that last 5 per cent on the table. The agreement that was signed in January this year between the Commonwealth and the states in part 3 quite clearly outlines that all public schools across the nation and in Victoria in particular are on a path to 100 per cent of the SRS. The Commonwealth is lifting its commitment, and it is very clear that the states and in this case Victoria will deliver 75 per cent of that funding by the conclusion of the period. The bilateral agreements that lay out exactly how that is going to be funded are being negotiated as we speak. If Ms Gray-Barberio wants to get to the heart of the funding arrangements for Victorian schools, they are publicly available already.

The second thing in relation to schools funding – and there has been a lot of talk in the debate today, a lot of emotive language used by the Greens and by members of the opposition, about schools receiving less, about cuts being made – does not stack up with the facts in numbers that are published in the budget. Was it yesterday or today that the budget papers were tabled in this chamber? I cannot remember which, but if you go to budget paper 3, the service delivery budget paper, and you look, in chapter 2 under the Department of Education, at table 2.1, the output summary by area, have a look at the funding that the budget delivered last week: allocations to schools funding in Victoria. 'School education – primary' is rising from \$5.2 billion in the 2024–25 budget to \$5.44 billion in the 2025–26 budget, a 4.5 per cent increase. 'School education – secondary' is rising from \$4.43 billion in 2024–25 to \$4.7 billion in 2025–26, a 6.1 per cent increase. The 'Wellbeing support for students' budget was \$375 million in the 2024–25 budget, rising to \$426 million in 2025–26, a 13.4 per cent increase. And 'Supports for schools and staff' goes from \$1.77 billion in the 2024–25 budget to \$1.9 billion in the 2025–26 budget, a 7.8 per cent increase. Some people are clearly trying to make some political mileage out of schools funding for their own political purposes. I have read those numbers into *Hansard* to try and inject some facts into a debate that, and not for the first time, the participants in this chamber and in the public seem to lack. They ignore the facts when they go into debates like this.

We have had an inquiry that has looked at schools funding, by the Legal and Social Issues Committee in this term of Parliament, and its report is not yet a year old. One of the other things that Ms Gray-Barberio said is that she did not seem to care, count or acknowledge the investment that the state government has made in school infrastructure. She said that she did not think it was particularly important.

I want to just go back to the report of the Legal and Social Issues Committee, because I think it is a nice segue into some of the challenges that we see coming from the opposition. We know the attitude of the Liberal Party when it comes to the funding of school infrastructure and the funding of capital

works in our public schools – we saw it under the last federal Liberal government. I will quote from page 265 of the Legal and Social Issues Committee’s report into the state education system in Victoria. It says:

Prior to 2017, the Australian Government provided funding to government schools for capital projects as part of its grants to state and territory governments. Between 2017 and 2023, the Australian Government stopped providing capital funding to government schools ...

We had a six-year period while the Liberals were in power when the Commonwealth provided no capital funding to government schools.

As part of that period we saw significant enrolment growth here in Victoria and a significant investment in schools funding, in new schools being built and in schools being upgraded. What you see when you go and visit those schools, either the new schools or the upgraded schools, is the real impact and effect this investment in school capital that this Labor government has had on those schools. We know that half of all of the new government schools built in this country since 2018 have been built here in Victoria. It matters that the state government invests in the capital program of our schools, and I do not think we should agree with the sentiment from the Greens that that funding does not matter.

The last point I will make is that debates over school funding are important, but as I have said in this Parliament before, funding is a means, not an end. What matters most are the educational outcomes that we are getting for our students, the educational policy settings that we put in place, the way that we support teachers to teach and the way that we support students to learn. What we are seeing from this government and from this minister, through the initiatives outlined particularly in the last 12 months – the use of structured and synthetic phonics in our classrooms, the moves towards explicit instruction and the new announcements about focuses on maths and numeracy in the budget last week – is that this government is not only investing additional resources, not only building and upgrading our schools, but it is focused on improving the student learning outcomes of all of the students who go to government schools here in Victoria.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:25): I rise to make a brief contribution on motion 947 in Anasina Gray-Barberio’s name. This motion requires the Legal and Social Issues Committee to investigate the impact of the Victorian government’s decision to delay raising school funding to 75 per cent of the schooling resource standard until 2031. This decision rips \$2.4 billion out of our public school system. This money was needed to pay for the long-awaited Gonski education reforms addressing social, economic and cultural disadvantages faced by students. Victorian public schools are the lowest funded in the country, and Victorian teachers are the lowest paid. Low funding means public schools are left with less or poorer quality resources, and the unavoidable result is a lower standard of education for our young people. As this is the Education State, this is something that you would expect the Victorian government to be deeply concerned about. But no, they buried this decision in the budget papers and looked the other way.

At the same time this government is investing over \$700 million into our prison system, tightening bail laws and championing the number of young people who are incarcerated. Victorian kids are now the worst off in the country. They are not getting the education they deserve, but they are getting thrown in prison. Victoria is no longer the Education State, it is the prison state. Education can be the great equaliser, but only when we properly resource the public school system. When home life is difficult, school provides structure, learning and vital connections that some children may have never experienced. I saw this firsthand at the hearings for the inquiry into the state education system in Victoria. Kids who had a troubled start eventually found their stride when they found the right school and supportive teachers. You can see how life-changing a good school is for these kids. They gain confidence, and their relationship with learning completely changes.

A failure to resource public schools to deliver quality education encourages our most vulnerable young people to drop out earlier, with lifelong effects on their quality of life. Young people deserve a world

of opportunities and schools that are resourced to give them the skills and knowledge to succeed. By doing this we help break cycles of family trauma and poverty. When we fail to adequately fund our public schools, we fail an entire generation of young people, embedding social inequities and leaving us all worse off. For these reasons we will be supporting this motion.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (16:28): I rise today to support Ms Gray-Barberio's motion for a referral to the Legal and Social Issues Committee, motion 947 on the notice paper today. A couple of years ago the Nationals and the Liberals moved a motion for a referral to that same committee and, working with the Greens to adapt the terms of reference, actually got that up off the ground. Indeed we did conduct a fulsome inquiry into the state education system, and I want to refer to some elements of that report, which others have referred to. There was the overwhelming feeling that the government would listen to the recommendations, the evidence, the impetus from this report and do what they should do and increase that school funding and provide that context. But no, this Victorian government is funding a \$2.4 billion shortfall by delaying, by putting off, that funding of 75 per cent of the schooling resource standard from 2028 to 2031. It is delaying. It is kicking the tin down the road. It is saying, 'No, don't need to do it.' That then makes null and void the arguments from those opposite that said, 'We don't need another one.' Actually we do. We do need to understand the implications for our student population and our public school sector of this delay, because we know there is a compelling case for that additional funding, and we have heard those testimonies, which I will be happy to share with the house very shortly.

From that inquiry we know – chapter 7 deals with this quite a lot – that our Victorian government schools receive only the figure of \$15,970 per student compared to the national average of \$16,739 and also compared to New South Wales, which is \$16,887. It is really making an impact on our school community. Victorian government schools currently receive 90.4 per cent of the schooling resource standard. That was noted in 2023 in the report. The Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office estimates that closing the last remaining 5 per cent of that SRS gap would cost \$1.97 billion from the 2025–26 budget. But let us talk about what impact that is creating and how the education fraternity – those people in the know, principals and specialists – feel about this and what they think. The report finds, page 223:

The Committee received overwhelming evidence that Victoria's state schools are chronically underfunded on the terms outlined by the Gonski model.

I certainly heard 'Gonski report' back when I was teaching in the public school sector. It goes on:

They will remain so unless agreements between the Commonwealth and Victorian governments change.

That was one part. The other part of interest to the house is some professional comments about this:

The Better and Fairer Expert Panel stressed the importance of fully funding schools to 100% of the SRS ...

It says on page 234:

Underfunding of schools, and government schools in particular, is undermining other reform efforts, with real implications for student educational and wellbeing outcomes, teacher attraction and retention –

didn't we hear that as a major issue in that inquiry? –

and ultimately confidence in the public education system. Governments should work together to address this issue as a priority and fund government schools to 100 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard.

That is just one element. Then we had some teachers, and one of them from my patch in Bairnsdale, Matt Kell, was quite brave because he spoke very candidly about his concerns about teacher shortages – no doubt about that – but also meeting the needs of students with a range of learning abilities. He said:

The funding of public schools ... is below what was recommended by one of the many reviews that has been done into education. If you do not think \$2000 per kid makes a difference to what can be done at all levels ...

but especially at lower primary school, to bring up illiterate and innumerate kids, then you are kidding yourself.

Stephanie Feldt, a teacher from Albert Street Primary School – again, a great school – said:

Additional funding would indeed allow us to have the supports that we need in different classrooms. I am speaking of six classrooms, and I know that two of our classrooms need even more additional support to allow the teacher to teach, to do their job.

We have students with various needs and education supports. We know that that is really important for those children. For some of the children with learning difficulties, complex needs and complex behaviours, that additional support per student would make the world of difference.

My colleague Mr McIntosh over there was spruiking on a number of occasions the budget and what is going to be funded in that budget this year, and he took up quite a considerable amount of time. I also have a motion on the notice paper that outlines the budget items in 2025–26 budget paper 4, and it lists about 18 to 20 different schools that are going to be funded in the budget; it is in the budget papers. However, the fine print is that they are going to be funded and finished, but they are going to be delayed until July 2027. They were actually committed to as an election commitment in 2022. So the budget papers say, ‘Look at us. Aren’t we fantastic? We’re funding these schools,’ some of them in my patch. They were an election commitment for 2022. There are various schools that have leaking roofs, that have shoddy classrooms, that have asbestos in them, that are underwhelming in the extreme and that are creating environments where it is more difficult for teachers to teach and for students to learn. This is occurring after the government made that commitment in 2022, and if we are lucky they will be completed – and we know how budget papers can get strung out, pushed, like we have seen in this particular argument today when this government said, ‘2028, sure. We’re going to kick the tin down the road until that funding in 2031.’

With those few comments I just want to finish off as one of the possibly few members of this house who has had the privilege of teaching students in a state classroom. We recognise the value of our state education. We recognise the incredible resource of our teachers and of our principals. We recognise the stress and strain that they are undergoing with the teacher vacancy rates that are there. Principals are struggling to get subject-specific teachers in front of the classroom. There is much need in terms of the learning support. There is much need in terms of integration and this particular funding, which will be now delayed again. It is a saviour for the government of \$2.4 billion but a loss to our students in Victoria, and that is a shame. We are happy to support this referral to the Legal and Social Issues Committee.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (16:38): I rise to contribute on the motion, which concerns the funding of the Allan Labor government’s investing in our public schools in Victoria. The Allan Labor government reached a historic agreement with the Albanese Labor government to fully fund public schools across Victoria. This will see public schools meeting the schooling resource standard as set out in the Gonski report back in 2011. Australians endured a decade of coalition rule when schools were chronically underfunded. Public services felt the cuts, and schools saw more students enrolling, teachers burning out and school infrastructure and facilities neglected. Now for the first time there is a strategy to ensure all public schools are receiving the full funding required under the framework set out by the Gonski review. It will see the federal government lift its share of public school funding from 20 per cent to 25 per cent. Meanwhile the Allan Labor government will move to fund 75 per cent of the schooling resource standard, or SRS, for its public schools. With the state contributing three-quarters and the federal government investing the remainder, we can see public schools given their full entitlement share and finally getting the funding they deserve.

The SRS is a benchmark set out by the Gonski report that determines the minimum funding required for schools to meet students’ educational needs. It provides a national framework for the apportionment of funding for schools based on their needs and forthcoming requirements, rather than arbitrary or disconnected formulas varying by state. This was and still is a great outcome for schools,

students, teachers and their families. SRS funding matters because it offers per-student funding, which can be guaranteed to all students' needs based on the sector.

Importantly, by giving each student a guarantee they will receive the funding that they deserve in the public system, public schools will do better and be able to compete with the independent sector in attracting and retaining high-achieving students. This is important because segregated education systems leave people behind. One of the most important indicators for how a student will perform in school is how their peers are, and if high achievers continue to be incentivised to leave the public sector, then all the other students in the public sector will suffer as well. The promise of Gonski is, as former Prime Minister Julia Gillard said, that demography is not destiny. It should not matter what part of Victoria you come from, what school you attend or how wealthy your parents are, all students in the state deserve to get a quality education and the opportunity to make something of themselves. It is an important principle and one that we on this side of the chamber would hope that everyone else in this place would join us in upholding and defending.

That is why the government worked so hard to negotiate a better deal with the Commonwealth, which was announced earlier this year. This agreement is a testament to the hard work of the Allan Labor government. My good friend the Minister for Education in the other place, Minister Carroll, has fought hard for Victorian schools, and the work he has put behind securing such an agreement with the Commonwealth government should be applauded by all sides of this chamber. This agreement secures over \$2.5 billion for public schools as we move towards fully funding them.

In 2014, when we first entered office, public schools were in dire need of investment. Victorian families had had to face three years of the state government cutting their education services. Their last budget delivered before this allocated \$11.6 billion in total towards education. To them, that was seen as a groundbreaking figure. To put it in context, in the 2025–26 budget, the Allan Labor government is investing an additional \$4.9 billion in a series of measures to help public schools further, and the budget also provides \$17.1 billion this year for the general continual operation of our public schools, kindergartens and more. Put together, that is around \$22 billion in this year's budget alone, to keep our schools running and to fund the continued expansion of our education system. That is nearly double what those opposite were proudly declaring they were spending on Victorian schools – doubled in just 10 years.

For the Allan Labor government, schools are an investment in our future and an investment in our kids and in our state, and it is to the benefit of everyone. But for those opposite, it is just another budget item, another thing on their checklist to shave down. Across the road from my electorate office in Southern Metropolitan is Prahran High School, a wonderful school that was closed down by Jeff Kennett when he was Premier. It was the then Andrews Labor government that reopened it, because we believe in building schools, not cutting them. Building up our schools and our education system has been the core mission of this Labor government, and we are proud to have a partner in Canberra that supports Victorian schools, rather than trimming them down to the bottom line and selling Victorian students short.

We promised to build 100 new schools across Victoria by 2026, and we are delivering. We have already opened 81 new schools, including six that opened for students at the start of this year. Nineteen more are on track to open in time for term 1 next year. Fifty per cent of the new schools being opened across Australia as of late can be found right here in Victoria, because we are a government that is committed to investing in education, building new schools and ensuring all students have the best education no matter what. Building more schools is necessary to having a properly functioning education system.

These schools will be covered by full funding of the SRS when the Commonwealth and state reach the agreed deadlines. That means every Victorian family is going to have the assurance that both the Victorian state government and the federal government are pushing towards funding our schools in their entirety. It means more resources and funding where they are critically needed. The needs-based

model of Gonski outlines a progressive future for our public schools, where our regions are not left behind and where all schools are getting the funding they need. That is the funding for school resources, facilities and crucial things that students need for a good education. That is textbooks, computers, software and more. It means a better education for all Victorians. This motion being moved by the Greens is nothing short of an attempt to grab the media's attention. It has no basis in the on-the-ground reality of the service we are delivering in education and overlooks the core facts. Most schools being built are Victorian. The amount that we are investing in education is growing each year, more than any other government, and we are partnered with the Commonwealth, which is helping us fully fund public schools in Victoria instead of tearing them down. We are doing our part to ensure that not only will every school have the resources they need to teach these students, there will be enough teachers to fill the classrooms.

The budget handed down by the Treasurer includes \$159 million to help attract, retain and support teachers in our schools. It also grants \$320 million to complete the statewide rollout of the disability inclusion reforms for schools, reiterating the Allan Labor government's commitment to seeing that every student gets the best start in life, no matter their circumstances, and \$130 million to drive excellence in reading, writing and maths at every level of their education. Our record on education speaks for itself. While the opposition cuts schools and cuts funding, the Allan Labor government builds and invests in our youngest Victorians. Every Victorian and every parent should be proud of this agreement with the Commonwealth securing a better future for our children.

The motion makes suggestions of a potential adverse consequence for Victoria's teaching workforce. This completely overlooks the fact that the budget invests \$68 million across a range of school workforce initiatives. That includes providing 200 scholarships to study secondary teaching in specialist subjects. It would also help pre-service teachers to be paid on placement, with funding for 70,000 placement days. It will continue Teach Today and Teach Tomorrow programs, which are supporting up to 1200 places in learn-on-the-job programs, which make it easy to study teaching while working on the job. The measures in the budget also provide for payments and support to encourage up to 280 teachers to relocate where they are needed most in Victoria. These are crucial programs which help support Victorian teachers and help attract teachers into our education system.

Despite the Allan Labor government's investment in education in the workforce, this motion overlooks the budget provisions entirely. The Allan Labor government has a proud record when it comes to education, whether it be the record funding for schools and teachers or the record cost-of-living relief helping more parents send their kids to school and participate in extracurriculars. The government is delivering for working Victorians, and it is delivering for our public schools with an agreement with the Commonwealth to ensure long-term investment and fully publicly funded schools under the framework of the schooling resource standard from the Gonski report. It is something every Victorian should be proud of across this and all sides of the chamber. This motion is a thinly veiled attempt to stall the Labor government and to catch some quick media headlines, not to provide anything constructive, and for that reason I will not be supporting the motion.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (16:47): I would like to just remind Mr Berger that he was talking about Prahran and school closures by the Kennett government, but it was actually Joan Kirner's government that closed Prahran Primary School in 1990. That was a Labor government. It was one of the proud achievements in education under a Labor government. I just thought I would take the member for a trip down memory lane. Also in his electorate was Brighton Technical School, which was closed by the Kirner Labor government in 1991. I am not sure if this is in the member's electorate as well, but Keysborough Secondary College was closed in 1992 by a Labor government. These poor members – Mr Berger and Mr McIntosh – having to come in here and defend a \$2.4 billion cut to education. Who did those two members annoy this week to have to get that gig? I mean, really. Mr McIntosh came in here and talked about that terrible Kennett government and what the Kennett government did that he might be able to remember, or perhaps he was just given some talking points

and they tried to set up this caricature of someone most people of voting age do not even remember and how terrible the Kennett government was for Eastern Victoria.

Members interjecting.

Evan MULHOLLAND: I remind Mr McIntosh and the members of this house for their reference that it was the Kirner government that did sell the state-owned Bank of Victoria, did sell off trains and trams here in Victoria and did sell off 51 per cent of Loy Yang B, beginning the process of electricity privatisation here in Victoria. He talked about Eastern Victoria and how bad the Kennett government and the 1990s were for Eastern Victoria. The Kirner government dramatically reduced staffing levels in the public service and government businesses, especially the SEC. Terrible for Eastern Victoria, Mr McIntosh, were those 1990s, with significant job sector eliminations and a huge reduction in public health services under the Kirner government.

On education, the Kirner government closed approximately 100 schools, which was often framed as a reorganisation rather than an outright closure. They like to blame Kennett. It was the Kirner government that set up the ratios and frameworks for the criteria for school closures or mergers. They did not get going with one or two after that framework; they got going on 100, and the Kennett government used that exact same framework. Mr McIntosh and members opposite might want to take a trip across the hall to the parliamentary library to find out for themselves what the 1990s were actually like and the devastating consequences when you cannot manage money. You send the state broke, and Victorians pay the price. If that side of the chamber want to talk about the 1990s, they need to go look in a mirror at Labor Party history.

Members interjecting.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): Order! There is enough shouting. Mr Mulholland to be heard in silence, please.

Evan MULHOLLAND: The Kirner government literally set up the framework and criteria for all the cuts and closures that that side of the chamber talk about: 100 school closures under the Kirner government, who literally set up the framework and criteria for closures. As I said, it was 100. That is not a small amount. It is not like they just had to do one or two. They did 100, including in Mr Berger's electorate. He talks about closures under the Kennett government. We know that they occurred under the Kirner government rather than the Kennett government, who were simply following the footsteps and the framework set out by a Labor government. It was similar to the process of privatisation, whether it be Loy Yang B or trains and trams – privatisation that Joan Kirner did. Those in the transport unions from across the chamber decry privatisation of our public assets in transport and then forget to look at Labor history. The one thing that the Labor Party seem to forget is that privatisation is actually deeply rooted in Labor Party DNA, whether it be shares at federal level in Telstra, whether it be flogging off the state bank to Keating, who then flogged it off to the Commonwealth Bank, VicRoads licensing assets or –

Richard Welch interjected.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Yes, Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria – all sorts of things were privatised under a Labor government. Privatisation really is in their DNA. They seem to decry this side of the chamber for cuts, closures and privatisation and forget the history and whitewash the history of Labor governments. We should not whitewash former Premiers; we should actually remember them, so I suggest the members across the chamber go to the parliamentary library and remember them fondly. They named a hospital after this Premier, but they are not willing to state publicly what this Premier and this Labor government actually did. They like to gloss over it. So I would like to thank Ms Gray-Barberio for bringing forward this motion, my colleague the Shadow Minister for Education Jess Wilson and also Dr Tim Read for their cooperation in putting together this very important motion for referral to the Legal and Social Issues Committee.

Let us get the facts on the table. Labor secretly cut \$2.4 billion from public school funding by delaying the rollout of the Gonski education reforms in Victoria. Victoria had pledged to fully fund schools to meet the schooling resource standard by 2028. This target has now been pushed back under a revised timeline, meaning Victorian schools will, between now and 2031, receive \$2.4 billion less in government funding than they otherwise would have. It also means Victoria will receive less in federal funding as the Commonwealth's increased contribution is contingent upon states meeting their funding commitments. The AEU has called this a disaster for public school staff and students. Many who are in school today will completely miss out on receiving their full funding because they will have finished school by the time that Victoria meets the full SRS funding amount. Victoria delaying the Gonski reform agreement puts us three years behind Queensland and six years behind New South Wales. This is what happens when you cannot manage money: Victorians pay the price, and in this case we have had a savage cut to education.

Even I was shocked when I read that cabinet subcommittee documents were leaked. They are meant to be secure classified cabinet subcommittee documents. Someone is clearly trying to do a hit somewhere, and we see the Premier-in-waiting Ben Carroll was rolled by the Premier and the former Treasurer in that cabinet subcommittee, which was a test of his authority – and this whole debacle is a test of his authority. I think the Legal and Social Issues Committee should invite Mr Carroll over to this inquiry. We have a bizarre situation where the Treasurer in this house is able to freely stroll over to the Legislative Assembly to give a budget speech but the Premier cannot do the same for our committees to explain her role in the torching of \$600 million on the Commonwealth Games, so it clearly does not go both ways. When Labor wastes money like \$600 million for us to go and watch the Glasgow Commonwealth Games, somebody has to pay for that, and in this case, it is our school students that have paid the price – \$2.4 billion – because Labor cannot manage money.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (16:57): I am thankful for the opportunity to get up today and speak in opposition to the motion moved by the Greens calling for yet another inquiry, this time into the impact of the government's contributions to education. As I am sure has been said by those on this side before me, this is not a cut to education funding; this is a government clearly delivering staged and sustained investment into public education. There have been no cuts. In fact under the Allan Labor government education funding in Victoria continues to grow year on year, and the most recent state budget reflects that, with \$2.9 billion more in education investment, including a \$1.5 billion investment in school infrastructure alone. The motion is misleading. I believe it is unnecessary, and it is a duplication of work that has already been undertaken by this Parliament.

I will take a moment to acknowledge the enormous work of the members of the Legal and Social Issues Committee. I know that today we indeed moved to add new members to that because the workload is so big. In fact only a few months ago that committee in all their work delivered a thorough and comprehensive inquiry into the state education system. That report and inquiry covered funding issues in detail, and the government has already tabled its response in fact, including a clear commitment in that to lifting Victoria's contribution from 20 to 25 per cent of the schooling resource standard. We are absolutely not here to play politics with schools; we are here to build a better education system, and that is exactly what the Allan Labor government is doing.

The facts are that education funding in Victoria has not been cut since 2014–15, the Victorian government has increased real recurrent funding per student in government schools by 34 per cent, the highest increase of any state or territory – that is not a reduction, that is sustained investment – and since 2015 we have opened 123 new government schools. In the next year alone that will be added to by 19, a record for any Australian state in modern history. This is in addition to the more than 2300 school upgrades delivered and on top of the \$18.5 billion invested in capital works for schools since 2014. Victoria is absolutely leading the nation in infrastructure delivery for public education, not just in the quantity but importantly in the quality. And we have done that without the Commonwealth government, frankly, pulling its weight; 99 per cent of the capital investment in our public school system is borne by the state, and members on this side know that the Commonwealth government

contributes just 1 per cent. That is the imbalance, fair and simple, and that is what we have been working so, so hard to fix.

The path to 100 per cent of the schooling resource standard is now locked in. In January this year Victoria signed the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement with the Commonwealth government. As part of that agreement the Commonwealth will lift its funding share from 20 per cent to 25 per cent of the SRS for government schools, and Victoria will do the same, lifting our share from 70 per cent to 75 per cent. That agreement puts every Victorian school on the pathway to full and fair funding. Let us not forget this agreement only happened because of relentless advocacy here in Victoria, led of course by this Labor government.

The Commonwealth government actually first put forward a 2.5 per cent growth cap on education funding. Victoria firmly said no. Our Deputy Premier joined other state education ministers on the lawns of Parliament House. I had the good fortune of actually being in Parliament that day, and I saw just how riled up he was – the Minister for Education in our state was not going to take no for an answer. He went up to Canberra to make firmly known the views of Victorian parents, Victorian educators and the Victorian school community. It is something that very rarely happens, but when it did, my gosh, he was heard. It was Victoria's advocacy that led to the revised 5 per cent offer. It was Victoria that signed the agreement to ensure that funding flows in an orderly, staged and responsible way. That is how we get results: not by stunts, not by empty motions and certainly not by reheating issues that have already been through a committee.

I have heard the arguments. I hear them repeated by those opposite, and I have got to say it is extraordinary for me to see the Liberals and the Greens and their work around championing public education, because I am reminded so much of what happened under the Kennett Liberal government with the closure of 350 public schools, the sacking of thousands of teachers, the stories of which I could have told time and time again. They ripped a billion dollars out of the education budget. Something that I am often reminded of as I visit schools that enjoy the free breakfast program, a very well loved program in our schools, is the scrapping of Free Fruit Friday. These were real cuts that hurt kids, and they are remembered.

And let us not forget: when the Liberals had a chance to lock in the Gonski reforms federally they scrapped the Commonwealth debt cap and gutted future education funding. These are the same Liberals now calling for debt caps and pretending to care about our schoolkids. We cannot have it; it is not okay. I have got to say, when the education minister did go to Canberra and met with other education ministers to make the case, there he was with a sea of other Labor MPs. Were there MPs from other parties, including the Greens? Well, no, they were not there. In this term alone the Greens, I think it is worth reinforcing, have not asked the Minister for Education a single question during question time – not one – yet now they are putting this inquiry referral right above us. Because we are doing the hard yards of government, it is common for members to ask questions of ministers in the other place; I understand and respect that. In fact only today we had members of the crossbench asking questions of ministers in the other place.

In this year's budget alone we are delivering millions of dollars, including \$133 million to improve learning outcomes, including through early numeracy checks and improved literacy support. We are investing in our teachers, with \$158 million to attract, retain and support the workforce, including through programs like Teach Today and Teach Tomorrow, mentoring for our graduates and grants for regional placements – and it goes on. Only last week in the budget there was the incredible announcement of the \$400 payment per student from 2026 for the Camp, Sports and Excursions Fund, one that I know will be enormously popular with students in the Northern Metropolitan Region. This is to complement the existing suite of programs being offered to support students in state education, including free school breakfasts, glasses being available through the Glasses for Kids program, dental check-ups, swimming lessons and sanitary products in schools. They all go towards helping with the cost of living for families. What we are doing is committing to free, accessible, world-class public education, not just in words but absolutely in action.

We have had an inquiry. The Legal and Social Issues Committee produced a detailed report last year on the state education system, including on the issues now raised in the motion before us. The government has responded. Next week the minister will be in front of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, and that is the proper forum for budget and funding scrutiny. I will certainly take my opportunity to tune in. To reopen this for another committee process would be wasteful. It would tie up valuable parliamentary resources on a matter that is already being addressed through government policy and through ongoing negotiation with the government and the Commonwealth. Let us use our committee time for what it is meant for: issues that have not already been investigated. Let us not double up. What we hear time and time again is that the work of that committee is enormous, so let us respect our colleagues who have already contributed to a prior inquiry on this matter.

I say that we are absolutely, without doubt, proud of our record. We are the only state where vocational education is growing every year. We are leading the country in the rollout of three-year-old kinder, in school upgrades and in new school delivery, and we are doing this while pushing for a fairer deal from Canberra – not just for ourselves but for every child in a government school. Can I just say that we will not be lectured by those who abandoned public education when they were in government or ignored it when they had a chance to show leadership. We are going to stay the course each and every day. We will deliver on our commitments and will always fight for what is full and fair funding – not through motions and not through stunts but through sustained investment, effective advocacy and always standing up for the Victorian education system and the children within it. I strongly oppose this motion, and I urge others in this place to do so as well.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:07): I am pleased to stand and speak to this motion, which we will be supporting. I guess the real problem is when you talk the talk but do not walk the walk. Certainly in terms of a commitment to education in this state, the Labor government has abandoned it. You do not rip \$2 billion out of a sector and not expect that there are going to be significant consequences. We already know that schools are underfunded. When the government talk about investment in schools, sometimes what they are describing as investment is actually just making the toilets hygienic. They call that investment. It is basic plumbing. Basic plumbing in a school is an investment.

Sonja Terpstra: When have you ever set foot in a public school? Like, never.

Richard WELCH: I will take up that interjection. When did I? Well, I went to a country state primary school. My father was a principal. He committed the whole of his professional life to public education. I grew up in a household that knew intimately what the value of education was to our community –

Sonja Terpstra interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Ms Terpstra, please.

Richard WELCH: The whole idea was that we must educate our children because they will need the skills that create wealth for the next generation and for their own families. Do not lecture me on the importance of public education. I was there in 1990 when the Kirner government closed down schools. I was there when the money disappeared because of the Labor government's mismanagement. There is a human consequence to these cuts, a human consequence that you wanted to hide.

Sonja Terpstra interjected.

Richard WELCH: On a point of order, President, I am only shouting because I feel I have to.

The PRESIDENT: Ms Terpstra, can you please desist from interjecting. Mr Welch, can you direct your contribution through the Chair, please.

Richard WELCH: I will endeavour to do so. Thank you for that. Education is an investment in the future. If you take the investment away now, then it will have an amplified effect going forward in

the future. Mr Batchelor, I believe, in his contribution said that by simply highlighting this we are sowing fear and division in the community. No, it is not fear. People know what is happening. And it is not division. People are actually solidly united in their concern about these cuts.

Sonja Terpstra interjected.

Richard WELCH: Far from it – they have knowledge and are united on what is actually happening here, because you can only do creative accounting for so long and you can only hollow out state institutions' and bodies' internal funding for so long before the cracks begin to show on the facade. This is certainly one where it has been revealed as a betrayal of our next generation.

It is typical of a state government that has forgotten that as a state we need to compete. We need to compete with the other states in Australia. We need to compete in the world. Now, our funding is the worst. The state of our schools is the worst. How can you describe yourself as the Education State if you are at the bottom? It is reflected in the data, too, because NAPLAN shows us that 30 per cent of students are failing to meet basic standards in English and mathematics and overall outcomes are ranked first or second in 11 out of 20 categories, down from 16 in the previous year. We fail our disadvantaged students. We expect our teachers to take on more and more responsibilities every year in the classroom to manage a whole different range of students and tasks they were never previously required to do. But we are doing that with one hand, and then we are yanking out \$2 billion from them with the other. Parents are paying more in public schooling. Parents are paying more and more for extra fees – you take \$2 billion out, and then you graciously hand back \$400 for excursion fees.

Tom McIntosh: What are you going to offer people, Mr Welch?

Richard WELCH: Why? Why was that necessary? You, Mr McIntosh, constantly ask us what we are going to cut. Why was this necessary in the first place? Why did you need to cut? The question goes back to you. If we needed to save money in the education system, surely we could have looked at the Victorian School Building Authority – surely, that train wreck of an organisation that every school principal I have spoken to has said is an obstacle to what they need to do. But of course it is a choice, because when you needed to fund the SRL, when you had a choice between funding the SRL and funding education, this government chose the SRL. Every area it cut was a choice between the people of Victoria, the students of Victoria, and the SRL – and it chose the SRL.

Members interjecting.

Richard WELCH: You are the government. Have you forgotten?

Sonja Terpstra: On a point of order, President, I just remind Mr Welch again to direct his comments through the Chair. He is directly addressing Mr Berger over here. Also, the second point of order is the SRL has nothing to do with this motion.

The PRESIDENT: Let us just move on for the 24 seconds Mr Welch has left.

Richard WELCH: All cuts are the choice of government, and the government has made a very conscious choice not to fund schools but to fund the SRL. That is a choice that the next generation now lives with.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (17:13): I would like to say thank you to everyone in the chamber for their contributions on this notice of motion. I would like to emphasise that this referral to the Legal and Social Issues Committee is not a duplicate of what has already been done; this is to address the delayed school funding of 75 per cent of the schooling resource standard as well as cutting \$2.4 billion from the public education system. Now, the implications of these cuts and the delayed funding – we know exactly the communities and the cohorts of children, teachers and schools that are going to be directly impacted by these decisions. The budget is about decisions. It is about choices. This government has chosen to cut \$2.4 billion from the public school education system. And what is the fallout of that? Well, we are also saying to the younger generation, our young

students who deserve a fair go, 'Your education is not that important, not right now.' What we are also saying is 'We're not going to invest in the public education system. We're not going to invest in your future, because what's more important to us are things like the grand prix and like the prison system.' My colleague Rachel Payne has already stated that we are moving further away from being the Education State and moving into the dangerous territory of being known as the prison state, and that is shameful. We cannot go down that pathway.

We need to invest in our public education system, and by investing in our public education system we would also be investing in a stronger intergenerational outcome for families and communities. What we are saying to disadvantaged students is that we are going to concentrate disadvantage in public schools. That cannot be okay. This is not a matter of grandstanding or a grab at cheap headlines. No, this is about the future of our children, who are cherished members of our society. Any implication or inference that it is beyond that – we care. The Greens care. Everyone that has spoken to this motion in support of it cares. We have heard from Ms Bath, who is a former teacher with lived experience, about what is happening on the ground. Funding for capital works is not enough; we need to be funding curriculums. You only need to go 10 kilometres north into my Northern Metro electorate, where you have got students that are being shipped around from one high school to another because the curriculum is getting more and more narrow in their schools. What does that mean for the future? There is economic cost and risk when we withdraw constantly from the public education system.

I urge this Labor government to come to the table. Do you want to speak about delivery? Then stop taking away from the kids that really need it most – Indigenous kids, kids with disability, kids from a lower socio-economic status. The Gonski reforms are all about addressing equity and quality. That is something that we need to be thinking about when we are thinking about public education systems. Investing in our public education system goes beyond capital projects. It is about our teachers, it is about our communities and it is about our younger generation and the message that we are sending to them.

Motion agreed to.

Business of the house

Notices of motion and orders of the day

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:18): I move:

That the consideration of the remaining notices of motion and orders of the day, general business, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Statements on tabled papers and petitions

Austin Health

Report 2023–24

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:18): I rise to speak on the Austin Health annual report 2023–24, a report that is more than a collation of clinical activities and financial data. It is in fact a compelling reflection of how a publicly funded health service underpinned by the principles of equity, innovation and care can transform lives and strengthen communities. As I noted in the last sitting week while I spoke about the Northern Health annual report, annual reports are too often reduced to mere numbers – things like presentations, bed counts and budgets. However, behind every statistic is a story – a patient reassured, a life saved, a family supported and a community made healthier and more secure. Behind those stories are public health professionals, some of whom I got to meet in my recent visit to the Austin Hospital and the Olivia Newton-John Cancer Wellness & Research Centre. The skill and dedication that were on display during my visit are matched by the enduring support of the Allan Labor government, which understands that what really matters is universal, accessible, high-quality health care.

At the heart of Austin Health stands the Austin Hospital, which is one of our state's most important institutions and a cornerstone of care for Melbourne's north-east. It boasts one of the busiest emergency departments in our state. With more than 550 beds, including a 29-bed intensive care unit and 78 dedicated mental health beds, Austin Health continues to deliver complex specialist care across a broad range of medical disciplines. Its service is marked not only by its scale but also by the humanity that goes along with it. As I said, its emergency department is one of the largest. It served almost 87,000 Victorians last year, and it is an anchor point for people in moments of crisis. However, Austin Health understands that it is not enough to simply meet that growing demand. It must also meet people where they are and with dignity. That is why the Allan Labor government has invested \$275 million to expand the emergency department at the Austin Hospital. This investment is not just an upgrade in infrastructure but a reaffirmation of values. With 29 additional treatment spaces, a purpose-built paediatric zone and improved clinical areas, this project will enable the ED to treat 30,000 more patients each year. Importantly, the design includes culturally safe spaces enriched with Aboriginal artwork to foster a sense of healing and cultural respect for our First Nations people. That is what progressive health care looks like – not just faster care, but fairer care and care underpinned by humanity.

The Olivia Newton-John Cancer Wellness & Research Centre remains a national leader in integrated cancer care. With more than 200 clinical trials and internationally recognised expertise in immunotherapy and precision medicine, the centre exemplifies the best of modern oncology. Yet what truly sets it apart is its holistic approach to care. Its wellness programs, many supported through community initiatives like Olivia's Walk for Wellness, ensure that patients receive not only medical treatment but emotional, psychological and spiritual support when they need it, because we know that when people are at their most vulnerable, care must be complete.

The report also highlights how Austin Health is embracing digital transformation to improve safety and responsiveness. Through the Victorian health incident management system automation project, more than 90 per cent of Victorian health services now report clinical incidents in real time. The system accelerates intervention, reduces harm and makes care safer. The implementation of the Safewards model, a best-practice framework to reduce conflict in acute settings, has led to a 20 per cent reduction in restraint use and has strengthened the trust between patients and healthcare workers.

I had the privilege of visiting Austin Health recently and seeing firsthand one of the most forward-thinking initiatives in Victorian health care, which is the virtual emergency department. The virtual ED allows patients to speak to a nurse or medical practitioner from the safety and comfort of their own home. It is quick, accessible and changing the way we think about urgent care. I am proud to say that the Allan Labor government has recognised its success and potential. As part of the 2025–26 Victorian budget Premier Jacinta Allan and Minister for Health Mary-Anne Thomas have announced a \$437 million investment to permanently expand the virtual ED. This will nearly triple its capacity, enabling more than 1750 Victorians to access free 24/7 urgent care by 2028–29.

Finally, the report shines a light on Austin Health's pioneering work in virtual wards. The Hospital in the Home virtual care teams are now managing Victoria's first cardiac and haematology wards. Using wearable monitoring devices, patients can receive hospital-level care in their homes, supported by expert clinicians. More than 350 patients have already benefited from these services. It is a fantastic report, and I was very pleased and proud to be able to attend the hospital to see all of these fantastic initiatives and see them so well funded and supported by this government. I commend this report to the Council and to all Victorians who believe in the enduring value of a strong, accessible and world-class public health system.

Department of Treasury and Finance

Budget papers 2025–26

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (17:23): I rise to speak on the 2025–26 state budget, particularly on budget paper 3, which is service delivery. The reason I rise to speak on this particular

budget paper is because this budget paper actually raises some money for biosecurity. This was a budget that, of course, our Premier and our Treasurer billed as being focused on what matters most. But clearly regional Victoria, and particularly our horticulture industry, does not matter to Jacinta Allan or to Treasurer Jaclyn Symes, because in this budget they have cut a program that supports our horticultural industry – a program that the industry and local government made very clear that they needed \$1 million in funding per annum for. That is the very highly successful fruit fly eradication program. On page 30 of budget paper 3, the paper actually says that:

Funding is provided to safeguard Victoria's agriculture sector from biosecurity threats including:

...

- supporting existing regional fruit fly governance groups in the Goulburn Murray Valley Sunraysia and the Yarra Valley.

The budget line item for this output initiative is on page 28, and it says that a total of \$20 million is provided over two years, with \$7.3 million in the 2025–26 year and \$9.4 million in the 2026–27 year. It says that the funding envelope also covers biosecurity surveillance and diagnostic capability as well as responses to varroa mite and avian flu. But neither the line item nor the description specifies exactly how much is available for the fruit fly program. This is a program that local government have made clear and the industry have made clear that they needed \$1 million for. But what Greater Shepparton City Council have been able to find out – and they told this to the *Shepparton News* – is that they have received confirmation that the amount for fruit fly in 2025–26 is only \$320,000. No-one knows how much has been allocated in the 2026–27 year, and of course there is no funding in the forward estimates beyond that, so we do not know if the government will continue to fund it after 2027.

The uncertainty around this funding is deeply worrying for the horticultural industry in my constituency. The fruit fly management program has been incredibly successful in the Goulburn Murray Valley region. It reduced fruit fly numbers by 95 per cent in its first year and 60 per cent in its second year. But since the government reduced the funding in 2020, fruit fly numbers have started to rise again, and the initial success is now at risk because the Allan government is not adequately funding the program in this year's budget, and it may just end it all, with funding not allocated beyond 2027.

Fruit fly expert and specialist Andrew Jessup has warned that if the program ends fruit fly numbers are expected to increase by 200 per cent in the best-case scenario and over 600 per cent in the worst-case scenario. Growers invest significantly in managing fruit fly risk on orchards, but the real threat is from backyard fruit trees that will go unmanaged and unmonitored. Horticulture in the Goulburn Murray Valley region generates over \$1.6 billion in gross regional product, and all the industry asked for was an ongoing commitment of \$1 million annually. But the Allan Labor government has short-changed the fruit fly program and only allocated \$320,000, and we do not know how much beyond that.

They appallingly also left it so late to confirm that there would be some funding for next year. Local government, who administer the project, have staff who are dependent on this funding. It is now just 22 days before the end of the financial year, and they know that there is \$320,000 for next year, but who knows if there is anything moving forward? The level of funding places the good work of the project at risk, and we already know that fruit fly numbers have increased since the original funding was reduced in 2020. This allocation will ensure that the effectiveness of the program declines further and fruit fly numbers increase, so it is extremely short-sighted and certainly shows that this government do not care about the horticultural industry or regional Victoria.

Select Committee on Victoria Planning Provisions Amendments VC257, VC267 and VC274

Inquiry into Victoria Planning Provisions Amendments VC257, VC267 and VC274

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (17:28): I take the opportunity to rise today to deliver a statement on the Select Committee on Victoria Planning Provision Amendments VC257, VC267 and VC274 report, which was tabled here in the last sitting week. The Allan Labor government's bold planning reforms are reforms that are not only necessary but essential to securing a sustainable housing

future for Victoria. At a time when so many Victorians are being locked out of the housing market, the government has chosen to act decisively. The amendments VC257, GC252, VC267 and VC274 represent the most significant overhaul of our planning system in decades. They are not only abstract ideas – let me be clear on that – they are the result of an unprecedented process of community engagement and expert input. More than 110,000 Victorians took part in the *Plan for Victoria* process, with over 10,000 contributing specifically to the activity centre reforms. These are not just reforms for the people, they are reforms shaped by the people. VC257 and GC252 provide the foundations for delivering over 60,000 homes across 10 pilot activity centres strategically chosen for their access to jobs, to schools, to health care and to public transport. These amendments cut red tape and give the industry clarity and consistency, and that is just the beginning. They lay the groundwork for expansion to 15 more centres, unlocking space for over 300,000 new homes.

The new Townhouse and Low-rise Code – that is, VC267 – sets a consistent statewide framework for small and medium-density housing. For the first time builders and councils will have a clear set of standards that will include better setbacks, more tree canopy, improved room sizes and stronger requirements for natural light, accessibility and livability. These are the kinds of homes we should expect and demand for a growing state like Victoria.

Then of course there is VC274, which was also investigated as part of this select committee inquiry. One of the most transformative reforms of all, it is designed to unlock 70,000 homes around six new stations on the Suburban Rail Loop. This project is not just about homes, it is about creating whole communities. These are mixed-use precincts that bring jobs, services and open space together, delivering housing where people want and need to live.

These reforms are about speeding up delivery, because we know that too many good developments are delayed or derailed by lengthy appeal processes. The townhouse code will reduce the burden on VCAT, where one in three applications in some areas are currently being appealed. This adds cost, time and incredible complexity to these projects. Fewer delays means faster approvals and more affordable homes.

I am very happy to let the chamber know that these changes do not compromise quality. In fact they have set the strongest environmental and design standards we have ever seen, from rooftop solar and energy efficiency to improved stormwater management and increased tree canopy. These amendments ensure that new homes are fit for the future, sustainable, livable and environmentally friendly.

These reforms enjoy the support of experts and industry alike, from the Grattan Institute and Infrastructure Victoria to the Property Council of Australia, UDIA Victoria and even members of the Liberals for Housing group. This is not partisan planning, it is smart, future-focused policy, and it is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape our planning system to meet the needs of a growing and changing Victoria. In doing so we have sent a message: the government has a role to play in shaping inclusive, connected and affordable communities. The government is absolutely on the side of renters, first home buyers, families and downsizers; on the side of builders and tradies who want to get to work and want to build communities; and on the side of those communities that want certainty, good design and access to opportunity. We will not allow delays, scare campaigns or political games to derail the important work of building more homes for more Victorians, because every day that we hesitate is another day a young person gives up on owning a home or a family are forced further from the places that they love and are connected to. This government will keep building homes because that is what we are absolutely committed to doing, because the alternative is the status quo, and that is simply not good enough.

National parks

Petition

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:33): I have just a few words to say on a very good petition that my colleague Ms Lovell presented to the Parliament this week which relates to the request that

the Legislative Council call on the government to not create Wombat–Lerderderg National Park or Mount Buangor National Park and to keep those state forests open for public access and enjoyment. Indeed the petition puts some very good parameters and a compelling case as to why it is a very good idea to keep them open and not lock them up. If we total up recent petitions – the one that I presented to Parliament with 40,000 signatures of Victorians saying no to any new national parks, the one with roughly 29,000 from my colleague in the lower house the member for Narracan and Ms Lovell’s – we end up with 80,000 people saying no to new national parks. To be very clear on this to the house, this does not mean no to active management. It does not mean no to enjoyment, conservation or the rest. It means: let us keep the status quo.

Back when I first came in here there were rallies on the streets out the front of Parliament on this, and there were people saying that we need to keep those state forests open. There are 80,000 signatures, and it is about 80,000 hectares that is about to be locked up. I understand that this government is saying things like, ‘It’s a historical commitment.’ Well, it was not. It was a commitment by a former minister, Minister D’Ambrosio, and I am sure there are people out there in Victoria who have varying thoughts on Minister D’Ambrosio. But we have a new minister, Minister Dimopoulos, and he can make a choice. It is not written in stone. He can make that choice to not go ahead with this legislation.

Some of the most wonderful things can happen in state parks that cannot happen in national parks. We love our national parks, but they exclude certain activities. They certainly exclude people from free and dispersed camping. They exclude people from taking their dog in and camping with their family. They exclude people from having a little campfire and looking after it, communing with nature in that way. They certainly exclude the prospectors and miners overwhelmingly from going into a national park and doing what they do – and prospectors and miners do this very well in this area of Mount Wombat and Lerderderg. Indeed I have been contacted by prospectors and miners who are very concerned about this government’s new – you will never guess – fee grab, new proposition, concerned that they are going to increase the individual Victorian miner’s right licence by, get this, 234 per cent.

This government is a government of tax rises, tax increases and new taxes, as we have seen, and this one is up 234 per cent. Now, it is an individual miner’s right licence, and in my mind it is a bit like a fishing licence. You can have it for a short period of time – someone can go out there and get their licence online and have a great day out with their family and see, have a taste test, whether they actually like to do this fossicking and prospecting – or you can have it for quite some time, for that year. If you are going to put an impost, an increase, on that licence of 234 per cent, you are going to get people who make those choices not to get a licence and therefore to potentially, sadly, participate illegally. We do not want that. We want these sorts of outdoor activities, the Liberals and Nationals, to remain outdoor activities and for families to get together.

What we also know of course is that the recreational activities like prospecting and fossicking in these state parks are a wonderful opportunity for regional growth and regional prosperity. The local small towns have people come in, they buy their petrol, they buy their local groceries, they go out into the bush, they experience nature and they leave it – and I know this is a very strong commitment of the Prospectors and Miners Association of Victoria – in a better place than when they found it. They often take out glass, or sometimes they will find some little treasures, and certainly they will take the rubbish out with them. I commend them, and I call on the government to – yes, they are doing an investigation – investigate and then say no to this 234 per cent increase in licence fees.

Environment and Planning Committee

Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (17:38): I rise to make a statement on the Environment and Planning Committee’s inquiry report into the 2022 flood event in Victoria, which we tabled in July 2024. There has been a lot of discussion about emergency services, about the need and support for emergency services in the community recently, and given that the October 2022 flood event was the most significant that we have seen in Victorian recorded history, it is an opportune time

to reflect on some of the recommendations that the committee made in its report in July last year. One of the critical things that the committee recommended was that our emergency services need to be better resourced.

We know that the flood event in particular in October 2022 was during the state's wettest month on record and a disaster that affected thousands right across the state – rural communities, metropolitan communities. And it is clear in the evidence we received in the committee's inquiry and as detailed in the report, from both emergency responders and from climate scientists, it is undeniable, that climate change is increasing cataclysmic weather events and increasing the risks of living in Victoria, whether they be from fire or storms or floods. As the control agency for storms and floods and other events, the Victoria State Emergency Service plays a really significant role in emergency response for the state. Our report found the work of the volunteers was critical in that flood response in 2022. The report goes on to say that:

To ensure the Victoria SES can effectively fulfil its emergency management responsibilities, it is essential that they are adequately resourced, both in terms of equipment and increasing operational volunteers.

We had evidence from right across the state to support that. Gannawarra Shire Council stated:

... VICSES did not have the resources to respond ...

Rural Councils Victoria emphasised:

... a need for more volunteers and better resources, such as vehicles and other equipment, to improve the SES' operational capacity during natural disasters.

I am pleased that the government, following that disastrous flooding event and following the recommendations of the parliamentary committee report, recognised that particularly the VICSES needed more certainty about its resourcing and needed additional resourcing in order to better support its volunteers and also get the equipment that it needed. The government recognised that those extra resources were needed to make sure that the VICSES and local search and rescue can continue to play that fundamentally important role in emergency response at any time of the year. The recent legislating of the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund demonstrates the government's commitment.

I want to reflect today in this contribution on the work that our committee did to thank the VICSES as an organisation and its volunteers for the work that they did, both back in that flooding event of October 2022 but also more recently in suburban Melbourne when we saw that massive storm event that ripped through parts of metropolitan Melbourne. I was down at the Glen Eira SES not long after that event and spoke to them about the importance of and their need for additional support and resources. The government has acted, the government has listened and the government through the changes that it has made to introduce the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund is providing additional resources to our emergency service organisations, including to the VICSES. The report of our committee shone a light on just how important those resources are. I wanted to make sure that all of us who participated in that committee do not forget those recommendations.

Victorian Auditor-General's Office

Managing Disruptions Affecting Victoria's Public Transport Network

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (17:43): I rise to speak on the Victorian Auditor-General's Office's *Managing Disruptions Affecting Victoria's Public Transport Network*. We have seen quite a few today with the bus strike, and that has affected many in my community. I actually have sympathy for those workers in the Transport Workers' Union. The government is actually seeking to blame the bus operators, and the bus operators are quite rightly pointing the blame fairly and squarely in the government's corner – at least the last remaining bus operators that this government has not run out of town.

It is important to note, just like in the local government portfolio or other portfolios, the effect government cost shifting has on the lives of everyday Victorians. We have seen another example of

that today, where the government seeks to wash its hands of the responsibility of paying our bus drivers properly. Many of the bus drivers in my community live in my community – the bus drivers that operate the local routes. I think it is really important to express solidarity with them, because what they are going through is a result of this government's inability to manage money. When they cannot manage money, somebody has to pay the price, and unfortunately it is both bus drivers and commuters today that are paying the price.

While I am on the topic of buses, I want to talk about public transport – or the lack of it – and buses that consistently get raised with me in the growth areas, particularly places like Greenvale and Kalkallo, some of the fastest growing suburbs and towns across the state. One bus route that gets raised with me very often is the 525 bus from Craigieburn to Donnybrook, covering a huge, huge growth area. It desperately needs to be expanded to cover new estates. Think of a very long housing estate full of thousands of people, and it only goes about the first couple of hundred metres, but the estate goes for 2 kilometres. This is what the people of the north, particularly in Kalkallo, have been left with. I have been advocating to the government to extend that particular bus route up Dwyer Street and then around on the new Cloverton Boulevard. But also there are many schools in both Mickleham and Kalkallo where the bus stops do not have bus shelters. So you get a day like today and you have got literally 50 kids standing there in weather like today in the freezing cold, waiting for a bus and when a bus gets cancelled they are waiting for upwards of an hour. Many parents have raised that particular one with me.

I also want to raise the point about Hidden Valley, which is a town in Wallan. Over 2300 people have got a flash and growing retirement living place there, and it does not have a single bus to the main centre of town. Many residents advocate to me and I advocate on their behalf for a bus for Hidden Valley. It is not good enough that there is not one. We have weasel words from the member for Kalkallo and the member for Yan Yean about a bus for Hidden Valley, and nothing seems to occur. Certainly nothing occurred in this budget as well.

We need the government to take a good look at this, and as my colleague Ms Lovell raised today in her constituency question, we need better car parking spaces at Donnybrook station. Donnybrook station serves a huge area, from people in Mickleham to Kalkallo in my electorate to Donnybrook in Ms Lovell's electorate to places like Woodstock as well, and the car parking situation is not good enough. You have had about 30 spaces a year added, and it is really a drop in the ocean compared to the massive population growth this area is going through. Constituents contact me and Ms Lovell about how residential streets are just littered with cars because the car park is full. The car park is full often from about 7:15 in the morning. And this is also a station, remember, that is the last on the V/Line track that is still V/Line. V/Line calls itself Australia's fastest growing regional rail network. It is only because you have not bloody electrified any rail lines to our growing communities that need them. So the government should also look at car parks around Donnybrook station for this growing community.

Petitions

Waste and recycling management

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:48): I move:

That the petition be taken into consideration.

This is a David and Goliath fight, a community standing together against big government and big business to protect their homes and their community. The proposed waste transfer station in Hampton Park is not just unpopular, it has been categorically rejected, and that is why today people have come out from their homes. We have a mayor, a deputy and councillors here as well who have joined us. Over 6200 residents have provided petitions, objections and submissions. They are parents, business owners, families and migrants living in Lynbrook, Hampton Park, Narre Warren South, Lyndhurst and Cranbourne North. The residents understand the need for a place to dump waste, but it should not be acceptable for any responsible government to allow this to be located near homes, schools or in a

residential area. The new Casey councillors agree and unanimously voted for the government to move this facility to another location. If VCAT overturns the EPA's refusal and allows this waste station to go ahead in this area, the government needs to defend the EPA's decision, because the location is inappropriate and there are genuine health, safety and environmental concerns.

I thank the people of the Lynbrook Residents Association here today, Hampton Park Progress, the Casey Residents & Ratepayers Association, the 'We Say No' campaign and all of the councillors and people. When the community cried out, Labor state MPs were nowhere to be found. Only after massive public pressure, supported by my work in this place, did the member for Narre Warren South finally acknowledge the community's concerns. The Minister for Planning claims the matter is out of her hands, but her government laid the foundations for this project. It was Victorian Labor's plans on recycling and waste infrastructure which identified this site in a residential area as a waste hub in 2018. It required community consultation, but people's concerns have been ignored, and there are no protections that can be practically implemented with it being only 54 metres away from people's homes.

How hypocritical is this government? The Minister for Energy and Resources publicly opposes a waste-to-energy facility in Wollert, neighbouring her electorate, despite masterminding these plans. Meanwhile the Deputy Prime Minister opposed one in Lara, the area which he represents in federal Parliament. If this facility was no good for the people of Wollert or Lara, why is it acceptable for the people in my community? While we support recycling and waste into energy, these facilities need to be positioned away from residential areas. Sporting clubs, schools and community groups like Lynbrook Primary, the Hampton Park Junior Football Club and the Hazara Shamama Association are concerned about the risk to their community and young people and feel they have been ignored. No material about the waste facility has been provided in any language other than English.

The 2015 Hampton Park development plan identified the site for parkland, but the Labor-appointed Casey council administrators approved a revised development plan earmarking the land as a major waste hub despite overwhelming public objections. In November 2024 council officers granted planning permission just three business days before the new councillors were sworn in – no public notice, no consultation and no third-party appeal rights allowed. There were no environmental or social significant impact assessments. Shockingly, Casey council granted planning permission while allegedly being involved with a south-east waste processing company. In recent correspondence the company's chair confirmed that an agreement was signed on the basis that the Hampton Park transfer station would be able to gain a permit for operation. Residents and councillors have been told that there are no exit clauses in the contract. This is a breach of public trust.

Recently the EPA refused Veolia's licence, citing unacceptable risks to human health and the environment. Concerns include soil and water contamination and battery-related fires. Toxic waste has been known to cause sleeplessness, anxiety and impaired childhood development. Pollutants such as volatile organic compounds, methane and harmful bacteria have been shown to cause respiratory illnesses, cardiovascular problems and cognitive harm. International data has demonstrated links between birth defects and toxic and environmental and chemical waste. I commend this petition to the house because these are the facts, and I very much hope that the government will listen to them.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:53): I rise to speak on what is an important decision, and I welcome the opportunity to debate this.

Interjections from gallery.

The PRESIDENT: Again, just to the gallery: it is fantastic that you are in the Victorian Parliament. We really appreciate you making the effort, but there is no audience participation, so if you could hold back on your applause or otherwise, we would really appreciate it. You have been great and quiet, so if you could stay that way. The babies are exempt – they are free to make noise.

Michael GALEA: I rise to speak on what is an important petition, and I welcome the opportunity to debate its acceptance today. This petition opposes a proposal by Veolia Australia and New Zealand

to build a waste transfer station at their site in Hampton Park. In order for this proposal to succeed, it needed to be granted, first, a planning permit by the City of Casey and then a development licence from the Environment Protection Authority Victoria, the EPA. As the responsible authority for the Casey planning scheme, the City of Casey approved the planning permit for this facility in October 2024. What is noteworthy about the timing of this is that this approval was made whilst the council was under administration, less than a few weeks before last year's council elections. Whilst the council administrators were within their rights to make this decision at the time, to me it is very disappointing that the decision was not held over until after the council elections just a few weeks later. This would have allowed councillors elected by and accountable to the community to make that call.

Following the planning permit approval, the applicant sought a development licence from the EPA. As I am sure everyone in this room knows, on 9 April this year the EPA rejected the licence on the grounds that the development would result in unacceptable risks to human health and to the environment. The decision by the EPA underscores the vital role that it plays in our state and the importance of it as an institution. The appropriate decision has been made here by the appropriate body. Their decision to deny a development licence is one that I personally welcome and support. Noting that the applicant has appealed this decision to VCAT and that the case is currently awaiting a hearing in August, sub judice prevents me from commenting any further on the case. What I will say, though, is that I sincerely hope that an alternative location can be found.

Today we do have with us many members of the local community who have been affected by the proposal. I would like to thank them for their advocacy. I am also very troubled by some of the accounts that I have heard of their experiences in attempting to raise their valid concerns with the applicant in this process. I am concerned, from what I have heard, about the way in which they were responded to. I also do note the advocacy of many people, including many of the newly elected Casey councillors, the member for Narre Warren South Gary Maas and Mrs Hermans and Ms Payne in this place as well. We do know that the circular economy is very important, but we also know how vital it is for the community to be heard. I welcome and support the adoption of this petition.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:57): I would like to begin by welcoming residents of Hampton Park here for this debate and thanking them for their ongoing advocacy. Because of your efforts, today we call on the government to ensure that a waste transfer station is not constructed in Hampton Park. Six out of every 10 people in Hampton Park were born overseas, and eight out of every 10 residents have parents born overseas. Hampton Park is a suburb of people who choose to make Australia home and raise their families in the south-east. When they bought their houses, most residents were told that the landfill site was nearing capacity and would be rehabilitated into parkland. Many homes built in the 1990s stand within 500 metres of the landfill site. It is not surprising then that the people living in these homes were looking forward to the prospect of the landfill being replaced with parkland. But in 2022 there was a change of plan. Out of nowhere the then Andrews government declared the tip to be an ongoing waste site of state significance – the world's worst accolade.

Now the operator, Veolia, has applied to run a new waste transfer station adjacent to the site, just 250 metres or less from homes. Unfortunately, the community do not have a lot of faith in Veolia, who have been taken to the Supreme Court for breaching licence conditions. According to the EPA, Veolia allowed methane gas emissions from the tip to reach unhealthy levels 22 times and generated toxic run-off onto farmland. They are bad operators. Veolia's proposed waste transfer station would process the rubbish of nine councils, making it the biggest waste transfer station in Victoria, crunching through half a million tonnes of waste each year. It is also the only waste transfer station of this scale not planned in an industrial area. I do not think it is okay to dump half a million tonnes of waste into people's homes. That is why I have joined the community in their fight to stop this obscene proposal, because it is not okay to treat people like rubbish.

Last month the EPA refused Veolia's development licence for the transfer station, citing unacceptable risk to human health and the environment. This aligns with community concerns, with over

750 submissions made to the EPA. Over 95 per cent of respondents are against the proposal. But before the EPA even handed down its decision, Veolia applied to VCAT for a review. They claimed the application review timeframe expired on 23 January, but the EPA made a request for information on 24 January. Basically, Veolia have called in the umpire because the EPA was one day late, and now residents are in a limbo while they await VCAT's decision.

If the transfer station is built, there will be more than 500 trucks coming and going 18 hours a day. Along with household waste, the centre would accept demolition waste, fluorescent tubes, gas bottles, acid batteries, metals, paints, soils and TVs, to name a few. This is on the nose, metaphorically and literally. More than half of the waste at the waste transfer station, 350,000 tonnes, will be compacted into sealed containers and then go on a 120-kilometre trip to the contentious Maryvale incinerator.

This has all grown out of the 2020 *Recycling Victoria* policy designed to protect the environment. And yet here we are, trucking 325,000 tonnes of rubbish from a south-eastern suburb down the Princes Highway to burn in the Latrobe Valley. There is no denying we need to move away from the model of rubbish going straight into landfill, but we must also consider the impact of amenity. Veolia itself boasts that its Clyde transfer facility in New South Wales is one of the most efficient transfer stations in the world. And why is that? Because it is on a railway line, reducing local truck movements by 37,000 per annum. Frankly, allowing a waste transfer station in a residential area with 500 trucks a day moving through the local community is not a solution. Do we really want to set that precedent? I think it is all a load of rubbish.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (18:02): I rise today not to oppose the idea of waste infrastructure, but to condemn the reckless, inequitable and shamefully arrogant way this government has handled the proposed waste transfer station in Hampton Park. This is a community that has had more than its fair share. It lives in the shadow of one of the state's largest landfills. It absorbs the trucks, the odours, the noise and the risk. Now the government wants to add 550,000 tonnes of commercial waste a year to a site just 54 metres from homes. The EPA said no, the community said no, and more than 4400 residents signed a petition opposing this plan. And yet, instead of respecting expert advice and local voices, the developer is now appealing the EPA decision on a one-day administrative technicality – not on environmental grounds, not because the health risks are not real, but because they missed a deadline.

There was no social impact statement, no proper environment effects statement and no genuine consultation with culturally and linguistically diverse residents, despite this being one of Victoria's most multicultural and disadvantaged regions. This is the same government that talks a big game when it comes to inclusion. They claim to fight for the vulnerable. They insist that every Victorian deserves a safe and healthy home. But let us be clear, if this facility was proposed 54 metres from the Premier's house, it would not pass the first hurdle. So why is it acceptable in Hampton Park? We have seen this before: Brookland Greens, methane gas, hundreds evacuated and a \$23 million class action because VCAT ignored the EPA. Yet here we are, walking into it once again.

It is not about one facility. This is about a culture where planning is done to the community rather than with the community, where those already living with disadvantage are treated as being disposable – their lungs, their roads and their peace all sacrificed so the system can keep turning without consequence. This is environmental injustice, and it must stop here. I call on the government to uphold the EPA's decision, reject the appeal and restore trust in process right now, because that trust has been broken. Every Victorian, no matter their background, their income or their postcode, deserves protection from harm, and it is fair to say that they should have some say in the future in their own hands, not just what is told to them by the government.

I want to say well done to Mrs Hermans on her outstanding advocacy for the community and well done to the community for taking a stand and getting all those signatures and standing up for what is right, and I commend this motion to the house.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:05): Firstly, I would like to thank everyone who has contacted my office both recently and in the last term of Parliament about this long-running issue. I first went down when I was invited by people to go down and look at what was happening there, and I did. I went down, and there was actually a protest – I tend to go to lots of protests. It is very clear, if you see just how close the houses are to this proposed facility, that there is very much potential for harm to local property owners and residents. So I was very disappointed when the administrators, as was pointed out by Mr Galea, under the last council, which was under administration, made this decision without being able to be held to account democratically. In my view, they should have waited until after the election of the new councillors, who would have been able to be held to account. So I was disappointed with that decision.

When the EPA started their consultations, I actually went down there to see their consultation sessions. I spoke to staff from the EPA. I have had lots of complaints about the EPA in the past, but I will say that when I went and talked to the people there – they were environmental experts and engineers, and I spoke to many of the people there – I saw the types of consultation they were doing and I was quite satisfied that they were doing good work. So when they came back with their recommendation that this project should not go ahead, I felt that they made the correct decision that it should not go ahead and another site should be found.

There is no doubt that there is a waste management issue. We do need waste facilities, but this particular one is inappropriate. It is not the right place to have it – it is absolutely not. I know now that it is before VCAT, and I really hope that this can be expedited, because the people that have been fighting against this because they are worried about the harm to their health, they are worried about the traffic and they are worried about the amenity to their life have been worrying about this for too long. I hope that there can be finality on this as soon as possible so that residents no longer have to keep putting up this fight.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:08): I am truly pleased to stand and speak on this petition raised by the community of Hampton Park and raised by my colleague Mrs Hermans. It seems to be, with fresh eyes on, a catastrophic failure of common sense over and over and over again to the community. Just imagine you are standing outside a childcare centre or a school or an aged care home watching a 38-metre A-double truck thunder past, hauling compacted waste through a suburban street, and imagine that happening dozens of times a day. That is the future that Hampton Park residents are facing unless we act. I am strongly supporting this call because there is just no commonsense reason why you would locate this in a residential area. This is an industrial process that belongs in an industrial area; that is why we have them. Again, it is common sense.

To date, the proposal, for all the other reasons we have heard – the chemicals, the waste, the smell, the traffic – has injected industrial-scale traffic into the area. There has been no transparent traffic modelling, there has been no clear data on truck routes and there have been no plans for turning radiuses or for peak-hour freight interactions. There has been a failure to really give any reassurance of how this operation could operate safely within the existing infrastructure. And then there is the sheer volume of freight movement through the area. We must also consider, really, amongst all the other considerations, long-term wear and tear on the roads, which ultimately the residents will end up paying for because the council ends up paying for it. On every level there is a failure of common sense. You must wonder, ‘Where were the adults in the room at any one of these stages?’ Sadly, the adults in the room turned out to be the residents, who had to raise a petition and had to go through so much angst to do it. I congratulate them for not simply going along with it but putting their heads above the parapet and actually making a difference. Hopefully you will get a short circuit of the process, and hopefully you will find that the democratic process can work with Parliament, with your representatives.

But we still have questions. Has there been road modelling? Where is the public traffic impact study? Where was the consultation? Most of all, can we please have some common sense and take a basic sense of fairness and apply that to the process alongside the common sense. I commend this petition.

I commend all those who have participated in it. We will not let it go, and we will stand with you. This is not the end of the matter. It will go on now – together.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (18:11): I am glad to be able to speak in support of this petition today on behalf of the Greens and the community who has rallied against this project. Can I also thank the community for their advocacy, including our federal candidate for the seat of Holt Payal Tiwari, who has been an active campaigner on this issue, and the many others who have joined in supporting the community in their advocacy.

Veolia's proposed waste transfer station in Hampton Park will lead to a steady stream of trucks ferrying tonnes of Melbourne's nappies, apple cores and plastic bags over 100 kilometres to Maryvale for incineration. Can anyone think of a sillier idea during this time of worsening global heating than to burn truckloads of fuel transporting waste into Gippsland so we can burn it, sending all that carbon up into the atmosphere? It is no longer controversial to point out that we are seeing the impact of climate change virtually every other week somewhere in the world and too often in Australia. Today we spent half the day debating the drought that is going on in Victoria at the moment.

Waste to energy is often justified on the grounds that it has got to go somewhere. True, but the Greens do not think that 'somewhere' should be up into the atmosphere. Or it is justified because it is a waste of energy not to burn it. Well, we are trying to stop burning fossil fuels, and this is just another fuel we should not be burning. Add it to the same list as coal, oil and gas, because the carbon emissions are comparable. Or it is justified because methane emissions from organic matter in rubbish buried in landfill are worse than if we just burn the lot. That would be true if we were not separating out food and garden waste or at least moving towards that and capturing the methane from landfill. The Greens strongly oppose Labor's introduction of waste-to-energy plants to Victoria, because we are in a climate crisis. Pull something – anything – out of your rubbish bin tonight, and I guarantee you there is something better we can do with it than burn it.

We need more investment in resource recovery and recycling to keep waste out of landfill. But we also need to be very mindful of where these facilities are, especially if they are going to be close to residential areas. Residents nearby have a right to be consulted and to have their health and wellbeing prioritised. We have already heard that facilities like this require hundreds of truck movements day in, day out. That comes with diesel emissions and pollution, which are incredibly bad for people's health and wellbeing – noise, light pollution, you name it – so these sorts of facilities cannot be located so closely to residents. None of this has been considered in this proposal. It is reassuring to see that the EPA has done its due diligence and rejected this project. I really hope that the VCAT outcome is a positive one and reinforces that decision that was made by the EPA, but it would also be astute for the government in this instance to follow suit – to do what they actually have the power to do: intervene and ensure that this facility does not go ahead.

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:14): Today there are local families and individuals in the gallery and watching at home. These are people, they are not rubbish. They do not deserve to be treated like rubbish, and they do not deserve to live with it. It is great to have the crossbench come along and stand with us, but I want them to know that the Liberals–Nationals hear you and we stand with you. It is time the Allan Labor government did more and did the same. Thank you to the Lynbrook Residents Association, in particular Vernadette, Scott, Sue, Jason and others; Anthony, the vice-president of the Casey Residents and Ratepayers Association; and many others that I know I will have forgotten. To all the councillors that are fighting for this outside of your busy jobs and lives, you invest countless hours to defend your community.

We call on the relevant ministers to (1) launch a commission into the legal and procedural basis of the permit issued by Casey council; (2) revoke the planning permit approved based on the EPA's findings; (3) direct that version 4.1 of the 2015 *Hampton Park Development Plan* remains the sole legally enforceable planning document for this site until a new development plan is authorised by the minister, publicly exhibited and formally incorporated into the Casey planning scheme; (4) guarantee that all

future planning applications for this site undergo public notice and provide full third-party appeal rights; (5) defend the EPA's decision that the location is inappropriate, and there are genuine health and safety and environmental concerns if VCAT overturns their refusal; (6) initiate a probity audit into the governance and decision-making processes within Casey council, including potential conflicts of interest arising from its dual role as both permanent authority and stakeholder of a south-east waste organisation; and (7) seek an alternative, appropriately zoned location, such as an industrial precinct or disused quarry pit, away from the residential areas, with safe access to existing rail infrastructure.

These actions are about public health and safety, environmental protection, good governance and democratic accountability. Residents have not been heard, and they deserve better.

Motion agreed to.

Bills

Appropriation (2025–2026) Bill 2025

Introduction and first reading

The PRESIDENT (18:17): 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 for the appropriation of certain sums out of the Consolidated Fund for the ordinary annual services of the Government for the financial year 2025–2026 and for other purposes.'

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (18:17):
I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Gayle TIERNEY: I move, by leave:

That the second reading be taken forthwith.

Motion agreed to.

Statement of compatibility

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (18:18):
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 Appropriation (2025–2026) Bill 2025.

In my opinion, the Appropriation (2025–2026) Bill 2025, as introduced to the Legislative Council, is compatible with the human rights protected by the Charter. I base my opinion on the reasons outlined in this statement.

Overview of Bill

The Appropriation (2025–2026) Bill 2025 will provide appropriation authority for payments from the Consolidated Fund for the ordinary annual services of Government for the 2025/2026 financial year.

The amounts contained in Schedule 1 to the Appropriation (2025–2026) Bill 2025 provide for the ongoing operations of departments, including new output and asset investment funded through annual appropriation.

Schedule 2 of the Appropriation (2025–2026) Bill 2025 contains details concerning payments from the Advance to Treasurer in the 2023/24 financial year.

Schedule 3 of the Appropriation (2025–2026) Bill 2025 contains details concerning payments from advances made pursuant to section 35 of the *Financial Management Act 1994* in the 2023/24 financial year.

Human Rights Issues

The Appropriation (2025–2026) Bill 2025 does not raise any human rights issues.

As the Appropriation (2025–2026) Bill 2025 does not raise any human rights issues, it does not limit any human rights and therefore it is not necessary to consider section 7(2) of the Charter.

Conclusion

I consider that the Appropriation (2025–2026) Bill 2025 is compatible with the Charter because it does not raise any human rights issues.

Hon Jaclyn Symes MP

Treasurer

Minister for Industrial Relations

Minister for Regional Development

Second reading

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (18:18):
I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Ordered that second-reading speech be incorporated into *Hansard*:

I proudly begin my first Budget speech by acknowledging the Traditional Owners and Custodians of this land.

I pay my respects to Elders, past and present.

The Allan Labor Government is committed to Truth, Treaty and Self-Determination for First Peoples.

Speaker, around the world and here at home, families are making hard choices.

They're weighing up what they can go without and holding tight to what matters most.

This Budget meets them at that moment – with care, with discipline, and with determination.

It delivers real help with the cost of living.

It invests in the services people rely on.

And it does so with a clear and steady focus:

Backing Victorians, not just through the challenges of today, but for the opportunities of tomorrow.

We've been able to do that because we've made responsible choices, carefully weighing every decision and making sure every dollar goes where it matters most.

It means that with this Budget, Victoria returns to surplus.

We've done it while delivering record cost of living relief and backing the people who carry our state forward.

Because we know what nurses mean for a family waiting in emergency, what a good teacher can unlock in a Victorian child, what it means to see the police out in your community – or to get an ambulance when you need it most.

Because these aren't just services – they're the building blocks of a fairer and stronger state.

It's why the Allan Labor Government is focused on the things that matter most:

Real help with the cost of living.

Good hospitals, Great local schools, Safe communities, Decent jobs, And opportunity wherever you live. Our economy is strong.

Over the past decade, Victoria has led the states in real economic growth. Creating over 900 000 jobs and adding \$138 billion to Victoria's economy.

This Budget continues to back Victorian business, with \$240 million to support further growth and investment, including the new \$150 million Victorian Investment Fund.

With \$50 million dedicated to supporting jobs and investment in regional Victoria.

And an additional \$35 million to deliver one-to-one advice and help more Victorians take their products to the world.

Speaker, in the last five years, more than 113 000 new businesses have been created in Victoria. The largest percentage growth of any state.

And that's absolutely something to celebrate.

But we also know that numbers like these don't tell the full story.

Because behind every job created and every dollar added are real people, and right now, too many of them are doing it tough.

Families are counting every dollar. Parents are watching the price of groceries, petrol, rent, and bills inch higher week by week.

The cost of living has hit hard. And higher interest rates have only made it harder. That's why this Budget delivers targeted, meaningful cost of living relief.

Because good governments don't look away when times get tough. They show up. In my first Budget as Treasurer, I want Victorians to know this:

We see you, we hear you, and we're doing something about it.

Because building a fairer Victoria starts with backing its people – and that's exactly what this Budget is about.

Speaker, I was the first in my family to finish high school and go to university.

It wasn't easy. Four of us – uni students from Benalla – crammed into a tiny unit in Burwood.

Working part-time jobs, eating noodles, studying together late into the night. Those years taught me something that I'm now extremely grateful for:

That education opens doors. And importantly, it gives people the chance to imagine a bigger future.

And that belief – that every Victorian deserves hope and to dream big about their future – is at the heart of this budget.

It's why we're building and upgrading and planning new schools across our state – because every family should be able to rely on a great local school.

But we're not just building new classrooms: we're focusing on the learning inside of them too.

We've supported teachers to lift Year 12 completion rates dramatically – from 92 per cent in 2021 to 97 per cent today – because we know finishing school sets people up for life.

The VCE Vocational Major is central to this – it mixes practical job skills with traditional subjects, giving students more choices about their future –

And more reasons to stay in school and have grand plans.

And we're taking that even further – investing \$27 million in dedicated pathway coordinators at government high schools.

These coordinators will help students find the right course, apprenticeship, or career, ensuring young people don't feel lost when planning their future.

We're helping more young Victorians discover a love of learning – including maths, upskilling maths teachers, introducing a new Year 1 Numeracy Check, and for kids who **really** love maths, advanced maths camps – free of charge.

We're completing the statewide rollout of our Disability Inclusion reforms, making sure every child is supported to be their best.

And we're continuing to expand Free TAFE through 2026, making sure that Victorians can learn new skills or refresh old ones without worrying about money.

The Allan Labor Government has not only made our public transport system stronger, we've made it **cheaper** for Victorians.

Not just for us out of towners. But for those in Melbourne to get out of town – to see and experience everything that regional Victoria has to offer.

Passengers have saved well over \$100 million since the introduction of our fairer regional fares.

But we can do better – and in this Budget, we are.

It's why we're making public transport completely free for every Victorian under the age of 18.

It's a huge help for families – saving them upwards of \$700 a year. And it doesn't stop there.

We're also expanding free weekend public transport for every Seniors Card holder in Victoria:

Allowing grandparents to enjoy time with family, or to get out and explore the state, without worrying about how much it might cost.

Speaker, budgets are about choices.

And in this Budget, we have chosen to back Victorians with the services they need now – while planning for the kind of future Victorians want and deserve.

This Budget represents a profound commitment to the people who keep our state safe, strong, and moving, our nurses, police, teachers, train drivers, apprentices and so many others.

With this Budget, we're continuing to deliver the biggest investment in frontline staff and services as a share of workforce investment since 2019.

That's not just a percentage – it's a statement of our values.

It means \$203 million for self-determined health, education, employment, culture and other services for First Nations Victorians.

Another \$172 million to help victim survivors of family violence with one-on-one support, for specialised legal services, and to back Respect Victoria to help prevent gendered violence before it begins.

It means looking after farmers, with \$900 000 to support the work of the National Centre for Farmer Health.

It means bigger, better care in Maryborough and Geelong.

It means real investment in emergency departments, mental health care, and faster ambulance response times.

It means a lot to me personally.

Last year, my mum spent five months in the public hospital system – in and out of the ICU and various medical wards at Royal Melbourne, as well as the medical and rehabilitation units at Northeast Health Wangaratta.

I want to take the opportunity to acknowledge and thank our amazing health care workers – because of them, and supported by our investments, we have a world class health system.

I am incredibly proud that this Budget reflects and builds on our track record, with funding for new hospitals and community hospitals across Footscray, Frankston, Craigieburn, Cranbourne and Phillip Island – ensuring more patients get the care they need sooner.

In fact, almost a third of this year's expenditure is dedicated to the health and wellbeing of Victorians and their kids – invested in our hospitals and healthcare workers.

We're also making it easier to access treatments normally only available through a visit to the doctor – by expanding the role of our pharmacists and making those consultations free.

It's cost of living relief that eases pressure on GPs and emergency departments. And saves families both time and money.

Speaker, I want my first Budget to give people hope.

For our youngest Victorians, that begins with opportunity. Like the opportunity to join their classmates on camp.

To play in a team.

To feel like they belong.

These things should be a rite of passage – not a privilege.

But for too long, too many kids have missed out.

Not because they didn't want to go, but because their families simply couldn't afford to send them.

That's why this Budget boosts our camps, sports and excursions support for eligible students – to \$400.

This is what fairness looks like. That's what dignity feels like.

And it's the same principle behind our \$2 billion investment in early childhood education

Delivering Free Kinder statewide for every three and four-year-old, saving families around \$2 600 per child.

It's about giving every child the best start in life, and giving every parent the support they need to offer it.

Because when a child is welcomed, encouraged, and included from the very beginning, they don't just learn, they grow. They thrive, and so does our state.

Just as we're backing our future generations – we're building for a growing state: A \$4.1 billion investment in the Sunshine Station Superhub.

Opening the West Gate Tunnel and Metro Tunnel – transforming travel across Melbourne and cutting commute times.

And with \$727 million, we'll be ready to run services through five new underground stations, with more services on the Sunbury, Pakenham and Cranbourne Lines.

And because we've freed up the City Loop – we can deliver more services on other lines – from Werribee to Sandringham.

All while boosting V/Line trains to Bendigo, Traralgon and Seymour.

Building a liveable Victoria isn't just about construction – it's about connection.

No family should ever have to choose between getting where they need to go and getting there safely.

Last year, the Labor Government delivered one of Victoria's biggest single-year investments in road maintenance.

This year's Budget goes further with a massive \$976 million to fix potholes, upgrade road surfaces and keep bridges and roadsides across Victoria safe.

We're also delivering a \$1.2 billion Road Blitz.

And improving safety with \$412 million for the next phase of our Road Safety Action Plan.

But it's not just how we move around the state that matters – it's where we live and how we live:

It's why we're cutting red tape, unlocking vacant government land and fast tracking the renewal of public housing, to build more homes where people need them.

The Suburban Rail Loop is Australia's largest housing project. With Melbourne expected to reach the size of London by the 2050s, it will deliver 70 000 more homes on the doorstep of healthcare, education precincts and jobs.

In this Budget, we'll encourage more new apartments, units, and townhouses by extending the stamp duty concession, slashing stamp duty on eligible off-the-plan homes until October 2026.

And wherever people choose to live, we're helping them save even more with our Solar Homes program.

Already, 300 000 homes have installed solar panels – saving up to \$750 a year.

This Budget extends that success with rebates for electric heat pumps and solar hot water systems – cutting energy bills by up to \$400.

And we're delivering a \$100 Power Saving Bonus for households on a concession card – helping cover the cost of winter bills, for those who really need it.

As a Labor Government, it is in our DNA to support the most vulnerable in our community.

Hunger doesn't always look like what you expect.

Food relief agencies are seeing more full-time workers, people juggling rent and bills, needing help for the first time.

So we're stepping up.

We're doubling our Community Food Relief Program.

It's an \$18 million investment that means more support for regional Foodshares in Albury–Wodonga, Geelong, Bendigo, Shepparton, Mildura and Warrnambool.

Additional grants to neighbourhood houses, community groups and volunteer-led organisations across Victoria to provide meals to families doing it tough.

And a \$3 million boost to Foodbank's GROW program – making sure surplus farm produce that would otherwise go to waste supports Victorians experiencing food insecurity.

We're backing Good Shepherd and its Good Money program with another \$5 million – providing interest-free loans when life throws you a curveball.

Because a broken fridge or a surprise bill shouldn't push a family to the edge.

This Budget adds \$61 million to our investments in homelessness support – to give more Victorians the safety and security of a home.

We're also supporting Mortgage Stress Victoria with an extra \$4 million, so their team of lawyers, social workers, and financial counsellors can continue their quiet, vital work.

Because when a family is at risk of losing their home, it's not just about finances. It's about everything that home represents:

The roof over your head. The school down the road. The place where your kids feel safe at night.

This support isn't about charity. It's about fairness. Because dignity shouldn't come with conditions. And security shouldn't be reserved for the few.

It's something we all deserve – and something good governments help protect.

We can deliver these investments because of our responsible approach to financial management.

With my first Budget, we are firmly on track to deliver on the Government's fiscal strategy.

The Budget delivers an operating surplus in 2025–26 – the first since before the pandemic – with average surpluses of \$1.9 billion over the forward estimates.

By the end of the forward estimates, net debt is declining as a proportion of the economy.

These fiscal outcomes and our economic plan will help to ensure Victoria's economy continues to grow strongly and creates good secure jobs.

This is the beginning, not the end.

Families and businesses are carefully considering every dollar. They rightly expect their government to do the same.

It's why we commissioned an independent review of Victoria's public service, led by Helen Silver AO, to ensure spending is aligned with the needs and priorities of Victorians.

The final report will be received in June, but we're already acting, by stripping back inefficiency in government spending, reducing duplication and winding back non-priority programs, we have been able to invest in what matters most.

Speaker, this is a responsible Budget. It delivers on our fiscal plan.

It returns Victoria to surplus.

It reduces net debt to GSP over the forwards.

And most importantly, it is focused on the core services that Victorians rely on.

It backs the state government's frontline and helps them deliver excellence to the community.

And it provides real help with the cost of living.

A cheaper power bill that brings some breathing room.

A hot meal that reminds someone they are seen, cared for and important. A free V/Line trip that keeps a family close.

This is support you can feel – at the kitchen table, at the school gate, at the train station.

It's a Budget delivered by a Government that is on Victorians' side.

Because every choice in this Budget is shaped by a deeper truth about the kind of Victoria we believe in.

Where opportunities are not limited by circumstance – but expanded by choice. A fairer, stronger, more connected Victoria.

That's what we're building, and that's what this Budget delivers.

I commend this Bill to the House.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (18:18): I move:

That debate be adjourned for one week.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for one week.

Appropriation (Parliament 2025–2026) Bill 2025

Introduction and first reading

The PRESIDENT (18:18): 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 for the appropriation of certain sums out of the Consolidated Fund for the Parliament in respect of the financial year 2025–2026 and for other purposes.'

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (18:18): I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Gayle TIERNEY: I move, by leave:

That the second reading be taken forthwith.

Motion agreed to.

Statement of compatibility

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (18:19):
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 Appropriation (Parliament 2025–2026) Bill 2025.

In my opinion, the Appropriation (Parliament 2025–2026) Bill 2025, as introduced to the Legislative Council, is compatible with the human rights protected by the Charter. I base my opinion on the reasons outlined in this statement.

Overview of Bill

The purpose of the Appropriation (Parliament 2025–2026) Bill 2025 is to provide appropriation authority for payments from the Consolidated Fund to the Parliament and its agencies in respect of the 2025–2026 financial year.

Human Rights Issues

The Appropriation (Parliament 2025–2026) Bill 2025 does not raise any human rights issues.

As the Appropriation (Parliament 2025–2026) Bill 2025 does not raise any human rights issues, it does not limit any human rights, and therefore it is not necessary to consider section 7(2) of the Charter Act.

Conclusion

I consider that the Appropriation (Parliament 2025–2026) Bill 2025 is compatible with the Charter because it does not raise any human rights issues.

Hon Jaclyn Symes MP

Treasurer

Minister for Industrial Relations

Minister for Regional Development

Second reading

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (18:19):
I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Ordered that second-reading speech be incorporated into *Hansard*:

The Appropriation (Parliament 2025–2026) Bill 2025 provides appropriation authority for payments from the Consolidated Fund to the Parliament and its agencies in respect of the 2025/2026 financial year, including ongoing liabilities incurred by the Parliament such as employee entitlements that may be realised in the future.

Honourable Members will be aware that other funds are appropriated for parliamentary purposes by way of special appropriations contained in other legislation. In addition, unapplied appropriations under the *Appropriation (Parliament 2024–2025) Act 2024* have been estimated and included in the Budget Papers. Before 30 June 2025, the actual unapplied appropriation will be finalised and the 2025/2026 appropriations will be adjusted by the approved carryover amounts under section 32 of the *Financial Management Act 1994*.

In line with the wishes of the Presiding Officers, appropriations in the Appropriation (Parliament 2025–2026) Bill 2025 are made to the departments of the Parliament, and the independent officers of the Parliament.

The total appropriation authority sought in the Appropriation (Parliament 2025–2026) Bill 2025 is \$297 204 000 for Parliament in respect of the 2025/2026 financial year.

I commend the Bill to the House.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (18:19): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for one week.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for one week.

State Taxation Acts Amendment Bill 2025

Introduction and first reading

The PRESIDENT (18:19): 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 **Commercial and Industrial Property Tax Reform Act 2024**, the **Duties Act 2000**, the **First Home Owner Grant and Home Buyer Schemes Act 2000**, the **Land Tax Act 2005**, the **Payroll Tax Act 2007**, the **Taxation Administration Act 1997**, the **Unclaimed Money Act 2008** and the **Victorian Conservation Trust Act 1972** and for other purposes.'

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (18:20): I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Gayle TIERNEY: I move, by leave:

That the second reading be taken forthwith.

Motion agreed to.

Statement of compatibility

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (18:20): 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 State Taxation Acts Amendment Bill 2025.

In my opinion, the State Taxation Acts 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 makes a number of amendments to the *Commercial and Industrial Property Tax Reform Act 2024* (**CIPT Reform Act**), the *Duties Act 2000* (**Duties Act**), the *First Home Owner Grant and Home Buyer Schemes Act 2000* (**FHOHBS Act**), the *Land Tax Act 2005* (**Land Tax Act**), the *Payroll Tax Act 2007* (**Payroll Tax Act**), the *Taxation Administration Act 1997* (**TAA**), the *Unclaimed Money Act 2008* (**UMA**) and the *Victorian Conservation Trust Act 1972*.

Many provisions of the Bill do not engage the human rights listed in the Charter because they either do not affect natural persons, or they operate beneficially in relation to natural persons.

Human rights issues

The rights under the Charter that are relevant to the Bill are the right to property, the right to privacy and the right to protection from retrospective criminal laws.

Right to property: section 20

Section 20 of the Charter provides that a person must not be deprived of his or her property other than in accordance with law. This right is not limited where there is a law that authorises a deprivation of property, and that law is adequately accessible, clear and certain, and sufficiently precise to enable a person to regulate their conduct.

CIPT and Duties Acts amendments – commercial and industrial property

Clause 5 of the Bill amends the CIPT Reform Act to authorise the Commissioner of State Revenue (**Commissioner**) to determine whether land has a qualifying use to ensure that land that should be in the Commercial and Industrial Property Tax (**CIPT**) reform scheme but for lacking an Australian Valuation Property Classification Code (**AVPCC**) or for being valued more than 12 months prior to the transaction is appropriately assessed for the CIPT in accordance with the intended policy outcomes of the CIPT reform scheme. This may engage the right to property as natural person owners of land may become liable for CIPT as a result of the Commissioner's provisional determination.

Clause 5 of the Bill also amends the CIPT Reform Act to authorise the Commissioner to assess or reassess CIPT or land transfer duty payable under the Duties Act when the Commissioner's provisional determination is not consistent with the AVPCC allocated to the land in the subsequent valuation by the Valuer-General Victoria (**VGV**). This may engage the right to property as natural person owners of land may become liable to pay CIPT or duty as a result of the amendments.

Where only a partial interest in land has entered the CIPT reform scheme, duty consequences can apply to subsequent CIPT reform scheme transactions that occur within 3 years for the remaining interest in the land. Clauses 16 to 18 of the Bill amend the Duties Act to ensure that the same land transfer duty consequences will apply to CIPT reform scheme transactions involving child lots resulting from the subdivisions of this remaining interest in land. This may engage the right to property as natural person owners of land may become liable to pay duty as a result of the amendments.

However, to the extent that natural persons' property rights are affected by these amendments to the CIPT Reform Act and Duties Act, any limit is in accordance with the law, which is clearly articulated, not arbitrary, and sufficiently precise to enable affected natural persons to inform themselves of their legal obligations and to regulate their conduct accordingly. Furthermore, natural persons who are issued with assessments or reassessments as a result of the amendments will have the protections provided by the TAA including rights of objection, review, appeal and refund of overpaid tax.

Land Tax Act amendments – build to rent requirements

Clauses 29 and 30 of the Bill amend the Land Tax Act to specify that the rental requirement of build to rent (**BTR**) dwellings is that the property be 'genuinely offered for rent' rather than 'available for rent'.

This may affect the right to property to the extent that natural person landowners of BTR developments may become ineligible for BTR land tax benefits if their BTR dwelling is only available for rent but not genuinely offered for rent.

However, to the extent that natural persons' property rights are affected by the amendments, any limit is in accordance with the law, which is clearly articulated, not arbitrary, and sufficiently precise to enable affected natural persons to inform themselves of their legal obligations and to regulate their conduct accordingly. Furthermore, natural persons who are issued with assessments or reassessments as a result of the amendments will have the protections provided by the TAA including rights of objection, review, appeal and refund of overpaid tax.

TAA amendments – 50% penalty tax rate for recklessness

Clause 35 of the Bill amends the TAA to introduce a new 50% base penalty tax rate targeting the behaviour of taxpayers and their representatives which amount to recklessness in relation to tax and/or notification defaults.

This may affect the right to property to the extent that natural person taxpayers who are reckless with respect to their state taxation obligations may be liable for increased rates of penalty tax. However, to the extent that natural persons' property rights are affected by the amendments, any limit is in accordance with the law, which is clearly articulated, not arbitrary, and sufficiently precise to enable affected natural person taxpayers to inform themselves of their legal obligations and regulate their conduct in relation to tax and notification defaults accordingly. Further any deprivation of property as a result of these amendments is justified as the amendments are intended to deter non-compliance with Victorian taxation laws and promote voluntary compliance. Natural persons who are issued with assessments or reassessments as a result of the amendments will have the protections provided by the TAA including rights of objection, review, appeal and refund of overpaid tax.

UMA amendments – notices of repayment

Clause 40 of the Bill amends the UMA to empower the Registrar of Unclaimed Money (**Registrar**) to issue a notice of repayment of unclaimed money and impose interest on any unpaid amounts, when a payment of unclaimed money has been made to a person that the Registrar is no longer satisfied is the true owner of the

unclaimed money. It also empowers the Registrar to recover unpaid amounts specified in the repayment notice as well as accrued interest on any unpaid amounts as a debt owed to the State of Victoria.

This may affect the right to property as natural persons who have received amounts of money from the Registrar to which they were not genuinely entitled may be liable to repay unclaimed money and interest on any unpaid amounts to the Registrar of unclaimed money. However, these amendments are in accordance with the law, which is clearly articulated, not arbitrary, and sufficiently precise to enable affected natural person taxpayers to inform themselves of their legal obligations and to regulate their conduct accordingly. Further, objection and appeal rights under the UMA will be available to these natural persons. Any deprivation of property as a result of these amendments is justifiable as the amendments are intended to help promote the policy objectives of the unclaimed money scheme which is to return amounts of unclaimed money only to genuine owners.

Right to privacy: section 13

Section 13(a) of the Charter provides that every person has the right to enjoy their private life, free from interference. This right applies to the collection of personal information by public authorities. Any unlawful or arbitrary interference with an individual's privacy will limit this right.

Clause 25 of the Bill amends section 46K of the Land Tax Act to impose written notification requirements on a trustee where land held by the trustee for one trust is transferred to that same person acting as trustee for a different trust. It also imposes notification requirements on trustees that cease holding the trust land in their capacity as trustee and commence holding the land in their own right. These changes to the trust notification provisions are required to ensure that the appropriate rate of land tax is applied as a result of changes in trust land ownership.

Clause 30 of the Bill amends the Land Tax Act to impose the requirement upon the landowner of BTR dwellings to provide the Commissioner with a written declaration in relation to BTR dwelling rental periods upon request by the Commissioner. These declarations are required to ensure that only eligible properties are receiving BTR land tax concessions.

To the extent that the collection of any personal information from a natural person in relation to these provisions may result in interference with a natural person's privacy, any such interference will be lawful and not arbitrary as these provisions do not require that a person's personal information be published. Further, these provisions only require the provision of necessary information exclusively in the taxpayer's possession to achieve the purpose of determining a person's tax liability or eligibility for certain tax concessions. There are no other reasonable means available to achieve these purposes.

Retrospectivity: section 27

Section 27 of the Charter is concerned with the retrospective operation of criminal laws. It provides that a person has the right not to be prosecuted or punished for things that were not criminal offences at the time they were committed.

CIPT Act amendments – provisional determination of AVPCCs

Clause 5 of the Bill amends the CIPT Reform Act to authorise the Commissioner to determine whether land has a qualifying use to ensure that land that should be in the CIPT reform scheme but for lacking an AVPCC or for being valued more than 12 months prior to the transaction is appropriately assessed for the CIPT in accordance with the intended policy outcomes of the CIPT reform scheme. A provisional determination may be made in relation to land as at the date of a transaction that occurred before the commencement of the provision.

The provisions being inserted into the CIPT Reform Act do not amend any criminal laws and therefore section 27 of the Charter is not engaged. In any event, the Commissioner's ability to make a provisional determination regarding land at the time of a transaction that occurred prior to the commencement of the provision is necessary to overcome the unintended outcome that land otherwise eligible to enter the CIPT reform has been excluded from doing so as no AVPCC was available at the time of the transaction.

Conclusion

For these reasons, in my opinion, the provisions of the Bill are compatible with the rights contained in sections 13, 20 and 27 of the Charter.

Hon Jaclyn Symes MP

Treasurer

Minister for Industrial Relations

Minister for Regional Development

Second reading

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (18:20):
I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Ordered that second-reading speech be incorporated into *Hansard*:

The Bill will deliver a key 2025–26 Budget measure. The Bill will also amend several state taxation laws to support fair and effective revenue management for all Victorians.

The Bill contains amendments to the *Commercial and Industrial Property Tax Reform Act 2024* (CIPT Reform Act), *Duties Act 2000*, *First Home Owner Grant and Home Buyer Schemes Act 2000*, *Land Tax Act 2005*, *Payroll Tax Act 2007*, *Taxation Administration Act 1997*, *Unclaimed Money Act 2008* and the *Victorian Conservation Trust Act 1972*.

Budget measuresExpansion of off-the-plan duty concession

As announced in the 2025–26 Budget, the eligibility period for the temporary off-the-plan land transfer duty concession for purchases of eligible apartments and townhouses will be extended for a further twelve months to 21 October 2026. The concession was announced on 21 October 2024 and is available to off-the-plan purchasers of dwellings including apartments and townhouses. It reduces the amount of duty imposed on land transfers by allowing purchasers to exclude construction costs incurred on or after the contract date from the dutiable value of the land. The extension of the concession for a further twelve months will support homebuyers and the construction industry by encouraging more off-the-plan purchases of apartment and townhouses.

Family violence tax relief measures

The Bill amends the *Land Tax Act 2005*, the *Duties Act 2000* and the *First Home Owner Grant and Home Buyer Schemes Act 2000* to enable victim-survivors of family violence to access tax relief. Currently, victim-survivors of family violence are unable to access a land tax exemption when they leave their principal place of residence (PPR) due to family violence with no intention to return. Victim-survivors are also unable to access first home buyer benefits on the purchase of a new home where they've been part of an earlier application or because of their or their partner's prior relevant interest in a property.

Consistent with its long-standing commitment to addressing family violence, until now the government has offered ex gratia tax relief to victim-survivors fleeing family violence. To give victim-survivors the certainty of legislative protection, the Bill amends the *Land Tax Act 2005* to introduce an exemption from land tax for victim-survivors for up to 6 years where they have left their PPR due to family violence and have not received income from the land. The Bill also amends the *Duties Act 2000* and the *First Home Owner Grant and Home Buyer Schemes Act 2000* to allow victim-survivors to requalify for first home buyer benefits, subject to similar requirements. These measures take effect from the day after Royal Assent.

Build-to-Rent (BTR) amendments

The government is committed to ensuring that renters can access long-term housing. BTR developments offer long-term alternative housing options to home ownership for Victorians.

Under the *Land Tax Act 2005*, eligible BTR developments can receive a 50% reduction in the taxable value of land for land tax purposes and, where applicable, an exemption from the absentee owner surcharge for a period of up to 30 years ('BTR benefits'). To reflect that these benefits should only be available to developers who genuinely offer long-term rental housing, the Bill amends the *Land Tax Act 2005* to clarify that a minimum 3-year rental lease must be genuinely offered to a renter in a BTR development to obtain BTR benefits. To show that a lease term of at least 3 years was genuinely offered, the Bill requires the BTR provider and renter to jointly sign a declaration if the renter elects a lease term shorter than 3 years. The Bill also amends the *Land Tax Act 2005* to prohibit rental terms of less than 12 months being used in eligible BTR developments, except in limited cases, such as the extension of a long-term lease. These amendments will apply to rental agreements that are signed on or after 1 January 2026 in recognition that some developers may need time to alter their practices.

Lastly, the Bill gives the Commissioner of State Revenue (Commissioner) the power to disregard periods where an eligible property is temporarily uninhabitable and it is reasonable to do so, when determining whether developments remain eligible for BTR benefits. A property may be temporarily uninhabitable due to unforeseen circumstances such as natural disasters or other reasonable circumstances such as planned

refurbishments. In these circumstances, it is not fair that BTR developments lose access to BTR benefits because the property was temporarily unsuitable for occupancy.

Trust for Nature amendments

The Bill amends the VCTA to expand the Vacant Land Conservation Covenant Account (VLCCA) criteria to allow funds to be allocated to a broader range of conservation covenants across Victoria.

Under the VCTA, private landowners may enter into conservation covenants with the Trust for Nature (TfN) for land that the TfN considers to be ecologically significant, of natural

interest or beauty, of historic interest or of importance in relation to the conservation of wildlife or native plants. Land protected by a conservation covenant entered into with the TfN is exempt from land tax.

The VLCCA was established to support the Trust for Nature (TfN) conservation covenants on unimproved land within residential planning zones of metropolitan Melbourne. Initial funding of \$2 million was allocated to the VLCCA to fund conservation covenants in respect of up to 50 properties in metropolitan Melbourne that may be impacted as part of the expansion of the Vacant Residential Land Tax to unimproved residential land in metropolitan Melbourne that has remained undeveloped for at least five years and is capable of residential development. Greater opportunities exist to protect Victoria's unique biodiversity outside metropolitan Melbourne. The strict criteria for the use of the funds within the VLCCA has limited the use of the funds. The expanded criteria of the VLCCA will enable money standing to the credit of the VLCCA to be used in relation to land that contains a dwelling, land that has been zoned for non-residential purposes, or land in Victoria that is outside metropolitan Melbourne. The amendments are proposed to take effect from the day after Royal Assent.

Commercial and Industrial Property Tax (CIPT) Reform amendments

The Bill amends the CIPT Reform Act and *Duties Act 2000* to enable the Commissioner to provisionally determine if land has a qualifying use where no Australian Valuation Property Classification Code (AVPCC) has been allocated to the land, and to request a valuation of any non-rateable non-leviable land from the Valuer-General Victoria (VGV) for the purposes of the CIPT Reform Act. Under the CIPT Reform Act, land qualifies to enter the CIPT Reform if it has been allocated a commercial or industrial-related AVPCC by the VGV under the annual valuation process. On occasions however, where land has not been valued by the VGV and therefore does not have an AVPCC allocated to it, a transaction of that land does not qualify to enter the CIPT Reform, regardless of whether the land is actually commercial or industrial land. The amendments will enable the Commissioner to provisionally determine if land has a qualifying use, ensuring that land that is otherwise eligible to enter the CIPT Reform is not excluded where no AVPCC is yet available.

The Bill also ensures duty under the *Duties Act 2000* applies to the purchase of a child lot following a subdivision within three years after the parent lot enters the CIPT Reform as a partial transaction. This amendment aligns the dutiable treatment of a child lot with that of the parent lot after a subdivision.

These amendments will take effect from the day after Royal Assent.

Payroll tax amendments

The Bill amends the *Payroll Tax Act 2007* to clarify the definition of regional employees. Since July 2017, regional employers have been entitled to a reduced rate of payroll tax in order to support businesses and employment growth in regional areas. Under the *Payroll Tax Act 2007*, a regional employee is defined as one who performs services 'mainly in regional Victoria'. The Bill amends the *Payroll Tax Act 2007* to clarify that only services performed in Victoria are considered in determining whether a person is a regional employee. This amendment ensures that regional employers whose employees sometimes work outside Victoria are not disadvantaged by the definition of a regional employee. These amendments will come into effect from 1 July 2025.

Other land tax amendments

The Bill amends the *Land Tax Act 2005* to support families of landowners in difficult circumstances, where the landowner is unable to live independently or has passed away. The *Land Tax Act 2005* currently provides that a PPR is exempt from land tax in limited concessionary circumstances where an owner no longer uses and occupies the land, including where they have lost the ability to live independently for an indefinite period, or where they have passed away and their estate is under administration. The exemption is only available if no income was derived from the land in the preceding tax year. If part of the land is being used to derive income from a substantial business activity or a separately rented residence such as a granny flat, the exemption does not apply, resulting in the land becoming fully taxable. The amendments remove this unfairness by allowing the exemptions for owners unable to live independently or who have passed away to apply to that part of the land used as the person's residence. This means tax will only be assessed on the value

of that portion of the land used to derive income from a substantial business activity or a separately rented residence.

Separately, the Bill amends the *Land Tax Act 2005* to make certain notification obligations imposed on trustees operate more effectively, reducing red tape. Trustees will now only be required to notify the Commissioner of a disposal or acquisition of land where a trustee ceases holding trust land in their capacity as trustee and acquires that land in their own right or where a trustee ceases holding land subject to one trust and commences holding the same land subject to a second (different) trust.

These amendments will take effect from 1 January 2026.

Unclaimed money amendments

The Bill amends the *Unclaimed Money Act 2008* to empower the Registrar of Unclaimed Money (the Registrar) to recover an amount of unclaimed money paid to a person who is not the owner by issuing a notice of repayment. The Bill also empowers the Registrar to pay an amount of unclaimed money to a subsequent genuine claimant, even if the entitlement has already been paid to an earlier claimant. The amendment to empower the Registrar to pay a subsequent claimant will take effect from the day after Royal Assent. The amendment empowering the Registrar to issue notices of repayment will commence in relation to amounts that were paid to a claimant on or after the day after the Bill receives Royal Assent.

Taxation Administration amendments

The Bill amends the *Taxation Administration Act 1997* to introduce a 50% penalty tax for recklessness by a taxpayer or a person acting on their behalf in respect of the taxpayer's obligations. Under the Taxation Administration Act, the Commissioner may impose penalty tax when a taxpayer does not comply with an obligation to pay tax or make certain notifications required under taxation legislation. The Act currently provides that the Commissioner may impose a 25% penalty tax, as the standard penalty rate, or a 75% penalty tax where a taxpayer shows intentional disregard of the law. This framework limits the Commissioner's ability to respond proportionately to non-compliance across a range of severity. The Bill addresses this issue by introducing a 50% penalty tax for recklessness. The new penalty is modelled on the penalty tax framework under the *Taxation Administration Act 1953* (Cth). The amendment will come into effect from the day after Royal Assent.

I commend the Bill to the house.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (18:21): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for one week.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for one week.

Adjournment

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (18:21): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Community food relief

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (18:21): (1663) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Carers and Volunteers Ros Spence, and the action I seek is an update on the Allan Labor government's support for food shares across the state. Western District Food Share, based in Warrnambool, now has 100 volunteers who help to distribute emergency food out to over 70,000 people each year across south-west Victoria through emergency food programs. It was fantastic to see the Victorian budget 2025–26 doubling key support for food relief in regional communities, with \$6 million for food shares in Warrnambool, Geelong, Bendigo, Shepparton, Mildura and Albury–Wodonga. I look forward to the minister's update.

Falls Creek school bus services

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (18:22): (1664) I rise this evening to bring to the attention of the Minister for Education a matter of growing concern for the community of Falls Creek Alpine

Resort in northern Victoria – specifically, the lack of school transport options for local students. To quote directly from an email I received from a resident at the Falls Creek Alpine Resort:

Currently the only way the eight students may attend is to be driven by their parents and other family members, or at times, carpooling by the same people. To make a 62 km round trip takes on average 120 minute each day, twice a day, for the adults is just not viable when they are full time employees or self-employed in small enterprises.

An application by the school principal to establish a dedicated bus route was recently rejected by the Department of Education, citing the requirement of a minimum of 15 students. However, under existing policy a feeder bus service designed to connect isolated students to main bus routes can be approved with just eight students, provided there is an existing main route to connect to. The irony is that no such main service exists along the Bogong High Plains Road, the only access route to Mount Beauty, leaving these students in limbo.

This is not just a transport issue, it is an equity issue. Falls Creek is a remote community that contributes significantly to Victoria's tourism economy, yet families are being forced to leave because they cannot access basic educational services for their children. This undermines the long-term sustainability of the community and the wellbeing of its youngest members. The situation becomes even more urgent as we approach the winter season. Travel becomes more hazardous, and parents, many of whom rely on the winter months for their primary income, face impossible choices between earning a living and ensuring their children can attend school.

I ask the minister to urgently review the current transport policy as it applies to Falls Creek and consider either reinstating a dedicated school bus service or facilitating a seasonal feeder service during term 3, when the need is most important. There are existing coach services between Falls Creek and Mount Beauty during winter, and a partnership with these operators could provide a safe, cost-effective interim solution. It is also important to consider long term. To quote from the correspondence:

Securing a bus service (or reinstating the one that ceased many years ago) should be viewed as a long term solution ... as we have full childcare (maximum 16) and approximately 20 permanent year-round students attending the Falls Creek Primary School, so we know that there will be growing demand for a transport solution in the coming years. In the thirty years I have resided in Falls Creek, I have seen many people having to leave a place they love to live and work in simply because they cannot access secondary education easily for their children. The residents of Falls Creek are key to ensuring that one of Victoria's great tourism assets continues to operate ...

Minister, with the peak winter season approaching, I urge you to act swiftly to ensure that Falls Creek students are not left behind.

Drought

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (18:25): (1665) My adjournment this evening is for the Minister for Agriculture, and the action I seek is for all local government areas in the Northern Victoria Region to be included in the drought support package. Farmers in the northern regions of Victoria feel they are being unfairly excluded from the government's recently expanded drought relief package. On 16 May the minister announced an expansion of this funding, which is vital to keeping our drought-affected farmers going. This expansion only added another 14 LGAs to the 11 LGAs already eligible for help. Northern Victorian farmers feel this is unjust and unfair. They are suffering from the lack of rain and high water, feed and running costs just as much as their counterparts in the southern regions. Out of the entire Northern Victoria Region, the largest electorate in the state, just one LGA has been included in the drought support package – just one.

The mayors and farmers from my electorate have all reached out asking for help. They want to know why they have been excluded from this package, which could quite literally save the lives of our farmers. There is increasing concern for the mental health of farmers in the region, with reports of at least 17 taking their lives in the past few weeks. That is 17 families missing a loved one from the dinner table tonight and 17 communities left in mourning. In 2023 a National Farmers Federation

report found that 45 per cent of farmers have had thoughts of self-harm or suicide and 30 per cent of farmers have attempted self-harm or suicide. In 2023, 281 regional Victorians took their lives, an increase of 7 per cent on the previous year.

One can only suspect that the unimaginable pressures currently placed on our farmers and regional communities played a part in some of these tragedies. The minister and this government claim to care for our farmers. Nothing this government has done in recent weeks proves this. By excluding these LGAs, the government has demonstrated just how little regard it has for our farmers, not to mention that farmers and landholders are about to be slugged by the government's outrageous emergency services and volunteers tax in the coming months. Our farmers are at breaking point, some are beyond breaking point and some are ready to walk off the land. As the signs popping up all over my electorate say: no farmers, no food.

The action I seek is for the minister to include all local government areas in the Northern Victoria Region in the drought support package.

Croydon South housing development

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:27): (1666) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Housing and Building, and the action I seek is for the minister to provide an update on the progress of the Croydon South housing development and how the small sites program is contributing to the government's broader efforts to deliver more homes in established communities close to jobs, services and public amenities.

Recently I had the opportunity to visit Croydon South and inspect one of the sites currently revitalised under the Allan Labor government's small sites program, an initiative unlocking underutilised public land to deliver around 450 much-needed homes across Melbourne. The Croydon South site has deep local significance, occupying part of the former Croydon South Primary School, which merged with Tinternvale Primary School in 2008. In response to strong community advocacy, the remaining portion of the site was transferred to Maroondah council to expand Woodland Park, a valuable local asset. I commend the local community and Maroondah council for their constructive engagement on this project and the efforts to secure this outcome. Once completed, these new homes will be ideally situated close to Dorset Road shops, adjacent to the Croydon Special Developmental School and near the Bayswater North-Kilsyth South employment precinct. This model is an example of good planning and thoughtful use of land. I look forward to the minister's response.

Energy policy

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (18:28): (1667) My matter tonight is for the attention of the Minister for Energy and Resources, and it relates to the strong but clear comments, the well-founded comments, by Santos chief executive Kevin Gallagher, who did clearly attack the Victorian government's energy policy. He said the state's attitude towards investment was similar or akin to North Korea, warning clearly that the state's approach will lead to projects going offshore. There is mounting frustration, as he said, in the resources sector over Victoria's very aggressive approach to fossil fuels, but particularly its attack on gas. It has declared war on gas. There is no question about that. It has banned gas on new estates. It is in the process, through a regulatory impact statement – a flawed regulatory impact statement – of banning gas, seeking to ban gas in homes much more broadly, and replacing appliances both in rented premises and indeed in a whole range of new locations as well. This war on gas is a silly approach by this government. The government initially had exploration banned. They say that is removed now, but actually the government have jacked up fees and charges. The government has made it more difficult to actually get exploration underway. There has not been one new exploration permit issued in Victoria since 2013. Three of those permits were issued in Victoria in 2013, but there has not been one new permit for exploration for gas since.

We have got a declining gas volume coming out of Bass Strait. The state needs gas. We need it for several reasons. We need it to make sure that we have got proper peaking capacity with our electricity

so that when there is not sufficient wind or there is not sufficient solar there is sufficient gas to provide that peaking capacity. At the same time we need to make sure that gas is also there for homes. The government's proposal through its regulatory impact statement will see suburban homes across the state actually left cold and improperly or inadequately heated. Young people and kids will be left with cold bedrooms. This will be a frightening outcome for many in the community.

Our plan is very clear. We want to see gas brought forward. We want more exploration. Gas has got a very important role to play. What I want the minister to do is to sit down with the energy producers association and others in the gas industry and change her views.

Drought

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (18:32): (1668) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Agriculture. The action that I seek is for the minister to include animal sanctuaries in the state's drought relief program. Over the past 18 months large parts of northern Victoria have experienced record low rainfall, as confirmed by the Bureau of Meteorology. Despite this, many regions – in fact most regions – in my electorate are not currently listed in Agriculture Victoria's technical advice as being eligible for drought assistance.

I have spoken in this place before about the rescued sheep and horses that I care for at my home, and I know I am not alone in doing this. As well as farmers, there are wildlife carers and animal sanctuary operators across my electorate telling me daily that they are struggling to source enough fodder, feed and water. Many of them are at breaking point, having exhausted personal resources just to keep their animals alive. My electorate office is fielding calls from people who have stepped up to provide sanctuary to these animals, often surrendered by farmers who are no longer able to care for them in these conditions. These sanctuaries play a vital role in our communities, yet they have been entirely left out of the state's drought relief framework. The Macedon Ranges, where I live, and other parts across northern Victoria make up over 100,000 square kilometres yet remain ineligible for support despite experiencing the same, if not worse, conditions as other drought-affected regions.

I ask the minister to explain the technical levers Agriculture Victoria is using to determine eligibility and to reconsider the current criteria. These assessments must reflect on-the-ground realities, not just arbitrary thresholds. Further, I urge the minister to simplify the current application processes so that constituents can access help without having to navigate complex bureaucratic requirements. Most urgently, we must expand the definition of who is eligible for drought relief to include animal sanctuaries and wildlife carers – those who have taken responsibility for animals that would otherwise be left to suffer and to starve. They should not be left to shoulder this burden alone.

Economy

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (18:34): (1669) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs. Victoria's economy continues to grow, and with a strong labour market, the action I seek is for the minister to provide an update on the economic growth opportunities in eastern Victoria.

Craigieburn community hospital

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (18:34): (1670) My adjournment is for the Minister for Health. It has been seven long years and two elections since Labor promised a new community hospital in Craigieburn, a hospital that was completed last year but today remains behind a padlocked fence with no staff and no beds. You have heard about the pub with no beer, but here we have a hospital that no-one can use. Last week's budget confirmed that this commitment to opening the new Craigieburn community hospital has been pushed back to late 2026. Many residents have contacted me angry about this, and to be honest, I am angry about this. Hume City Council even passed a motion asking the government what on earth is going on with the Craigieburn community hospital. No-one seems to know, and the government keeps giving me, the community and the council non-responses. You have got a brand new community hospital sitting there behind literally a barbed wire

fence that is padlocked that no-one can access. We need proper healthcare services in the north. Our allied health services are being flogged with payroll tax under this government. We need a proper community hospital – we need an actual fully blown community hospital in an area like Craigieburn – but there is a community hospital that is there, built, that no-one can use. Residents are angry. I am angry. The community are really angry about this because we have got a brand new hospital there that no-one can use.

The people of Craigieburn and the people of the north – Mickleham, Greenvale and surrounds – deserve better than this Labor government. It is quite clear when you rack up \$194 billion of debt and are paying \$25 million a day in interest – over \$1 million an hour just to service the interest on the debt – and debt repayment becomes one of the largest growth items of expenditure in the budget that somebody has to pay for that, and unfortunately the people that are paying for that mismanagement under this government are the people of Craigieburn and the people of the northern suburbs, who lose out on access to decent health care because this government cannot manage money. The action I seek is for the Minister for Health to explain herself and why the funding for this hospital to open is not there and why they have pushed this opening back.

WorkCover premiums

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:37): (1671) My adjournment matter this evening is for the attention of the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC. I have recently met with several stakeholders to discuss yet another pressure on businesses that is making it difficult for people to succeed in Victoria. First, I met with a young couple that are trying to expand their tiling and interior design business. They expressed frustration with the difficulty of shifting from being sole traders to establishing a business with the potential for growth. The challenges they experienced included difficulty in estimating the up-front costs, making it difficult to budget for expected outlays; high premiums despite no claims history; and no differentiation between costs for staff doing admin tasks and staff doing site work. It was a really difficult meeting with them. They are a couple with a great business idea to provide for their family, but the escalation in materials, costs, taxes and other charges and then a much higher than expected insurance premium just slow any progress.

But they did not come with just their own story; they brought several case studies from other businesses. These included one that experienced an over 600 per cent growth in premiums over six years, with no claims history and an unblemished record, another business that collapsed after an incorrect charge that was not rectified quickly enough to save the business and one that suspected they might have been targeted after receiving several audits after raising concerns, despite no history of claims or safety issues. It is tough out there in business, but these are not isolated concerns.

I also met recently with South East Melbourne Manufacturers Alliance. They also raised concerns our WorkCover premiums are impacting manufacturers in the south-east. This relates to the impacts on 50 per cent of manufacturers in Melbourne that employ over 250,000 people. Of the members that they surveyed, 100 per cent of them had experienced an increase in premiums, with the average range from 25 to 55 per cent, and 100 per cent of them said that they would be forced to increase prices, reduce spending on capital investment or delay hiring new staff. They also noted other likely impacts, such as creating a deterrent to employment and incentives for under-reporting incidents.

To reflect some of the key concerns raised with my office, my request to the minister is to review premium calculations to ensure fairness and account for specific circumstances of businesses, to improve consultation and communication and to consider tax deductions or credits for businesses with a good safety record of no claims.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region public transport

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:39): (1672) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport. The state budget announced last week is another great budget for the south-east, including in the space of transport, with locked-in continuation

of route 881, with its extension from Merinda Park to Clyde North. It is one of many new routes servicing the Clyde North area. This confirmation comes on top of the recent extension of route 798 along Hardys Road into Clyde North as well as the forthcoming extension of the Bells Road bus route, the 831, south from Berwick. These are all very exciting developments in the space of public transport in my patch of the outer south-east, and I ask the minister to update the house on these improvements.

Police mental health services

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (18:40): (1673) My adjournment matter today is for the Minister for Police and regards access to critical mental health services with the closure of two mental health and wellbeing hubs in Knox and Geelong. The action I seek is for the minister to immediately appeal to the Treasurer for the reinstatement of funding for Victoria Police to ensure the continuation of access to critical mental health facilities across the state. It was recently reported that Victoria Police will no longer have access to the promised new mental health services in Knox and Geelong and the four planned mental health and wellbeing hubs across the state due to savage budget cuts by the Allan Labor government.

As a former police officer, I know how important it is to access a timely mental health service which includes a 24/7 staff crisis support line and a police psychology unit specialising in trauma exposure, especially when the state is in the middle of a crime crisis intensified by the watering down of the bail legislation by this Labor government and the leniency of sentencing repeat youth offenders, along with the cost-of-living issues we are experiencing. These men and women, some of whom are my former colleagues, are expected by the government to tackle dangerous offenders, confront gangs and organised crime syndicates and enforce laws and legislation day in, day out. They are exposed to horrific crime scenes and pick up the pieces after some dreadful accidents. Yet this Labor government has cut the funding to support these men and women on the front line keeping Victorians safe.

This Labor government has taken away the critical mental health support to keep these men and women mentally fit and healthy so they can be healthy and carry out their duties. The government is sending them out to perform endless tasks. Crime rates are only going up under this Allan government, and the drivers of crimes are getting worse. The exposure to traumatic crime scenes and incidents that police experience is higher than ever, so the need for timely mental health and wellbeing services is critical. We have seen a massive increase in crime in our streets, and now we are rubbing salt in the wounds of victims and the men and women who keep our streets safe. The Allan Labor government is not only cutting funds to the services that support these men and women; this goes deeper than people realise. The number of police suicides is at a high, a matter of great concern I have expressed in this chamber.

It is well known that with compounded stress or repeat exposure to traumatic incidents, a lack of timely mental health service support can have a large effect on a person's wellbeing – it can lead to depression and suicidal tendencies. In this year's budget the Allan Labor government cut \$50 million from the police budget. Policing is not a business, it is a public service. This must be rectified. I implore the minister to work with the Treasurer to have this funding reinstated, reverse the decision to close the health and wellbeing hubs in Geelong and Knox and proceed with the rollout of the four planned hubs across the state.

Early childhood education and care

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (18:44): (1674) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Children, and the action I seek is an explanation or clarification for why timelines for early education programs have been shifted – as announced in budget paper 3, page 207 – resulting in decreased grants and funding from the Department of Education. Early childhood education is one of the most powerful tools we have to set children up for the future. It is a period of critical brain development, but it is not just about learning letters or numbers. High-quality early education helps level the playing field. It gives every child the chance to build confidence and learn how to manage their emotions, and it helps with cognitive development as well as building their

social skills and equipping them for starting school. These benefits are even stronger when children from mixed backgrounds learn together in the same classroom. We must also pay attention to the young children who are most at risk of being left behind as a result of these early education programs being shifted, and that includes children growing up in disadvantaged communities, Indigenous children, children with disability and children learning English as an additional language. Evidence shows that these children stand to gain the most from attending strong, supportive early learning programs.

If the government is serious about inclusion and improving learning outcomes for every community, it needs to be investing in early childhood education programs, not making cuts at budget time. Minister, families and communities deserve to know why timelines around early education programs are shifting, because these decisions have real consequences and affect families. When we delay or limit access, we also risk holding children back.

Hawthorn West Primary School

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (18:45): (1675) My adjournment is for the Deputy Premier in the other place in his capacity as the Minister for Education. The action that I seek is for the minister to provide information on the positive impact that the Allan Labor government's investment in Hawthorn West Primary School will have on the broader community of Hawthorn.

The electorate of Hawthorn, which sits in my constituency of Southern Metro, is home to a number of fantastic public schools, including Hawthorn West. I had the pleasure of visiting Hawthorn West Primary just last week to see the latest on the Allan Labor government's investment to help upgrade and modernise schools across Victoria. Hawthorn West Primary School received \$5.7 million, invested by the Allan Labor government for the modernisation of school facilities and classrooms. By upgrading classrooms in block A at the school, we are helping improve the amenities, facilities and overall learning experience for students. The investments made under the plan for upgrades and modernisation were aimed at giving students better learning opportunities, providing substantial improvements to the school and by extension to the local community.

The Allan Labor government is investing in public schools to ensure that every student gets the best education possible, no matter where they are from. These investments add to the mission by ensuring students at Hawthorn West Primary are getting the very best, and that starts with upgrading and modernising their classrooms. I look forward to seeing the minister's response and informing my constituents of Southern Metro and throughout the electorate of Hawthorn of the positive and broader impacts these investments in local schools have for the community.

Recreational prospecting

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (18:47): (1676) My adjournment matter for the Minister for Energy and Resources concerns Resources Victoria's brand new proposal, published last Friday, to drastically increase regulatory fees for licence-holders across the mining and quarrying sectors. This will have knock-on consequences for businesses and construction costs across our state, but tonight I particularly want to focus on the impact on everyday Victorians who love fossicking and prospecting. These activities should be encouraged. I have spoken in the past about the physical and mental health benefits, the sense of community, the connection to the outdoors and its importance to regional economies. The consultation proposes two options: a uniform 234 per cent fee increase or a targeted increase of 211 per cent for the extractive industry and 247 per cent for the minerals sector. 'A 234 per cent increase?' you might ask. It is absurd.

The government claims it is about cost recovery. The taxpayers are subsidising the sector. But last year royalties from extractive industries in Victoria brought in \$133 million. That is a significant contribution to state revenue, yet the government insists those funds do not count toward running the regulator. It is like paying massive road tolls and then being charged again to repaint the road markings. This is the latest tax raid from a Labor government desperate for cash. The prospectors and the

fossickers will pay. Over 96,000 miners rights are currently on issue. This includes retirees, hobbyists, families and young people just giving it a go. They are not mining magnates, they are ordinary Victorians. The system is simple and cheap to administer: enter your details and print out a permit. You print it yourself. It is amazingly cheap for the government, yet still they want to increase the cost of a miner's right from \$27.80 to \$93.10. That is not cost recovery, it is a barrier to entry. People will be priced out, and that hurts individuals and regional communities alike. Worse, it encourages noncompliance. When fees triple, some will fossick without a licence. That means increased enforcement costs for rangers, investigations and prosecutions. The cost of chasing people will far outweigh the revenue raised. The Prospectors and Miners Association of Victoria were not consulted. The draft was dropped with only one month to respond and two predetermined outcomes, both unfair. Minister, I urge you: intervene, scrap this proposal and consult properly. Protect this proud Victorian tradition dating back to the 1855 miner's right, and remember what happened the last time the government tried to exploit mining fees to bolster its revenue.

Southside Justice sex worker legal program

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:50): (1677) My adjournment matter is for the Attorney-General, and the action I seek is for their advocacy to ensure funding for Southside Justice's sex worker legal program. In 2022 the Victorian government changed the law to finally recognise sex work as legitimate work and aimed to improve safety, health and human rights for workers across the state. Southside Justice's sex worker legal program is one of just two legal programs for sex workers in Australia and has seen demand for its services continue to grow year on year. Since 2022 it has provided free specialist legal services to hundreds of sex workers facing stigma, discrimination and unsafe working conditions who would otherwise be unable to access justice.

I would like to share just one example, noting that names have been changed with permission. This program helped people like Annie. Annie provided commercial sex services to Trayvon, who later made it clear that he had no intention of paying. Annie was unable to afford private legal help and was referred to the sex worker legal program. It was there that she was supported to pursue a civil and criminal case, as fraudulent consent could be considered sexual assault under Victorian law. Trayvon has since paid the debt, and the criminal case is ongoing. This story of non-payment and sexual assault is all too common. People involved in the sex industry face stigma, inequality and power imbalances on top of existing barriers to justice. This is why specialist, trauma-informed legal support is so important.

I was deeply disappointed that the Victorian government ignored my calls to fund this program in a recent state budget. Other sources of funding for the program will cease in December, placing the program at serious risk of closure. At the same time, the legislation that decriminalised sex work in Victoria will soon be up for review. A failure to fund this program and support the invaluable contribution to a future review is a mistake. Funding for the sex worker legal program is vital to improving the safety and wellbeing of all sex workers and for the effective decriminalisation of sex work. So I ask: will the Attorney-General advocate to ensure funding for Southside Justice's sex worker legal program?

Glen Eira College

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (18:52): (1678) My adjournment matter tonight is for the Minister for Education, and the action that I seek is an update on the progress of construction of the new building at Glen Eira College. Glen Eira College is a great government secondary school in Caulfield and has underway a \$16.5 million upgrade program which is building a brand new year 9 and 10 building on an old asphalt site on the corner of Miriam Street and Booran Road – three storeys, including a roof deck and great new learning spaces. I went down and visited the school recently and saw that things were looking really good. I would like to get an update from the minister on the progress of that construction project and the benefits it is going to bring to the school community.

Yan Yean Road, Yarrambat

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (18:53): (1679) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and the action that I seek is for the minister to confirm that there will be no acquisition of private property between Bannons Lane and Laurie Street on Yan Yean Road for the stage 2 upgrade. If she cannot, will the minister join me at a meeting with affected residents to hear their concerns about the current design for the project?

I recently received an email from a constituent of mine who was very concerned after receiving news that a compulsory acquisition of land from his and 18 other properties along Yan Yean Road was being proposed. Newly released plans show that the designers have chosen to build an extra-wide median strip along the stretch of Yan Yean Road between Bannons Lane and Laurie Street. In 2019 the residents received a letter from VicRoads indicating that there would be no acquisition of their property for the stage 2 upgrade of Yan Yean Road. But now lawyers have shown them details of a proposed new overlay along that stretch of road that would require the acquisition of 6 metres of depth from the front of these residential properties to allow the road to widen, and the residents are not happy about it.

Bringing an 80-kilometre road right up to the front of their homes will cause a significant increase in road noise and negatively impact the peace and quiet of the country homes that they bought precisely for the tranquillity of the area. The land removal would also take away valuable car parking space, making it difficult to host friends and visitors. While residents would receive compensation for the land, the change would also force residents to incur costs for double glazing of their windows and developing their property frontage to remove vegetation and build pavement for parking. The design choice seems senseless. The extra-wide median strip is not obviously necessary for any reason of safety or traffic flow. Even if the median strip was necessary, the required land could be taken from the other side of the road, where there are no residential homes, just vacant land, and where the human impact of compulsory acquisition would be insignificant.

Residents believe that the driving force behind the decision to acquire their land is an environmental outcome. The environmental impact statement for Yan Yean Road stage 2 duplication says that the wide median strip was chosen so that vegetation can be planted there to offset the removal of native vegetation elsewhere. But the environment effects statement also notes that the median strip is not strictly necessary in that location, that there will be some vegetation impacts regardless and that the median strip should not be treated as a design constraint if a better outcome can be achieved. Minister, I urge you to find a better outcome for these people, because to remove 70 trees in order to plant 20 on a median strip is not a good outcome. As my constituent noted in his email, acquiring a strip of land 6 metres deep from the front of their properties would require the removal of those 70 trees.

Victorian bank levy

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:56): (1680) My adjournment matter tonight is to the Treasurer, and the action I seek is for her to introduce a levy on the big banks to help everyday Victorians. The RBA recently cut interest rates another quarter of a per cent. Let us be clear, and do not get me wrong, people will be pleased to see this cut. But in this cost-of-living crisis, it just does not seem like enough. With things like education, health care, groceries and rent increasing by 20 per cent, a quarter of a per cent cannot make up for that. But the big banks can afford to pass along this cut and more. Despite what they may say, the big banks can definitely afford to lower their mortgage rates. In the last six months alone, ANZ made record revenue of \$11 billion in half-year results. So how can they be raking it in, breaking records, while so many are struggling? Allegedly part of it is explained by them underpaying their staff. Part of it comes from massive investments in things like fossil fuels, AI, you name it – if it makes them money, they will do it. But mostly their profits come from hardworking Victorians just trying to pay off their mortgage. The average home loan pays the big banks over \$200,000 in pure profit alone, making Australian banks very profitable by world standards. Surely they could afford to pass on more than a measly quarter of a per cent cut. The big

bank levy that I am proposing would barely affect these institutions, but it could make all the difference for people struggling to pay their mortgages, and it can pay for the schools, for the hospitals and for the services that we all rely on. Tax them and get it done.

Suburban Rail Loop

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:58): (1681) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop. The new budget proudly doubles down on the Suburban Rail Loop, but buried in budget paper 4 is a quietly devastating admission that the Commonwealth contribution to the SRL funding is still to be confirmed. In other words, there has been no commitment for that \$11 billion or so, just as there is no mechanism for the value capture component of the funding. I will reiterate again and again that when this project was first budgeted at \$34 billion the formula was that \$11 billion would come from state borrowing and the balance would come in cash from value capture and from the federal government. Now, the fact is that the federal contribution has not come – it is to be confirmed – and the value capture does not kick in until the project is complete. That means in a practical sense that the whole project has to be funded by debt until such time that either of those two things arrive. What happens if that money does not materialise? What concerns me deeply is that, as the budget itself states, there is no credible contingency if value capture falls short or if the federal funding is not received, and the budget itself notes this.

Victorians deserve true and full transparency on the future of their suburbs, their finances and their open space. All of these are at risk because in the undefined value capture mechanism there are absolutely Wild West planning rules being put in place that would destroy local character and destroy quality of life for the people who actually live in those suburbs. But particularly in the context of our budget and the risk to our credit rating, it is simply unacceptable to have ‘to be confirmed’ on critical funding for the largest single project in the state. So the action I seek from the minister is to immediately release a detailed public report outlining the current status of Commonwealth negotiations, a breakdown of value capture forecasts and, critically, a risk assessment explaining what will happen if these assumed revenues do not eventuate.

Responses

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (19:01): There were 19 adjournment matters this evening, and all will be referred to the relevant and appropriate minister for response.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 7:01 pm.