

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne – Tuesday 19 May 2026

### **MEMBERS**

Sarah Connolly – Chair

John Pesutto – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Richard Riordan

Meng Heang Tak



**WITNESSES**

Enver Erdogan MLC, Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation; and

Emma Cassar, Secretary,

Emma Catford, Deputy Secretary, Justice Services and Regulation,

Kathryn Bannon, Deputy Secretary, Justice System Coordination and Reform,

Bree Oliver, Chief Operating Officer, Tobacco Licensing Victoria,

Simone Cusack, Executive Director, Gaming and Liquor,

Suzy Neilan, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission, and

Chris Carter, Chief Operating Officer, Liquor Control Victoria, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and it is broadcast live on the Parliament's website. The broadcast includes automated captioning. Members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during hearings and anything you say can be picked up, even if you say it quietly.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards our witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation the Honourable Enver Erdogan, as well as officials from DJCS. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time the committee will ask you some questions. Your time starts now.

**Visual presentation.**

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Thank you, Chair and all committee members, for the opportunity to speak today on behalf of the casino, gaming and liquor regulation portfolio. This year has been a big year for us, in particular with our new tobacco licensing scheme, which kicked off from 1 July. Enforcement on the ground began on 1 February. You will see we have had about 5000 tobacco licence applications and over 3000 licences granted. Since starting regulation on the ground with inspectors we have had over 3.8 million cigarettes taken off the streets, and \$6 million worth of tobacco products have been seized in this period.

In the gambling and casino regulation space the VGCCC has continued to modernise gambling regulation through intelligence-led and risk-based oversight and stronger collaboration between law enforcement and partner agencies to focus on efforts where the highest risk activities take place. This complements the framework that we strengthened, especially as we all know the history of the VGCCC post the royal commission.

Liquor regulation is also a matter of big public interest. I know that every member of both houses of Parliament contact me on issues relating to liquor licences in their community, so we know how important it is as a driver of economic growth but also safe liquor consumption. We regulate 23,900 licensees, including hotels, bars,

nightclubs, bottle shops and major events like the grand prix and the Australian Open. Fee relief occurred this summer during the bushfires, and we supported over 137 licensees through that process. Liquor inspectors are active across Victoria, monitoring compliance with licences and making sure there is responsible service of alcohol. We also have a new initiative, the new responsible service of alcohol training, which helps licensees and staff working in venues and stores to identify, prevent and respond to sexual assault and harassment, making Victoria's hospitality sector safer for everyone.

Could I go to the next slide, please. Tobacco Licensing Victoria obviously has probably got the largest amount of interest as it is the first ever tobacco licence scheme we have had in our state's history. There was significant investment in last year's budget of \$46 million, dedicated to setting up this new licensing scheme, with an additional \$13 million investment in this year's budget to strengthen additional enforcement, as greater powers will be implemented later this year, such as closure powers that I know many of you have taken an interest in. That was an announcement that the industry welcomed, because this is all about making sure we level the playing field due to the criminal element in this sector, which the police in particular are focused on.

On the next slide, we have the gambling harm and prevention response model. The department has continued to coordinate the gambling harm prevention response model, working closely with the Department of Health, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and the VGCCC. A number of independently researched gambling harm papers have been funded through the department. In 2026 there is another round that will examine the relationship between gambling harm and family violence. Planning is underway for the next round as well in relation to a Victorian population and gambling and health study, which is to be conducted in 2027.

Alongside strong regulatory activity to hold industry to account, the VGCCC continues to deliver gambling harm awareness campaigns for Victoria. We do have strong gambling regulation. We also had our mandatory account-based play trial, which was through October–November across 43 venues in Monash, Greater Dandenong and Ballarat. As of 1 December 2025 we have new load-up limits so that no-one can load up more than \$100 at a time on gaming machines and we have slowed down spin rates by 40 per cent. That builds on the work that we have already done in terms of harm minimisation, such as closure periods between 4 am and 10 am at all gaming venues across the city. Also Crown is continuing with their Melbourne transformation plan.

I might go to the last slide, if I may. Liquor Control Victoria – liquor licences are being issued 15 per cent, or seven days faster, on average in 2025–26, and I am happy to report that. We are seeing inspectors across regional and metropolitan Melbourne at all hours. Inspectors are focused on high-harm breaches and high-risk times. The liquor regulator has shut down venues that are having a harmful effect. Liquor Control Victoria will continue to work closely with partners, including police, local councils, community groups and industry, to minimise and prevent liquor harm. Over 30,000 people have completed the new RSA training that helps staff, and we know that is really important. We have made improvements to the website to provide timely information for people that want to access it in the most convenient way. That might conclude my –

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Minister. The first 13 minutes – that would be dangerous, giving you the wrong time, Deputy Chair – are going to the Deputy Chair.

**John PESUTTO:** Thank you, Minister, good afternoon and good afternoon officials. Minister, I refer to the government's decision to grant the Lottery Corporation a 40-year extension of its exclusive Victorian lottery licence. Does the agreement make any reference to tax arrangements, and if so, does it amend the basis upon which taxes are payable by the Lottery Corporation?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Thank you, Mr Pesutto. That agreement was entered into with a focus on delivering the greatest value to our state. This licence extension is in fact the highest price ever paid for a lottery licence in our country. In terms of the settings, I do need to be careful about what I am able to disclose, understanding that there is commercial confidentiality around these agreements. But I –

**John PESUTTO:** Sorry to interrupt, Minister, but can I ask: surely an agreement that has been settled and concluded that involves taxes to be paid by an entity in Victoria is no longer subject to commercial in confidence, really, is it? Should that be shielded from the Victorian people?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I was getting to that specific question. Victoria's lottery tax is the highest in the nation, and you will see in BP5, on page 23, the annual revenue we do collect from the lottery licence. We already

have the highest tax rate. I think the question you are getting to is the material adverse change clauses that are quite common in licence leases. I can confirm that we do have a provision that aligns Victoria with New South Wales and South Australia, so there can be no material adverse change to those tax settings going forward.

**John PESUTTO:** Sorry, I am just trying to understand. Does that mean there is no tax change or that there is a tax change and it will not be changed any further?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** There is no further tax change, because we already have the highest rate in the nation, but as part of the extension there is a clause that means that we cannot change the tax rate. We cannot increase the tax rate.

**John PESUTTO:** Right. Sorry, I do not mean to labour the point, but just so I can understand it and viewers can understand it, as a result of the deal, which obviously extends the operation, there is no change to the taxes to be paid?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** No.

**John PESUTTO:** Okay. Minister, was the government asked by the Lottery Corporation to change any laws that allowed the extension, and if so, when was that request made?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** In terms of laws requested by them, we did have legislative changes in 2025. They were about providing the greatest flexibility to the state. That was really generated via the department governance policy so that we could maximise value for the state.

**John PESUTTO:** Am I right to understand, Minister, that in anticipation of the extension being granted to the Lottery Corporation, the government made legislative changes in 2025? Is that a correct understanding?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I would not describe it that way. I understand the Treasurer provided a detailed timeline to this hearing on Friday. I think when the legislation was drafted, the goal was to maximise value irrespective of this lottery licence, because the changes were actually much broader than that. It was about the independent review panel to add additional oversight to a range of licensing arrangements and settings in this space, so not just for one company. We do not make laws just for one company. We made it for the broader settings, and that is why the legislation was so broad.

**John PESUTTO:** Can I clarify, Minister, that at the time of those legislative changes they were being made whether or not an extension was to be granted to the Lottery Corporation?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Yes, because those changes were far-reaching and beyond just the Lottery Corporation.

**John PESUTTO:** Thank you for that. At the time of the legislative changes, can you advise this committee whether there were any negotiations with the Lottery Corporation to your knowledge at that time? That is the time of the legislative changes being introduced and passed through Parliament?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** No. It is some time ago, but I think the Treasurer set down the timeframe. Initially, you would appreciate, the process in terms of the market sounding in relation to the lottery licence, which was 20 June –

**John PESUTTO:** Sorry, if it makes it any easier, I am just trying to try to zero in on one aspect, not the whole chronology. But at the time of the legislative changes were discussions afoot between the government and the Lottery Corporation?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** When the legislation was introduced to the Parliament, I believe that was in April 2025, at that time there was consideration of a range of licences that may be affected by the legislation, including this one.

**John PESUTTO:** And, Minister, had you received any written briefs, oral briefs or any other advice from your department or any agency of government about the possibility of the granting of an extension of a licence, at that time in April 2025?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Before that time, because I assumed the role in December 2024. Across January I received a number of verbal briefs from the department about a number of licensing and gaming settings.

**John PESUTTO:** About this one in particular, the Lottery Corporation being granted a 40-year –

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Including this one, but not limited to this one.

**John PESUTTO:** Sorry, Minister. I don't mean to speak over you. But just to clarify, you had received briefs from the time you assumed your duties as minister, briefs not only but specifically dealing with a granting of a 40-year extension to the Lottery Corporation.

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Not a 40-year, but a potential extension to a range of licensing and gaming settings in the portfolio.

**John PESUTTO:** On that basis, can I go back then to just a few moments ago when I was asking you about it. At the time of the legislative changes, those changes were being introduced into this Parliament at a time when you had and possibly were still being briefed on the possibility of licence extensions in relation to the Lottery Corporation?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think the implications of the legislation I was advised on, one of the implications was that it would affect the range of our licences that we have in the gaming space, including this one.

**John PESUTTO:** Minister, can you advise this committee whether you or any member of your staff or any person on your behalf, if not a member of your staff, ever met with any representatives, agents or authorised spokespeople for the Lottery Corporation at any point?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I can confirm I have never met with anyone from the Lottery Corporation. In terms of my staff, my staff meet with a range of stakeholders in this portfolio, but like I said, I personally have not met with anyone from the Lottery Corporation.

**John PESUTTO:** Minister, being a responsible minister, you have protocols in place as to the expectations of staff members in relation to meetings with organisations that have significant contracts with the Victorian government?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think all staff members, especially staff of members of the executive, have a code of conduct, and there are obviously probity requirements for that, so I would expect everyone to adhere to them.

**John PESUTTO:** To your knowledge, whether you have been advised in writing or orally or otherwise, are you aware of any meetings or discussions between members of your staff and any employee or agent or officer of the Lottery Corporation?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Look, I think my staff meet with a range of stakeholders, and I cannot really comment on behalf of each of the discussions they have. It is quite appropriate that my staff do engage with stakeholders. I have never met with anyone from the Lottery Corporation or have had any direct discussions with them in relation to this matter.

**John PESUTTO:** Have you had any indirect discussions with them?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I have not had discussions with them about this matter.

**John PESUTTO:** Any written communications with them?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I know a lot of the discussions about the licence extension were overseen by the independent probity adviser at a departmental level, and obviously the department were advising me on the process.

**John PESUTTO:** I was going to come to that, but I will come to it now. Without disclosing anything that is genuinely subject to commercial in confidence, but to the best of your knowledge, Minister, who was conducting the negotiations? And in relation to your answer to that question, can I ask: who initiated the discussions about a licence extension, and then who was involved in those discussions going forward?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** In terms of the process, some of it precedes my time, to be frank. The previous minister for gaming and the previous Treasurer initiated a market assessment and sought commercial advice about –

**John PESUTTO:** Did you have access to that market assessment, Minister?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I was advised about it through the process. Of course when we entered into it more formally, I sought out an expression of interest, once I was advised that the best value would be captured by a bilateral arrangement, in line with what has occurred in other states, such as –

**John PESUTTO:** Can I just unpack that – again, sorry to interrupt, I just want to get clarity on this. So at some time prior to your appointment as a minister, there had been an assessment of the market?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Yes.

**John PESUTTO:** And am I right to understand that assessment was: ‘What’s the best possible price? How many people can we involve in this’, if you like, ‘tender process to see who can give us the best value for money?’ Would that be a fair summary of what was going on?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I would not describe it that way, but I think the market assessment commercial advice was that the Lottery Corporation was best placed to have, I guess, off-market discussions with about a possible extension. That is what occurred in other states.

**John PESUTTO:** Do you know why? Do you know who provided that advice?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** In the commercial advice?

**John PESUTTO:** Again, I am not asking you to disclose what the advice was, but do you know who provided that advice?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I received that via the department, in terms of that commercial advice and –

**John PESUTTO:** Was any external consultant or law firm or market advisory firm engaged to do that?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** That advice was led by DTF and the former Minister for Finance’s office. But yes, so that is –

**John PESUTTO:** Sorry, Minister. That would be the Treasurer and the Minister for Finance at the time. Those two ministers were involved, and DTF undertook an analysis.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Was it the minister or the departments, or we do not know?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** The department advice.

**Mathew Hilakari** interjected.

**John PESUTTO:** I will ask the questions, Mr Hilakari.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, but let me just say this again, Deputy Chair: please do not put words into the mouths of ministers.

**John PESUTTO:** No. The minister is experienced; he can answer the questions.

**The CHAIR:** This is not *Law & Order*; just ask the questions. It is the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

**John PESUTTO:** Minister, you mentioned the market assessment.

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Yes.

**John PESUTTO:** I presume that assessment, am I correct, was an assessment to see whether it would be worthwhile going to the market or having a bilateral negotiation?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Yes. My understanding and the advice I received were that an off-market process was the best process to extract the greatest value, and that was the process that was undertaken in Queensland and South Australia, understanding that the Lottery Corporation has coverage of every state except for WA.

**John PESUTTO:** So by the time you became a minister, and tell me if any of this is wrong, there had been an analysis undertaken by the Treasurer and the Minister for Finance, the Department of Treasury and Finance, which by the time you became a minister had concluded – again, tell me if I am wrong – that rather than go to the market and invite tenders from other organisations who could provide the same service, the government was going to proceed with an exclusive bilateral negotiation to culminate in a licence extension with the Lottery Corporation. Is that correct?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** As part of that process, at all times if the government did not believe it captured value, there was an opportunity to of course seek other parties and entertain other offers. But initially that was the plan to proceed with the Lottery Corporation, based on that commercial advice.

**John PESUTTO:** And to your knowledge, and I think it is implicit in what you are saying, but again I just want to clarify for the record: at no time after you became a minister, are you aware of any event or occasion where the government felt that it should go to the market? In other words, am I right from your comments to understand that the government proceeded, at all times after its assessment, with a bilateral exclusive negotiation with the Lottery Corporation and had no occasion or reason at any point after that to go back to the market?

**Mathew Hilakari** interjected.

**John PESUTTO:** I am asking the minister whether that is correct. If it is not, he can tell me.

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think the agreement delivers the highest price ever paid for an Australian lottery licence, and it was also consideration that it also provided certainty for the 800 small businesses, newsagents and retailers that rely on this network.

**John PESUTTO:** Thank you very much, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** I would not want to be accused of wasting your time, Deputy Chair.

**John PESUTTO:** It was 13 minutes, wasn't it?

**The CHAIR:** I am the timekeeper here, and that was your clock. The next 18 minutes are going to Ms Kathage.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. Minister, I want to ask about Tobacco Licensing Victoria and the rollout of the new scheme. On page 97 of the performance statement you can see \$72.3 million spent in 2025–26 for the output. That includes the tobacco regulation objective. Can you update the committee on how the first few months of enforcement activity has been progressing? I did meet one of your new officers; he is one of our fantastic CFA volunteers, and he has become an inspector. What has the progress been in the first few months since it commenced, and how is it beginning to crack down on illegal tobacco?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Thanks, Ms Kathage. It is really a great pleasure to be able to speak about our new tobacco licensing scheme. It is really nation leading. Our goal is to have the toughest regulator in the nation. We never had a regulator in this space before, but we know that this is a national issue and a national problem that requires a national approach, and in Victoria we want to make sure we are doing our bit. That is why we set out to create a new regulator. We have Bree Oliver here, who is our first ever Chief Operating Officer of the new regulator. That is about making sure that we can crack down on illegal operators and back honest businesses doing the right thing.

We did not know the size of this market initially. We had different estimates of the size, but now we do know that we have had about 5000 applications and 3000 plus approvals, which has meant that we are able to target people doing the wrong thing. We have had a strong start, I feel – almost 4 million cigarette sticks taken off our streets, \$6.5 million worth of products off our streets, which is a strong start. But importantly as well, I think

Tobacco Licensing Victoria is working closely with other agencies, both in Victoria – like Victoria Police – but also Commonwealth agencies, which also have a big role in tackling this issue.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you. You spoke about honest retailers. What are we doing to support them to be part of the new scheme and to meet and understand the new licensing requirements?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think that making sure we do not overburden legitimate businesses was a big consideration as part of setting up this new regulator. We wanted to make sure that the enforcement was focused on a risk basis. We did not want to go after the, I guess, large supermarkets that are following the laws and have strong compliance. We wanted to target more risky operators, obviously relying on intelligence. A lot of that intelligence comes from the community, so if anyone knows of a vendor doing the wrong thing, please report it. This is intelligence-led enforcement. But again, I will say that the initial feedback is that the licensing process, first up, obviously would be quite onerous, because we want to make sure we get all the right details for the proprietors. But in terms of backing retailers, it is about strengthening the system, and \$13 million in this year's budget means more inspectors on the ground. It also will allow us to resource the new closure powers, and there will be an education piece to go with that. As we know, those closure powers will not be exclusive to the regulator. Victoria Police will also share in those new powers.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** And I guess the other side of that coin then is illicit tobacco and organised crime and the connection there. I saw on page 5 of BP3 more than \$13 million to strengthen Tobacco Licensing Victoria with the additional inspectors and implementation of those new store closure powers that you just spoke about. Can you update the committee on the new powers and additional frontline resources and how they are going to strengthen that crackdown on illicit tobacco?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** As I stated in my opening presentation, Ms Kathage, that is right. The \$13 million will be, I feel, a game changer. Closing stores is an important message as well, because we have seen too many times where legitimate businesses are affected by competition from illegitimate businesses. Before having this retailer list, it was difficult to tell and be able to gather intelligence on who was doing the wrong thing. But now we have a list of all the legitimate businesses, so you can go online and check it out yourself. If you see someone selling tobacco and they are not on that list, then that means they are probably an illegal operator, and we want to make sure we hold them to account.

Closure powers are a key incentive. Those powers are about empowering landlords. We also have this difficulty where landlords can be bogged down in lease agreement disputes, and this will give them stronger powers to be able to take action. It will also crack down on landlords that do not do the right thing and turn a blind eye to this behaviour – because some of these criminal syndicates can be quite lucrative – and will give us powers to take action against them too. There are multiple sides of this, but the goal is to make sure it is harder to sell and harder to profit from.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** It is obvious that organised crime is using shopfronts and commercial premises as part of that illicit trade. Can you take the committee through how the proposed landlord penalties and lease termination powers will work?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Yes. When we set out to introduce these laws – and I want to give a shout-out to a lot of the sector, in particular, who have been quite vocal, from convenience stores to retail associations to many others, on the need for these laws – we looked at what was drafted in South Australia and Queensland. We thought there were good examples they had done. They are a bit more advanced in some of this work, and we wanted to make sure our settings were the toughest, so we looked at their settings. Landlords should have a clear power to terminate leases where a long-term closure order applies to a premises involved in illicit tobacco activity. We wanted to make sure we empowered them. That is what is in place in New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia. We also wanted to make sure that no-one could turn a blind eye to this criminal activity. Ultimately it is about protecting legitimate businesses. We have looked at other jurisdictions. They already had a regulator in place of course, so we have set up a regulator. Now we are strengthening the enforcement. But at the same time – I guess all of you are probably watching; I am not sure if you have been reading the news – there is a Senate inquiry ongoing in Canberra looking at these exact matters, so I will look forward to that inquiry's outcomes too.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you. Back to the ‘Department Performance Statement’ and that \$72.3 million spend for liquor, tobacco, gambling and casino regulation, including those measures to support safer venues and effective liquor regulation, I am wondering about how the government is supporting Victoria’s hospitality sector while also improving safety in those licensed venues.

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think we all know the link between alcohol and domestic violence and the link between alcohol and other social harms. I think this is an important harm minimisation measure that many of our stakeholders were calling for. It is in many regards nation leading. It is mandatory RSA training on harassment that has been rolled out. It is an online module, acknowledging that the workforce is quite mobile in these fields. Also, for victims of abuse themselves it can be quite traumatic, so we thought an online module might be a bit easier to roll out to reach everyone across our state, knowing that the service of alcohol spans every part of our great state and this is an opportunity for them to be part of the training. This is in particular for late-night venues, bars, hotels and bottle shops, and it is delivered online at no cost. That was another key objective. We did not want to overburden businesses doing the right thing. I might pass to Emma Catford, who might want to expand on the rollout of the RSA obligations.

**Emma CATFORD:** Yes. Thank you for the question.

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Our Deputy Secretary, by the way. Sorry, I should have introduced you.

**Emma CATFORD:** Not at all. As the minister noted, that training was rolled out late last year, and we have had funding received in order to develop that training. It is an e-learn module delivered through multiple channels, and it is at no cost to participants as well, as the minister has noted, to try and make it as accessible as possible. The training also includes necessary warning signs and referral pathways to appropriate services for people so they can refer patrons and in particular to support victim-survivors who are required to undertake the training and may have experienced sexual assault or harassment themselves. It has very much been trauma informed in its development. I think the intent is that the training would be refreshed and a participant would need to complete that every three years, but it is also a mandatory condition for new licensees. If they are starting out, all staff would complete that at the time. It is for the supply of alcohol in general, as well as on-premises packaged liquor, so it covers a raft of different licensed venues.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you. Minister, you touched on the importance of supporting hospitality venues and local venues across the state. With some venues doing it tough this year, particularly with the bushfires or through financial hardship, what support has been provided to them through the liquor licence fee waivers?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Thanks, Ms Kathage. I know that as someone that is a peri-urban MP you understand the challenges of bushfires firsthand. Your community in the past has been affected deeply, and I know these are matters that you are passionate about. The bushfires did have a significant impact across the state, and many of the businesses were greatly affected. As soon as this happened, the department, to give them credit, and I talked about options to support affected communities. One way was to give liquor licence fee relief and waivers for venues impacted, and that is what we have done. More than 100 bushfire-affected licensees, including venues near fire-affected areas and also businesses whose stock was destroyed at the Harcourt Co-operative Cool Stores fire, were given relief and support by our government. This builds on the support the Allan Labor government has provided for communities that have been affected by the bushfires. Obviously now we are in more of a recovery phase as we head towards winter, some months after the events, but that work continues. There obviously will be other applications on a case-by-case basis. You need to draw the line somewhere. That is always the challenge, actually, because there are communities that are directly affected, and they of course have direct access to that support, but then you need to draw the line. So it is case by case. If people have a situation, we are always open to hearing those cases. I know the department is also very open to supporting those businesses. But obviously they need to still, based on merit, consider that support for hardship or any other reason. That is really important too. Ultimately it is about backing regional communities and supporting local jobs. For a lot of people – I can see some former retail workers and retail union officials, Michael – their first job is in retail or hospitality, and these are exactly the jobs that are available in our regions and communities across our state.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you. I can see from objective 6 in the ‘Department Performance Statement’ that gambling harm reduction remains a key objective of the government’s gambling regulation framework.

Can you update us on the gambling reforms – those landmark reforms that the government introduced – and how they are helping to reduce gambling harm across Victoria?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** These are the changes that I am really most proud of, having been minister in this role for 18 months now – being part of a government that has taken strong action to minimise harm and to have reforms that are putting people first and putting power back into the hands of people. I look at Mr Hilakari – he is nodding – Mr Tak, you and Mr Galea. Everyone, especially on the government side, has reached out to me in the last 18 months, talking about the harm that gambling has caused in their community and how we can mitigate that risk, understanding that this is a legitimate recreational activity for many. Many people do gamble responsibly, but there are many people that do fall through the gaps, and we need to be there for them and make sure that the safeguards are there. I talked in the presentation about 1 December being a key date, because 1 December 2025 was in fact the date when we slowed down the spin rates and therefore slowed down the losses and when we implemented changes to load-up limits from \$1000 to \$100. I do not like reflecting on other jurisdictions in this chamber, but I was in New South Wales not too long ago – I am indulging in the hearing today – and they were telling me about how they had reduced their load-up limits to \$500 and how that was really important reform, and it was. It is all relative. I thank my New South Wales colleagues, but I think we have gone further in that time – down to a \$100 load-up limit. We are really nation leading in relation to this work. I know harm minimisation is something that we all take very seriously.

Some of you asked about account-based play. That has obviously been implemented at the Crown Casino already, with world-leading, account-based play reforms at Crown. That is in place also on all electronic machines at the casino. I am not sure if any of you go to the casino often, but if you do – if you wander in – you can register. It is a pretty straightforward process. All the right safeguards are in place. Crown has already led that way. That is part of their transformation, and they are doing that work diligently. They have a transformation plan that is being overseen by the VGCCC – important work that was obviously one of the recommendations and conditions of them keeping their licence. But the rollout of account-based play is progressing. We have just commenced the facial recognition technology trial at a number of venues across our state; that will complement that work. But I think we need to look at other technologies as well. This space is changing quite fast. I know there are a few proposals out there that I think could be groundbreaking, because we know the harm that unregulated gaming can cause, so we want to make sure it is regulated, it is safe, that people set their own limits and that they can stick to those limits, and obviously venues as proprietors share that responsibility with us as the state as licensees. We are doing that work, it is coming along nicely I feel, and I am proud to say that we are leading the nation.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Minister. I want to move on to gambling harm research now. I can see it on page 61 of the ‘Department Performance Statement’. Can I ask what funding – and perhaps one of your officials might assist us – has the government allocated for gambling harm research, and how will that inform future policy reforms?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I am really excited; there is a lot happening. We funded a number of research studies, some that will be nation leading, and they touch upon very topical issues like, say, the link with domestic violence, but also groundbreaking new research – and I need to treat it very sensitively because there are many people impacted – that we are going to announce on the link between suicide and gambling harm. I think there is growing evidence. There have been a number of high-profile cases, and I want to express my deepest sympathy to all the families affected. But I think this research is crucial, and we are funding that research. I might pass over to Simone to just expand on some of that gambling research work that is happening.

**Simone CUSACK:** Thank you, Minister. In addition to the research that you have just mentioned, the department is in the final stages of its latest grants round as part of the gambling harm prevention and response model, which is looking at the link between family violence and gambling. The recipients of those grants will be announced in due course, once the final decisions have been made. Consistent with the approach since the new model has been established, all that research is being published on the department’s website in line with the commitment that had been made following the decommissioning of the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** I remember in our inquiry into gambling harm we heard evidence about the percentage of women presenting to emergency departments following family violence and how high the percentage was of people whose partners had just had a gambling loss, and then the women ended up in

emergency departments. So it is really important research that you are commissioning, and I really commend you on that. Thank you very much.

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Thanks, Ms Kathage.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We are going to go to Mr Puglielli.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. Just picking up the exchange from earlier, Minister, the government passed the Gambling Legislation Amendment Bill 2025, allowing multidecade lotto deals to be negotiated in private. And then of course this year the government signed a 40-year exclusive deal with the Lottery Corporation. But during the period that those laws enabling those types of multidecade deals were being prepared – 2022 to 2025 – the Labor Party received over \$165,000 in donations from the Lottery Corporation. So my question, Minister, is: do you accept that there is a substantial real or perceived conflict of interest here, Labor being the party in government and receiving massive donations while amending laws or, in the case of this budget, signing contracts that have exclusively benefited your donor?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Mr Puglielli, I think I said in Parliament last week, and I know you were in the chamber, that I was not even aware of those donations until after they became public. Since that time I have discovered that the Lottery Corporation in fact donated to both major parties.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Minister, can you guarantee that your staff have not met any lobbyists on behalf of the Lottery Corporation?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** My staff meet and liaise with a range of stakeholders, including people from the gaming sector, from the harm minimisation sector and social work across the board.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** But a guarantee – can you guarantee they have not met with them?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** My staff speak to a range of stakeholders, and they always act appropriately.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** But in full seriousness, Minister, am I to take from your response you cannot guarantee that illegal activity has not occurred in relation to your office given the prohibition on lobbyists in relation to public lottery licences?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I reject the premise of that question, Mr Puglielli. Illegal behaviour should be referred to the appropriate bodies.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Do you accept, Minister, that accepting significant donations to the party that is in government at the same time that exclusive public contracts are being negotiated with the donor is a really bad look for integrity and public confidence in your government's integrity, especially in relation to this portfolio?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** In relation to this portfolio and any portfolio, we have disclosure laws around donations, and they should be appropriately disclosed. They are not relevant factors for me. I was not even aware of this donation until after it became public.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Minister, the Premier has told Parliament that the process around this deal was conducted with appropriate probity. Do you agree with her?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Yes, I do. Commercial advice was sought, it was overseen by an independent probity advisor and there was the independent review panel as well, which I might add will obviously provide a report on the licence extension, which I will be tabling in Parliament in due course.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Are you confident the Auditor-General will reach the same conclusion?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I welcome the Auditor-General looking at these matters. I think with a transaction of this nature, being so large, it is important they do their job, and I am confident that we have extracted the best value for the state with the largest ever lottery licence deal.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Since becoming aware of the donations – as you said, you were not aware previously – are you aware of any additional donations being made from the Lottery Corporation to the Labor Party in this financial year when the contract was awarded?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think questions about donations to the Australian Labor Party, whether it is a federal or state branch, are better directed to the state secretary of the Labor Party.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** But to your awareness?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Like I said, questions about the donations that the Labor Party or any other political party receives should be directed to their secretary.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** I can appreciate that, but as the minister overseeing casino and gaming regulation, it is quite relevant to this matter, isn't it?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** And I am being quite upfront that it is not a relevant consideration for me. No donation will influence my decision-making about matters of public interest. My goal is to extract the greatest value for the state, and that is what we have achieved.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Puglielli. Minister and officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

I do recognise that evidence given to this inquiry this afternoon has related to suicide and family violence, which some people will find distressing. If you or a loved one needs support, the following services are available to you: Lifeline, via phone on 13 11 14 or text on 0477 131 114; and Beyond Blue, on 1300 224 636. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who need support, call Yarning SafeNStrong on 1800 959 563. For LGBTIQ+ people who need support, call Rainbow Door on 1800 729 367. In relation to family violence, call 1800 RESPECT. There is Safe Steps; their phone number is 1800 015 188. And GIRA, which is a culturally safe service for Aboriginal people, can be contacted via phone on 1800 105 303.

The committee is going to take a very short break before resuming this hearing for its consideration of the portfolio of outdoor recreation at 4:50 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**