



Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Tuesday 4 February 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	Lib	Ratnam, Samantha ⁵	Northern Metropolitan	Greens
Erdogan, Enver	Northern Metropolitan	ALP	Shing, Harriet	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Ermacora, Jacinta	Western Victoria	ALP	Somyurek, Adem ⁶	Northern Metropolitan	Ind
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 ⁷	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib

¹ Resigned 7 December 2023

² IndLib from 28 March 2023 until 27 December 2024

³ Appointed 14 November 2024

⁴ LDP until 26 July 2023

⁵ Resigned 8 November 2024

⁶ DLP until 25 March 2024

⁷ Appointed 7 February 2024

Party abbreviations

AJP – Animal Justice Party; ALP – Australian Labor Party; DLP – Democratic Labour Party;
Greens – Australian Greens; Ind – independent; IndLib – Independent Liberal; LCV – Legalise Cannabis Victoria;
LDP – Liberal Democratic Party; Lib – Liberal Party of Australia; LP – Libertarian Party;
Nat – National Party of Australia; PHON – Pauline Hanson's One Nation; SFFP – Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party

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Tuesday 4 February 2025

The PRESIDENT (Shaun Leane) took the chair at 12:04 pm, read the prayer and made an acknowledgement of country.

Condolences

Hon John Edward Delzoppo OAM

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:04): I move:

That this house expresses its sincere sorrow at the death on 23 November 2024 of the Honourable John Edward Delzoppo OAM and places on record its acknowledgement of the valuable services rendered by him to the Parliament and the people of Victoria as a member of the Legislative Assembly for the electorate of Narracan from 1982 to 1996 and as Speaker of the Legislative Assembly from 1992 to 1996.

Just to make a few remarks to honour Mr Delzoppo on behalf of the government, of course we express our deepest condolences following his passing. He was a respected former member and Speaker in the other place, as foreshadowed in the motion. He served as shadow minister for several portfolios, including transport, local government, water resources and property and services, and he later extended his connection with the Parliament through his contribution to the Victorian Parliamentary Former Members Association, where he served as the president for over a decade. He also represented his community as a long-serving councillor and mayor for the Shire of Buln Buln. On behalf of government members we offer our sincerest condolences to his family, his friends and the broader community that do hold him in such high regard.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:06): I am honoured to rise on behalf of the Liberals and Nationals to support this condolence motion. John Delzoppo was somebody I knew. He was a very decent man, a very strong advocate I might say for Gippsland, a strong advocate for his local area and widely respected. He was very active in supporting bush nursing in his area and was a council member of the Victorian Bush Nursing Association. He was a councillor, as has been pointed out by the Leader of the Government, and was widely respected in that role. He was also a strong Anglican and actually had a lot to say about those matters as well. As the Leader of the Government has pointed out, his involvement with the Victorian Parliamentary Former Members Association is also very noteworthy, and he was Speaker, as has been outlined, between 1992 and 1996. He was a pharmacist by background. Liberals in particular, but Nationals I am sure too, have strong views about the passing of John Delzoppo. He was, as I said, a very strong advocate for his local area and respected widely throughout the party and in the Parliament.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:07): I rise to add my voice to this motion about a wonderful life – a long life, a very long life, from 1931 to 2024 – with a rich history in Gippsland and a rich family history. To be married for 69 years is certainly an achievement in itself but also adds that layer of in-depth passion and concern for his family: Beth, their children Ian, Lindsay, Clare and Anne, their nine grandchildren and their seven great-grandchildren. I understand that he was called ‘Old Grandpa’. I think that is a wonderful term. I am a new grandma; I hope to be called ‘Old Grandma’ or ‘Old Nanna’ one day. I just want to put on record the Nationals’ respect for this gentleman. Being a pharmacist in Neerim South, a very small hamlet, these services are incredibly valuable to local people. Often when someone cannot get into a doctor, pharmacists become that very much valued information source and connection there as well. He was a councillor for the Shire of Buln Buln. I was there the other day, and they are beautiful hills, beautiful dairy-growing hills, beef-growing hills and of course potato-growing hills. Indeed there is the timber industry, which he was a strong advocate for. I also notice in his maiden speech, his inaugural speech, he criticised the government at the time for being city centric and noted the need for the freeway that we now call the Monash Freeway, which we use so much getting out to his electorate, which our current member Wayne Farnham now holds. Vale, John Delzoppo.

The PRESIDENT: I ask members to signify their assent to the motion by rising in their places for a minute's silence.

Motion agreed to in silence, members showing unanimous agreement by standing in their places.

The PRESIDENT: As a further mark of respect, the proceedings will be suspended for 1 hour.

Sitting suspended 12:11 pm until 1:14 pm.

Bills

Aged Care Restrictive Practices Substitute Decision-maker Bill 2024

State Taxation Further Amendment Bill 2024

Tobacco Amendment (Tobacco Retailer and Wholesaler Licensing Scheme) Bill 2024

Royal assent

The PRESIDENT (13:13): I have a message from the Governor, dated 3 December 2024:

The Governor informs the Legislative Council that she has, on this day, given the Royal Assent to the under-mentioned Acts of the present Session presented to her by the Clerk of the Parliaments:

49/2024 Aged Care Restrictive Practices Substitute Decision-maker Act 2024

50/2024 State Taxation Further Amendment Act 2024

51/2024 Tobacco Amendment (Tobacco Retailer and Wholesaler Licensing Scheme) Act 2024

Committees

Parliamentary committees

Membership

The PRESIDENT (13:14): I advise the house that I have received letters from the following members resigning from the Electoral Matters Committee: Brad Battin, member for Berwick, effective from 1 February 2025; Wayne Farnham, member for Narracan, effective from 3 February 2025; Luba Grigorovitch, member for Kororoit, effective from 4 February 2025; and Emma Vulin, member for Prahran, effective from 4 February 2025.

I advise the house that I have also received letters from the following members resigning from the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee: David Davis, effective from 3 February 2025, and Moira Deeming, effective from 3 February 2025.

I advise the house that I have further received a letter from Bev McArthur resigning from the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, effective from 4 February 2025.

Economy and Infrastructure Committee

Reporting dates

The PRESIDENT (13:15): I notify the house that the Economy and Infrastructure Committee has advised me in a letter from the chair that the committee has agreed to extend the tabling date of the self-referred inquiry into the Victorian electrical transmission grid from 20 December 2025 to 30 June 2026.

*Members***Acting Presidents**

The PRESIDENT (13:16): Can I call the Clerk to lay on the table a warrant discharging an Acting President.

The Clerk:

Pursuant to the provisions of Standing Order 2.12 of the Legislative Council, I discharge:

Mrs Bev McArthur

as an Acting President.

Given under my hand on 4 February 2025.

SHAUN LEANE

President of the Legislative Council

The PRESIDENT: I thank Mrs McArthur for her assistance during her time as an Acting President.

Ministry

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (13:16): I rise to inform the house of changes to ministerial portfolios, but I would ask that members refer to a list that has been provided by the clerks that will list all of the changes. Bear with us as we do our best to work out who is representing on each occasion, because I do not think I have personally got a copy of the list in front of me. For today's purposes we will do our best to make sure that the questions go to the correct ministers if they need to be referred.

Shadow ministry

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (13:17): On a similar matter, I will ensure that the papers office has a list of the changes to shadow ministers and their various responsibilities.

*Questions without notice and ministers statements***Economy**

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (13:17): (773) My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, today Standard & Poor's have issued a warning that Victoria faces a credit downgrade if it fails to curb rising operating costs and cost blowouts. S&P blamed lax financial discipline, operating revenues of nearly \$150 billion higher than pre-COVID expectations and \$200 billion in spending blowouts. Minister, you were a member of the expenditure review committee for five years, as you told the *Herald Sun*. Do you accept a share of responsibility for the serious financial deterioration of Victoria's accounts, or is it entirely the responsibility of Daniel Andrews, Jacinta Allan and Tim Pallas?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (13:18): I thank Mr Davis for his question and my first question as the newly appointed Treasurer. It is an honour to take on this role for the Allan Labor government. Mr Davis, in the usual style I see that not much has changed over the summer. You selectively choose what to point out in an article and fit it to your own narrative. Of course the financial position is different to what it was pre COVID, because we had to respond to COVID; we had to ensure that we protected households, lives and businesses. We make no apologies for ensuring that the economy of Victoria was able to bounce back after the pandemic. I think it is really disappointing that you like to ignore the fact that we saved lives during a pandemic.

You referred to the credit ratings. When credit rating agencies are looking at governments, they look to see whether governments are doing what they say they will do. What we are doing is we have a fiscal strategy to return to a better position. We are sticking to that fiscal strategy. We have ticked off steps 1 and 2. It is all there to see in the budget updates. What I will do is point you to some of the

comments that the rating agencies have made, direct quotes in relation to our state, not the broad statements that you have referred to in your question:

The Fitch rating affirms a stable outlook for Victoria and states our ‘strong and diverse economy’ will support a continued recovery in the state’s fiscal position ...

The Moody’s rating comes with a stable and positive outlook, and I quote Moody’s:

... the “stable outlook reflects our expectation that the state’s large and diverse economy will remain resilient”.

Just last week S&P confirmed their stable outlook for Victoria, with an expectation that Victoria’s operating balance will improve and its infrastructure spending will decline. We make no apologies for making the investments in productive infrastructure in this state. This is what Victorians are benefiting from now. We have two major projects opening this year. Future infrastructure in –

David Davis: On a point of order, President, it was a very reasonable question. The minister has been on the expenditure review committee for five years, as she told the *Herald Sun*, and I asked: does she accept a share of the responsibility or is she going to point at others?

The PRESIDENT: Mr Davis, we all heard the question, and the minister was relevant in her answer.

Jaclyn SYMES: I will have responsibility to be part of a really strong year for Victoria, with Deloitte forecasting that our state will have the highest economic growth of the east coast states and the Commonwealth Bank forecasting the biggest improvement in economic activity in all the states.

Mr Davis, right now Victorian families are closely watching every dollar. We think they rightly expect the government to do so. That is what I am bringing to this role. But our focus for 2025 will be making sure that every dollar of investment is focused on supporting families and the growth of the Victorian economy.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (13:21): The Treasurer did not clearly accept a share of the responsibility, and that was the point of the question. She did not accept a share of responsibility, despite having been a member of the expenditure review committee for five years. I therefore ask: Treasurer, will you heed the advice of the S&P rating agency – and if so, how – or will you thumb your nose at the serious warnings delivered in Victoria again today?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (13:22): Mr Davis, I have confirmed my commitment to the Victorian community. Right now they are focused on cost of living, they are focused on their households and they are watching every single dollar. As Treasurer, I intend to take the same approach to the state’s finances.

Windsor Community Children’s Centre

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (13:22): (774) My question today is to the Minister for Children. Minister, you wrote to the Windsor Community Children’s Centre on 17 December 2024, and you referenced the demographic evidence in a report that was titled *Review of Early Childhood Service Needs in Windsor–Pahran & Surrounding Catchment Area*. That report, dated September 2024, details both the current existing shortfall and a future projected shortfall of childcare and kindergarten places within the Windsor–Pahran area, where WCCC is located. Given the significant community need for early childhood education services in the area, have you undertaken, Minister, any legal, financial or policy assessments regarding the government’s ability to reclaim or retain 131–133 Union Street, Windsor, in public ownership or to support Stonnington council’s acquisition of the property from Swinburne University?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (13:23): I thank Ms Copsey for her question and for the opportunity to recanvass these matters, which

we talked about in I think the last sitting week of the Parliament last year. We know how important it is that families have access to early education. For the clarity of the house – and I sought to explain this before Christmas – child care is a federal government responsibility. Kindergarten, free kindergarten – although those opposite are still confused about whether or not they support free kindergarten; I am hopeful that those over there do support free kindergarten – for three-year-olds and four-year-olds is the state government's responsibility.

We acknowledge that at times the Commonwealth have not met the objectives or their responsibility in relation to child care, and it is why we are building 50 early learning centres across the state, doing our bit to assist with child care. But ultimately child care is a federal government responsibility. What the state government is doing is delivering free three- and four-year-old kinder for every three-year-old and four-year-old and working with Stonnington to ensure that there are enough three- and four-year-old kindergarten places for all three- and four-year-old kindergarten children in Stonnington.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (13:24): I note, Minister, you engaged with the preamble to the question there but did not respond around the government looking to reclaim or retain 131–133 Union Street. Minister, will you advocate for 131–133 Union Street to remain zoned for public education and to save the Windsor Community Children's Centre?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (13:25): I again thank Ms Copsey for her supplementary question. What I can assure this house is that this government is interested in ensuring that every three-year-old and every four-year-old has access to free kinder and the Department of Education is working with the City of Stonnington to ensure that that is the case. That is our commitment: free kinder for three-year-olds and four-year-olds.

Katherine Copsey: On a point of order, President, the question was related to a specific centre. I ask that you direct the minister to answer the question.

The PRESIDENT: I believe the minister was being responsive in relation to her portfolio.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As I have assured Ms Copsey, our commitment is working with Stonnington to ensure that all three- and four-year-old children in Stonnington will have access to kindergarten. That is detailed planning work that our department undertakes throughout the year – and each and every year – to ensure that three-year-olds and four-year-olds can access free kinder. In relation to the long day care places that you asked about in your substantive question and that your supplementary clearly relates to, that is a matter to take up with the Commonwealth government.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (13:26): I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Ministers statements: Development Victoria

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (13:26): I rise to update the house on the new appointment of Anne Jolic as the CEO of Development Victoria. Anne brings a wealth of experience through her extensive career in the private sector and property industry, and she is perfectly placed to support DV and the Allan Labor government as we work to revitalise urban areas, create cultural and recreational facilities and build diverse, affordable and sustainable communities. With a career spanning more than a quarter of a century, she has led multidisciplinary teams that have delivered in building projects that have shaped our city and state.

Unlike those opposite, the Allan Labor government is not wasting a day in tackling the housing crisis. We are building more homes closer to local jobs, education sites and key services, and we are building these homes for the people that need them most. Just last year 21 per cent of DV housing sales were to families and individuals on incomes eligible for affordable housing. And at the iconic Fitzroy

Gasworks site our government is delivering 1200 homes, including 20 per cent affordable housing as well as a mix of build-to-rent. The new neighbourhood will also feature a multi-use sports centre close to transport connections and open space. This is a thriving new precinct – which is predictably opposed by the Greens political party – and an example of the important work that DV is doing and continues to do, not just around additionally building homes but also building communities. And it is not just metropolitan Melbourne that will benefit from these transformational projects: Development Vic is building communities across regional Victoria, including Ballarat, Bendigo, Morwell, Wodonga and Geelong.

I am looking forward to working with Anne and her team as we continue to unlock and rezone surplus government land, which will enable the delivery of approximately 9000 homes across 45 sites up and down our state. We are a government committed to providing opportunities for all Victorians to have the dignity of a roof over their head and to realise their aspiration no matter where they live. While those opposite block, we will build, and I cannot wait to get on with this work.

Suburban Rail Loop

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (13:28): (775) My question is to the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, a member for Eastern Victoria. Last week it was reported that the Commonwealth offered an extra \$2 billion to fully fund the airport rail link, a project Victorians actually support. Meanwhile, ratings agency S&P has warned of a potential credit rating downgrade if the Allan government recklessly pushes ahead with the Suburban Rail Loop without federal funding. Minister, has the federal government confirmed it will provide the \$9 billion required from the federal government to complete the SRL East?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (13:29): Thanks, Mr Mulholland. I am really determined to continue the work that was given the go-ahead across two elections for the development and delivery of the Suburban Rail Loop as well as to make sure that we continue to engage with communities across SRL East – that is, Cheltenham to Box Hill – and again the work to make sure that as we work to get tunnel-boring machines into the ground by 2026 we can continue to deliver on the sort of planning and the sort of consultation and engagement that mean we are making the very best use of the resources that we have across all levels of government.

Mr Mulholland, when we look at the Suburban Rail Loop and around \$14 billion of spend, we are talking about \$11 billion from the state government. You have read the budget papers from 2020–21. I am not sure whether you have read the business case, though. It has 400 pages of really important detail. It has also 300 pages of additional technical assessment. I am very, very happy to actually take you through the detail in that document. But we are also talking about legislation that has been part of this particular development of the project as well. You, I think, would have read the comments from people in the course of the development and the debate on the Suburban Rail Loop Act. Mr Davis was a prolific contributor to that particular debate, and no doubt he will have some things to say that perhaps walk back some of his earlier positions on the Suburban Rail Loop.

We have got, again, a partnership on infrastructure for the state of Victoria that will deliver what we need as far as nation-building projects go – SRL East alone, 70,000 homes. The rhetoric that we are hearing from you – and the rhetoric that we are hearing from Peter Dutton in Canberra – is not going to build a single home. When we look at nation-building projects and when we look at infrastructure like the Suburban Rail Loop, again, we are talking about a return on investment of between \$1.10 and \$1.70. Now, again, to compare and contrast with the –

Evan Mulholland: On a point of order, President, I did ask if the federal government had confirmed the \$9 billion required to build the Suburban Rail Loop.

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

Harriet SHING: Mr Mulholland, again, I will take you to comments that have been made by my predecessor and also by the Prime Minister of Australia. \$2.2 billion is in the budget, and this is a nation-leading project that is being delivered in stages. We have sufficient funding, as you would have seen, from the \$14 billion allocated already to continue with this work to make sure that we have got trains running in 2035. We will be taking hundreds of thousands of cars off the road. We will be providing services that, in peak, will be intended to deliver every 2 minutes and every 4 minutes respectively as demand increases. Again, I just want to carefully contrast this with the east-west link. When we had a business case that was developed by you lot, it returned, at its best, an 84 cent –

David Davis: On a point of order, President, I do not think that is an appropriate phrase that the minister is using, and she might choose to refer to the opposition or others more appropriately.

The PRESIDENT: I will uphold the point of order, and I will call the minister to the question.

Harriet SHING: When you and your mates decided to put in a business case that delivered 45 cents in the dollar or 84 cents in the dollar, it was not ever going to stack up. We are getting on with the work that will change our nation.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (13:33): Minister, when – approximately what year – does the government expect the Suburban Rail Loop to reach Werribee?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (13:33): Mr Mulholland, this is a project that will span generations. And this is a project that, if you have anything to do with it, will not be getting anywhere because you have decided that, rather than actually build infrastructure, you are going to press pause. Now, what you are saying –

David Davis: On a point of order, President, question time is a time for ministers to answer questions, not to attack the opposition. She could answer with a very simple date.

The PRESIDENT: The minister was responding to the question and the tone of the question.

Harriet SHING: I am going to pick up on an interjection that Mr Welch made: ‘Take us through the business case.’ Do you know what? The business case is public. It is 400 pages and then there are an additional couple of hundred pages of technical assessment. Print it out. Mr Davis says he has read it. Again, if you are going to stand up now and say that you are not going to build the Suburban Rail Loop, that you are not going to deliver 70,000 homes, that you are not going to embark upon delivering infrastructure that your leader in Canberra backs –

Evan Mulholland: On a point of order, President, on relevance, my question was very short and clear. It was on when the government expects the Suburban Rail Loop to reach the good people of Werribee.

The PRESIDENT: I believe the minister was relevant in her answer at the start of her answer.

Harriet SHING: If you have your way, Mr Mulholland, it is never going to get there, because you oppose nation-building infrastructure that is going to make sure that we can provide hundreds of thousands of homes to people who deserve them outside of Brighton, Mr Mulholland – outside of Brighton.

Evan Mulholland: On a point of order, President, the minister is refusing to answer a very short and clear question on when the government expects the Suburban Rail Loop to reach Werribee.

The PRESIDENT: As I said before, I believe the minister addressed the question at the start of her answer, a long time ago. The minister has got 4 seconds.

Harriet SHING: Read the business case.

Cannabis law reform

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:35): (776) My question is for the Treasurer. Firstly, I would like to congratulate you on your historic appointment to the role of Treasurer. I wish you all the best in your role.

It is no secret that Victoria is in a challenging financial position. Naturally this government will be looking at a range of ways to create budget savings. Currently millions of taxpayer dollars are being wasted on policing and imprisoning cannabis consumers. The only winner in this is the illicit market. Criminal organisations are making millions of dollars, and these profits are funnelled back into criminal activity instead of into Victoria's economy. So in your new role as Treasurer, will you consider the cost savings of regulating cannabis?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (13:36): I thank Ms Payne for her question and her kind comments. As you have indicated, there is no surprise that a party with your name would use the first opportunity to ask a Treasurer in this house the question that you have asked. So it is not unexpected, but given I was expecting it, I did just review some of the exchanges that we have had in the past. Of course I could have conversations with you about health impacts and justice impacts and the like, but because I am the Treasurer you have asked me in relation to that. I can confirm, Ms Payne, that as the Treasurer in this new portfolio I will always look for ways to optimise the revenue streams and to target expenditure in a way that addresses the priorities of Victorians and benefits them the most. I do look forward to continuing discussions with you to progress shared priorities, noting that the government has no plans to legalise recreational cannabis at this time.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:37): I thank the Treasurer for her response. Obviously that is going to be on the top of my agenda this year, so I appreciate your reply. By way of supplementary, there is an overwhelming amount of data on the economic benefits of regulating the adult personal use of cannabis. Legalise Cannabis Victoria commissioned advice from the Parliamentary Budget Office about the value of the illicit cannabis market, and they estimated the value to be between \$1.02 billion and \$1.27 billion in 2022. So I do ask: will you meet with us to discuss the findings of this analysis and the role of cannabis in improving Victoria's finances?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (13:38): Ms Payne, I am always happy to meet with the members of this chamber, and you can put on the agenda whatever you like.

Ministers statements: pill testing

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (13:38): I rise to update the house on the Allan Labor government's pill-testing trial. Over the new year our mobile services kicked off at Beyond the Valley festival with huge success. More than 700 young Victorians accessed the service during the festival, and that is the largest number of tests of any event in Australia. For 70 per cent of those who used the service, it was the first time that they had had a conversation with a health professional about their drug use. Forty per cent said that they would consume a smaller amount of the drugs, and one in six intended to discard their drugs altogether at the conclusion of them getting their test results. That is what pill testing is all about; it is about giving people the facts that they are asking for so they can make safer and more informed choices.

Off the back of this success, I confirmed last week the next four events to host this life-saving service this festival season, starting with Hardmission this Saturday at Werribee racecourse, a festival that tragically saw a number of really bad overdoses last year; Pitch Music & Arts festival, a multiday festival across the Labour Day weekend near Moyston in the Grampians; Ultra, a single-day event on 12 April at Flemington Racecourse; and the Warehouse Project, a single-day event on 25 April at Port Melbourne Industrial Centre for the Arts. These events allow us to test the delivery of pill-testing

services in a variety of settings to make sure we get the model right for Victoria. They cover metro, regional, small and large events and single-day and multiday events, and the most important thing here is that the events are where we know that they will help to reduce harm, because that is what drug testing is all about. Pill testing is about saving lives and giving Victorians the information that they want.

Rochester swimming pool

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (13:40): (777) My question is for the Treasurer. The people of Rochester are currently sweltering through their third long, hot summer without a swimming pool, due to the town's pool being destroyed by the October 2022 flood. During the regional sitting in April last year the mayor of Campaspe and the people of Rochester made it very clear that replacing the pool is a priority for the town. In your response to a coalition question without notice about funding for the pool you said:

The Attorney-General or the Minister for Emergency Services does not provide funding for pools ...

Now you are the Treasurer and responsible for all funding and finances in Victoria, so I ask again: will you commit the funding to rebuild the Rochester pool?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (13:41): Ms Lovell, of course I am well briefed on the issues in our mutual electorate of Northern Victoria and the impact of Rochester, and therefore I am speaking to a lot of people about the pool as a project. I disagree with your characterisation in relation to the current proposals and the support of the community. I think the current envelope that the council have put forward is something that I have suggested would be wise for them to consider revising down – such a large amount.

This is a broader comment for the chamber: I take issue with your characterisation of my role and the fact that you can ask me any question that has a dollar figure attached to it. I will always – and I hope that my past practice demonstrates this – try to answer questions in the chamber, but just characterising something as a matter for the Treasurer by saying it has a dollar amount attributed to it is not a good use of the chamber's time. I am not going to be across every grant program and every portfolio priority in relation to how bids might come to the Treasurer. The project that you speak about would be unlikely to come directly to the Treasurer. It would come through sport and recreation more than likely. I have been personally, as a local member, working with members of the community on that project, and I can give you a commitment that I will continue to have those conversations in my capacity as a local member. At this point in time it is not a question that can be directly attributed to the Treasurer. I am not going to stand here and say, 'I'm going to fund that and I'm not going to fund that' when I have not even had proposals put to me.

I am more than happy to continue conversations with you, but I just do start the parliamentary year with a little bit of expectation setting that I am not going to be responsible for every question if you just say that it costs money. I had a similar approach when I was previously regional development minister. Mr Davis will recall this quite regularly. Just because something happens in regional Victoria does not necessarily mean it is a matter for regional development. Again, I reaffirm my commitment that I will always try to give you an answer, and hopefully that is what I have done right now.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (13:43): The Treasurer did refer to a project that was quite a large sum, and the Campaspe shire have revised that figure down now. Campaspe shire has also paid for the removal of the old pool, and the town expects that construction of the new pool will follow shortly. In your response at the regional hearing you said it was:

... a project that not only meets the needs of a community but is symbolic of a recovery project, it is a project as a local member that I am pretty sure I will get behind.

Treasurer, do you stand by those words, and will you get behind the people of Rochester by providing the funding needed to rebuild their pool?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (13:44): As I confirmed, on my many visits to Rochester this topic comes up regularly. I am sure I will continue those conversations with the community, but no formal process has come to me in the role as Treasurer.

Youth justice system

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (13:45): (778) My question is to the Minister for Youth Justice. I refer to the minister's responsibility under section 3B of the Bail Act. Minister, the Premier has announced a ministerial review of the Bail Act. When were you informed of this review?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (13:45): I thank Mr Davis for his question and his interest in these matters. You will note that the Bail Act under the general order is the primary responsibility of the Attorney-General in the other place, and you will recall we did have a youth justice bill last term. When there were questions specifically about the Bail Act we had the Attorney-General at the time, Minister Jaclyn Symes, at the bench, answering a lot of those questions. But what I will say is the Premier –

David Davis interjected.

Enver ERDOGAN: I will respond. The Premier has outlined that we are looking at our criminal justice settings, and that is what all governments do. At the heart of all our justice reforms is community safety, and that is what the Youth Justice Bill was about. We did strengthen the Bail Act in that, and I can say, as the Minister for Youth Justice, we have seen an increase in the amount of young people on remand as a consequence of those reforms. So we have already strengthened the Bail Act. In relation to the current reforms, the Premier also outlined that those reforms and those justice settings are being looked at and being led by the Attorney-General and the police minister, and I support them undertaking that work. We have a very capable team of ministers. The police minister and Attorney-General are well placed to do that work, and I will be supporting them 100 per cent.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (13:46): President, I note that he did not answer with a timeline on when he knew about this, so I will ask you later about that.

My supplementary is this: what role will you play, given your joint responsibility for section 3B of the Bail Act and that you have not been named as part of the review?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (13:47): I thank Mr Davis for his supplementary question. I think I answered some of that, Mr Davis, in my answer to the substantive. That work is being led by the police minister and the Attorney-General, but obviously as the Minister for Corrections and the Minister for Youth Justice I will pay close attention to the outcomes of that and be contributing with information as required. At the heart of all of our reforms is community safety. I will say that through our investments in our corrections system we have ample capacity to accommodate additional people, but as the Minister for Corrections and Minister for Youth Justice I do not decide who enters our system. Those are matters for the courts and are obviously matters for the legal settings at the time, but I will be contributing with information as required and supporting them. We have a very capable Attorney-General and a very capable police minister, who I will be supporting. They are leading that work, and I will be supporting them the whole way through.

Ministers statements: TAFE sector

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (13:48): The Allan Labor government is teaming up with industry and our world-class TAFEs to establish

Australia's first dedicated future of housing construction centre of excellence. I was recently joined by the federal minister for skills Andrew Giles and the Housing Industry Association to announce this joint state–Commonwealth project at Modscape in Essendon Fields – a fantastic facility to see innovative housing construction methods at work. With deep connections to industry, TAFE and the Victorian research universities, this centre will deliver cutting-edge training to boost housing supply. Victoria will lead on training for modern methods of construction like modular building. We will upskill traditional trades through the use of technologies like AI, robotics and virtual reality. Thanks to the Allan and Albanese Labor governments' investment of \$50 million, this nation-leading training facility will be established here in Victoria at Melbourne Polytechnic's Heidelberg TAFE campus. This centre is an important initiative in our government's *Economic Growth Statement*, which is cutting red tape, boosting growth and training future skills. The Housing Industry Association's Simon Croft said the project will:

... ensure the skills of the construction workforce continue to evolve, supporting a stronger, more innovative housing sector ...

And I agree. The new centre is part of our government's agenda of delivering the skilled workforce to build the affordable homes that Victorians need and is yet another example of the cutting-edge innovation happening at our fantastic TAFE campuses.

Youth justice system

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (13:49): (779) My question is again to the Minister for Youth Justice. Minister, since your government weakened bail laws in Victoria crime has increased 15 per cent, aggravated burglaries are at a record level and youth crime is the highest on record. Given the government's decision to review bail laws, why did your government block the Liberal and Nationals bill to strengthen bail laws last year?

The PRESIDENT: I am happy to call the minister, but I expect that he would refer this to the Attorney-General's and the police minister's responsibilities.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, the minister is responsible for part 3B of the relevant act, under the administrative orders. He cannot simply abscond from responsibility. He is responsible; that is what the administrative orders say. He is jointly responsible with the Attorney-General for that section of the Bail Act.

Jaclyn Symes: On the point of order, President, I just refer to the question and the way that it was posed by Mr Davis, because he is trying to connect it to the Minister for Youth Justice, whereas their draft bail bill did not apply to children.

The PRESIDENT: I do not think that was a point of order. The minister can answer as far as his responsibility in his portfolio goes.

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (13:51): I thank Mr Davis for his question and his interest in the criminal justice settings, in particular bail. But I think I was clear in the answer to the previous question that these are matters, in relation to bail as a whole, that under the general orders would fall within the remit of the Attorney-General in the other place. I am happy to pass on that question to her for a written response in line with the standing orders. I note as well that I reject the premise, Mr Davis. Last year we in fact strengthened the bail laws, in particular for repeat serious offenders, and you voted against that. You voted against strengthening the Bail Act and those reforms we made in the Youth Justice Act which are about holding young people to account. I think appropriately, President, that should be referred to the Attorney-General, so I will seek your guidance.

The PRESIDENT: The question was not addressed to the Attorney-General. You have answered that it is not your responsibility, so it will not be passed on to the Attorney-General.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (13:52): With respect to the government's review of the bail laws, I ask the minister: how long will the government's review process take, and when will the government change the bail laws?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (13:52): I refer to my answer to the substantive, Mr Davis. That work in relation to the bail work is being led by the Attorney-General. The Premier was quite clear. The standing orders are quite clear. I refer that question appropriately. It should be directed to the Attorney-General in the other place.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, it is very clear that the review of bail laws will deal with youth matters, and it is also very clear that the minister has joint responsibility for a large section of the Bail Act – section 3B, to be specific – in the administrative orders. He indicated that he will be contributing to that review in an earlier question today. My question to him is a very specific one: how long will the government's review process, which he is contributing to, take?

The PRESIDENT: The minister has been clear that this is not a process he is leading. It is a process that he may be asked to contribute to. He has indicated that it is not his responsibility as far as his portfolio goes.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, is what you are saying here that the minister can just simply say he is not responsible, even though the administrative orders say he has responsibility and he has indicated he will contribute? He may not know when the matter will conclude. He may not know how long the review is. He is quite entitled to say, 'I don't know how long,' but he is not entitled to say, 'I'm just not going to answer it.'

The PRESIDENT: I suppose, taking your rationale, Mr Davis, the Minister for Skills and TAFE may not know when the Attorney-General is going to finish a review, which is outside her responsibility. The recourse for you if you do not believe the minister's answer is correct is you have a right to move a motion to take note of his answer or move a substantive motion at some time when we move to motions. I do not think we need to have a long debate on the orders and what they mean.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, respectfully, it is very plain when you read the administrative orders that a clear section of the Bail Act is jointly administered by this minister. The Bail Act is under review. He has indicated that he is actually going to contribute to this review. It is entirely reasonable to see him having some responsibility in this. He may or may not know the timeline – I accept the facts on that – but he cannot just simply say, 'I'm not responsible at all' when the administrative orders are plain. He does have some responsibility jointly with the Attorney-General.

The PRESIDENT: I think it has been very clear for the last two years that it is not for me to question when a minister says that whatever question has been asked of them does not fall inside their responsibility. We have gone forward with that for the last two years and it is a ruling that has been set previous to me as well, so it is not anything new. The minister has responded that that question should be the responsibility of the Attorney-General, and that is his answer.

Drug harm reduction

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (13:56): (780) My question is for the Minister for Mental Health. Last year health services raised concerns that their medical indemnity insurance policies through VMIA excluded the administration of take-home naloxone in the community by non-clinical workers. This led to the absurd situation that non-clinical health workers could not administer a treatment that could be given by a layperson walking down the street. We were assured that this had been resolved via a gazetted regulatory change, and I have been informed that VMIA wrote to health services advising that they would be covered; however, it has been brought to my attention by several people working in the sector that there are ongoing legal uncertainties. The law still does not allow

non-clinical workers to administer naloxone, only to possess and supply it, which has created some uncertainty about the soundness of VMIA's advice. Minister, can you confirm whether or not the administration of naloxone by a non-clinical health worker in the community is covered by VMIA's indemnity policies?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (13:57): I thank Dr Mansfield for the question. The most recent advice I did receive from my department was in line with what you have just outlined, but I am very happy – given that the uncertainty in the sector is not something I want to see – to take your question on notice, get some updated advice from my department and provide you with a written response.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (13:58): I thank the minister for that response and undertaking. Further to my substantive question, I also ask if you would commit to reviewing the relevant legislation just to ensure that there is no ongoing legal ambiguity as well as the issue around indemnity coverage.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (13:58): Yes. I will seek to cover off that issue in my written response to you, Dr Mansfield.

Ministers statements: prisoner phone calls

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (13:58): I rise today to highlight the importance of maintaining family connections with people in custody and a commitment I made last year about reducing the cost of prison phone calls – a commitment made and, I can confirm, a commitment delivered. For most in custody there are family, friends and loved ones on the outside. As the Minister for Corrections I have heard from many family members of people in custody, and many of them tell me a similar story. They do not like what their loved one has done, but they are family and they want to maintain their relationship with them even when they are in jail or in custody.

The evidence is clear: maintaining positive relationships with family members is a key part of rehabilitation and turning people's lives around. We all know the value of a simple phone call for human relationships. For anyone, a conversation with your children, parent or partner can provide reassurance and connection. That call can be even more important for people with a loved one in custody. That is why I am pleased that starting last weekend we have more than halved the cost of prison phone calls to mobile phones. This brings those costs more in line with the costs faced in the community and makes Victoria one of the cheapest in the nation.

I have been asked in this place as well as out in the community why the cost of phone calls from prison was so high. I have always been clear that I wanted to see them come down, and now they have. This is just one part of our efforts to modernise Victoria's prison system. New technologies such as Zoom, body scanners and AI-enabled security settings are being rolled out across our prisons, and this year our state-of-the-art Western Plains facility will open. Together all of these changes mean we are making the best use of our best facilities, and that is keeping Victorians safe.

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (14:00): Minister Stitt, you will get a written response for Dr Mansfield on both of her questions in line with the standing orders.

Constituency questions

Southern Metropolitan Region

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (14:00): (1316) As thousands of kids head back to school across Southern Metropolitan Melbourne, my question to the Minister for Education is: how is the Allan Labor government supporting families with back-to-school costs? The school saving bonus,

an initiative of the Allan Labor government, is providing a \$400 payment to eligible Victorian families to help cover the costs of education essentials: things like uniforms, textbooks, school supplies, camps, excursions – all part of the costs that families face. The \$400 school saving bonus provided by the Allan Labor government is helping all families with students in government schools and those with eligible students in non-government schools with financial support right now to help with these costs. We know that millions of dollars have already flowed to support families right across Victoria, including in the Southern Metropolitan Region. We know some families are struggling with the cost of living. The Allan Labor government is here to help.

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (14:01): (1317) My question is for the Minister for Emergency Services: will the minister ensure that Shepparton Search and Rescue Squad and the Echuca and Moama Search and Rescue Squad receive funding from the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund? The government has announced that later this year it will establish an Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund to support a wide range of Victorian emergency services, including VICSES. But the published list of beneficiary organisations overlooks the Shepparton and Echuca and Moama search and rescue squads, which are independent units and not part of VICSES. The final report of the 2022 flood inquiry recognised that Shepparton Search and Rescue Squad had the most call-outs, fielding 980 requests for assistance during the floods. Accordingly, recommendations 57 and 49 of the report specifically state that the Shepparton and Echuca and Moama search and rescue squads should receive increased government funding for operations and training. The Minister for Emergency Services must commit funding to Victoria's two independent units.

Northern Metropolitan Region

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (14:02): (1318) My constituency question is to the Minister for Housing and Building. My constituent Ms Ifrah is a mother of seven and lives in a public housing tower in Flemington. Her family of eight are crammed into a run-down three-bedroom flat with no functional cooling or heating and only one bathroom. Two of her children have intellectual disabilities, and the others cannot study, due to overcrowding. She applied for a transfer over three years ago but is still awaiting a suitable property. As the spokesperson for child protection and disability rights, I recognise my constituent's right to safe, secure and appropriate housing. Our concern is public housing currently does not meet the needs of our children and disabled residents. Minister, can you commit to providing residents, like Ms Ifrah of the Flemington towers, in Northern Metro with appropriate and safe public housing that addresses their needs?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:03): (1319) My question is to the Minister for Police, and I ask: Minister, what action are you taking to reduce the escalating number of violent attacks by young offenders in this state, after a 19-year-old lifeguard on duty at Casey aquatic and leisure centre needed hospitalisation and treatment after being aggressively attacked by a group of youths? The lifeguard was headbutted, kicked and punched by the group, who I understand have not yet been located. The City of Casey has been forced to take immediate steps to increase security at council-owned aquatic centres to ensure a safe environment for everyone. It is frightening that a responsible, wage-earning teenage lifeguard who is simply doing his job protecting the community and our children can be viciously set upon by a group of hot-headed thugs. Youth crime is spiralling out of control under this Labor government, which is doing absolutely nothing to resolve it.

Western Metropolitan Region

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (14:04): (1320) My constituency question was originally directed to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety in October, but it apparently falls within the purview of the Minister for Planning. So take two. Last year the Premier announced 25 new precincts for increased housing density around railway stations as part of the activity centre housing

program. While my constituent supports locating housing in transport corridors, designating Tottenham as an activity centre will inevitably put more strain on the Ashley Street underpass, which I have raised in this place previously. It is the only north–south railway crossing within a 5-kilometre area and has only one lane each way. It has no bike path, and the narrow footpath, the only entrance to the station from the north, floods whenever it rains. With Tottenham being slated for hundreds of new homes, my constituent asks: will the government consider additional rail crossings, or is the plan to simply funnel more residents through Melbourne’s most miserable underpass?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (14:06): (1321) My question is to the Attorney-General in the other place, and it concerns the growing crime crisis in the northern suburbs. My question is: will you finally admit you were wrong to block our bill in March last year to strengthen your weakened bail laws? I was shocked to see the Premier finally admitting today in the *Herald Sun* that the bail laws that she weakened are too soft, setting up a review into her government’s weakening of our bail laws. Minister, the northern suburbs have become a hotspot for rising crime. Recent data shows a disturbing increase in incidents of burglary, vehicle theft and violent crime, with residents living in fear. When I introduced that bill last year it was actually Mr Galea on the other side of the chamber who said that we were motivated not by Victorians but by a headline in the *Herald Sun* and on 3AW. By the Premier’s actions today in the *Herald Sun* and on 3AW, it seems the minister is more concerned about her own job than the safety of all Victorians.

Western Victoria Region

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (14:07): (1322) My question is for the Minister for Natural Disaster Recovery. Recently I received correspondence from the Horsham Rural City Council with regard to their ineligibility for the state government’s disaster relief funding after the recent bushfires in the region. Though Horsham Rural City Council has not yet been directly impacted by the blazes, families and businesses have suffered terribly from the loss of tourist traffic over the holiday season. Just this weekend residents near the Grampians and Little Desert national parks were again told to evacuate amid increased fire activity. These communities have not had a break. Minister, will you ensure adequate and equitable funding for all rural councils affected by the Grampians and Little Desert fires?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:07): (1323) My constituency question is to the Minister for Housing and Building, and it is in relation to the Horace Petty public housing in Prahran. I was on the Prahran pre-poll on Saturday speaking to a constituent, Carol. She was there with her mother, and she said, ‘I am so worried. We are getting moved out of our homes. We’ve been relocated. We’ve had no communication.’ She has followed up with an email to me, which says:

Since the announcement in October there has been no community communication, only if they have found a property for you. I would like to have more communication, as I have been here for thirty years and they don’t seem to care about that.

I can say that Carol and her mother were so concerned about where they were going to live and what they were going to do. I ask that the minister provide that community consultation that they need in relation to what is happening to these redevelopments so that these people in public housing know exactly where they are going to be living.

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:08): (1324) My question today is to the Minister for Transport Infrastructure, and it relates to the North East Link Program. It relates to the more than 7000 non-disclosure agreements, or NDAs, that people, including those in my electorate, have been forced to sign in exchange for compensation for damages caused by the construction of the North East Link. The Labor government and their contractors should not be trying to cover up the

extensive damage caused by the construction of the ludicrously expensive North East Link toll road. Residents in my area and others have been forced to sign upwards of 7000 NDAs and have been given millions of dollars in secret payments to stay quiet about the damage that this North East Link is causing by ripping through their suburbs, leaving potholes in their roads and cracks in their houses. All of this subterfuge and secrecy was enacted in the name of pretending that this disastrous and expensive project was a success and that the construction is going smoothly. Clearly that is not the reality of this catastrophic project. Minister, I ask: can Victorians expect to see an end to these NDAs and the veil of secrecy this has created around this project or a continuation of the enactment of these dodgy deals?

Western Victoria Region

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (14:10): (1325) My constituency question is for the Minister for Police. Many constituents in Ballarat were extremely disappointed to see graffiti, vandalism and destruction of monuments in Victoria and also locally. We saw in Melbourne the desecration of a monument which pays homage to Anzacs, who fought to defend our freedoms and our way of life. These acts are totally reprehensible and should be roundly condemned by all. In Ballarat we have seen the destruction of two busts on the prime ministers walk in the Ballarat Botanical Gardens, where heads were cut off former prime ministers Kevin Rudd and Paul Keating. In the last 48 hours we have seen destruction of the floral clock in the botanic gardens as well. The cost to the City of Ballarat is estimated to be in the order of \$250,000. My question to the minister is: what do you intend to do to ensure that historic monuments, particularly the ones in Ballarat, will be protected for the future?

Eastern Victoria Region

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:11): (1326) My constituency question is for the Honourable Steve Dimopoulos, the Minister for Environment. It appears the good residents of Silverleaves on Phillip Island indeed face being on the endangered species list. Minister, they are coming into Parliament tomorrow. The question is: will the minister find 10 minutes in his busy day to meet with these good people?

David Davis interjected.

Melina BATH: Mr Dimopoulos, indeed. They are coming in because I am presenting a petition in state Parliament calling for emergency short-term mitigation works to be implemented yesterday. They are coming in because there is huge consensus about these mitigation works, these geotextile sandbags, to support the reduction of coastal erosion while a long-term solution is found. They have met with Nats MPs, Liberal MPs and a Liberal member of Parliament, and they have met with their local member. But I ask that they meet with you, Minister Dimopoulos.

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:12): (1327) My constituency question is directed towards the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. In last few years I have had the great pleasure of attending Holi and Diwali festivals in the City of Whittlesea run by the organisation Mission Smile. Mission Smile are not just a commercial operation; they do charitable works, and they are deeply involved in generating a sense of community in the northern suburbs. However, the multicultural commission of Victoria, who previously supported this event, has due to funding cuts put in a condition that they can only support one event per organisation per year. That means Mission Smile must choose now between running a Holi event or a Diwali event. I would ask that the minister please discuss and review this matter with the multicultural commission and guarantee that Mission Smile can deliver both Holi and Diwali events this year.

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (14:13): (1328) My question is for the Minister for Education. Melton South Primary School has over 900 students. Several students have impairments which limit their physical mobility, let alone the requirement to cater for parents, carers, staff and visitors who might need disabled parking spaces. The designated so-called accessible parking spaces at Melton South Primary are currently located 130 metres away and around the corner from the main entrance of the school. For some reason Melton City Council has advised the school that they cannot create the requested compliant spaces. Minister, will you work with the Minister for Planning as an urgent priority to provide safe and proper accessible parking for the Melton South Primary School community?

Northern Victoria Region

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (14:14): (1329) My question is to the Minister for Transport Infrastructure to address serious safety issues on V/Line services. Regular commuters are extremely frustrated by the constant disruptions on the Bendigo to Melbourne line, and serious safety concerns have been raised. A lady, Lisa, was travelling to Melbourne when bus coaches replaced the usual metropolitan rail services from Sunbury due to works on the line. Metropolitan trains arrive frequently, and not enough buses were made available to keep up with the number of commuters. Some effort was made to provide shelter for people waiting, but the awnings were inadequate. Many commuters were exposed the elements for long periods, and there were no seats available in the queue area for elderly or less mobile customers. I was also alarmed to hear that V/Line encouraged people to take advantage of the standing room on the buses to move the crowd more quickly, and this occurred on buses travelling on the Calder Freeway at speeds of 100 to 110 kilometres an hour. I ask the minister to review and address the inadequacy of contingency arrangements on V/Line services and put the safety of commuters first.

Eastern Victoria Region

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:15): (1330) My question is for the Minister for Community Safety. Minister, in the early hours of 20 January this year at least seven businesses in Lakeside Boulevard were vandalised. The following day I met with some of the shop owners – Savan from Smokin' Joe's and Kong from Lakeside Fish & Chips – to hear about their concerns and the damage that was done along that strip. Smokin' Joe's noted that CCTV footage captured an individual among a group of teens who was walking along kicking in the doors and shattering the windows of their shops. This is the second attack like this in just six months. It is highlighting terrible behaviour, and it is costing businesses greatly at a time when businesses are suffering. They are being taxed through the nose, there are rising taxes and charges and now they have to deal with the cost of vandalism. So my question is: what immediate actions will you take to address this ongoing crime spree and better support small businesses?

Committees**Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee*****Alert Digest No. 1***

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:16): Pursuant to section 35 of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, I table *Alert Digest No. 1* of 2025, including appendices, from the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee. I move:

That the report be published.

Motion agreed to.

Petitions

Residential planning zones

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) presented a petition bearing 313 signatures:

We, the undersigned citizens of Victoria, respectfully urge the Legislative Council to note:

- The Allan Labor Government has announced 10 high-rise high-density zones in the municipalities of Bayside, Boroondara, Brighton, Darebin, Frankston, Glen Eira, Hume, Kingston, Monash, Moonee Valley, Stonnington, Whitehorse and Whittlesea where planning rights will be stripped from councils and communities, high rise development will occur as of right and planning control will be exercised undemocratically by the state government;
- That, in addition to a central activity district with as of right 12 storey development, these zones contain enormous “catchment areas” where planning protections will be removed, where 3 and 6 storey development can occur as of right, where municipal heritage overlays and designations will be overridden resulting in the destruction of thousands of irreplaceable heritage properties and where canopy tree protections will be overridden resulting in the loss of neighbourhood amenity and the exacerbation of heat island effects; and
- These plans are not accompanied by proper health or education service plans or plans for additional open space despite proposed massively increased local populations.

We therefore call on the state government to desist and recommence proper discussions and consultation with local communities and councils and heritage peak bodies in all 10 affected zones prior to taking any further planning actions to implement the announced high-rise high-density zones.

Georgie CROZIER: I move:

That the petition be taken into consideration on the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Road maintenance

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) presented a petition bearing 103 signatures:

The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council the poor state of Victoria’s roads, especially in rural and regional areas and the safety, economic and environmental damage consequences. The Economy and Infrastructure Committee should inquire into, consider and report on the state of Victoria’s roads, including but not limited to, the budgetary resources dedicated to road construction and repairs in Victoria, with comparison to national and international experience; the methods and standards of design, construction and maintenance of road pavement and surfacing, with comparison to national and international experience; and the value for money achieved by the existing Victorian system of delivering road surface construction and maintenance.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council require the Economy and Infrastructure Committee to inquire into, consider and report on the state of Victoria’s roads.

Papers

Papers

Tabled by Clerk:

Administrator of the National Health Funding Pool – Report, 2023–24.

Financial Management Act 1994 – 2024–25 Budget Update (*released on 13 December 2024 – a non-sitting day*).

Interpretation of Legislation Act 1984 – Notices under section 32(3)(a)(iii) in relation to –

Accessible Parking Permit Scheme (*Gazette G2, 9 January 2025*).

EPA Designation – Classification of PFAS-impacted soil (*Gazette G1, 2 January 2025*).

Land Acquisition and Compensation Act 1986 – Minister’s certificates of 10 December 2024 to not require the service of a notice of intention to acquire land, under section 7 of the Act.

Legal Profession Uniform Law Application Act 2014 – Practitioner Remuneration Order 2025.

Local Jobs First – Report, 2023–24.

Melbourne City Link Act 1995 – Operating Services Agreement Direct Deed, CityLink and Exhibition Street Extension, under sections 15(2) and 15D(6) of the Act.

Members of Parliament (Standards) Act 1978 – Register of Interests – Return submitted by a Member of the Legislative Council – Primary Return, 6 December 2024 (*Ordered to be published*).

National Health Practitioner Ombudsman and Privacy Commissioner – Report, 2023–24.

Planning and Environment Act 1987 –

Infrastructure Contributions and Development Contribution Levies – Report, 2023–24, under section 46GZJ of the Act.

Notices of approval of the –

Ararat Planning Scheme – Amendment C48.

Ballarat Planning Scheme – Amendment C253.

Campaspe Planning Scheme – Amendment C122.

Cardinia, Casey, Hume, Melton, Mitchell, Whittlesea and Wyndham Planning Schemes – Amendment GC206.

Colac Otway Planning Scheme – Amendment C130.

Glen Eira Planning Scheme – Amendments C263, C266 and C268.

Golden Plains Planning Scheme – Amendment C102.

Greater Bendigo Planning Scheme – Amendment C291.

Greater Dandenong Planning Scheme – Amendment C244.

Hepburn Planning Scheme – Amendment C88.

Hume Planning Scheme – Amendment C276.

Kingston Planning Scheme – Amendments C221 and C224.

Knox Planning Scheme – Amendment C203.

Latrobe Planning Scheme – Amendment C131.

Macedon Ranges Planning Scheme – Amendment C163.

Maribyrnong Planning Scheme – Amendment C184.

Maroondah Planning Scheme – Amendment C158.

Melbourne Planning Scheme – Amendments C384, C474, C475 and C476.

Merri-bek Planning Scheme – Amendment C232.

Mildura and Swan Hill Planning Schemes – Amendment GC202.

Mildura Planning Scheme – Amendment C121.

Monash Planning Scheme – Amendment C157.

Mornington Peninsula Planning Scheme – Amendment C271.

Nillumbik Planning Scheme – Amendment C153.

Port Phillip Planning Scheme – Amendment C217.

Stonnington Planning Scheme – Amendment C348.

Swan Hill Planning Scheme – Amendment C78.

Victoria Planning Provisions – Amendments VC237, VC269, VC272 and VC273.

Whitehorse Planning Scheme – Amendment C254.

Whittlesea Planning Scheme – Amendment C278.

Wodonga Planning Scheme – Amendment C144.

Yarra Ranges Planning Scheme – Amendment C224.

Project Development and Construction Management Act 1994 – Nomination Order and Application Order of 10 December 2024, and a statement of reasons for making a Nomination Order of 3 December 2024, under section 9 of the Act.

Radiation Advisory Committee – Report, 2023–24.

Statutory Rules under the following Acts of Parliament –

Assisted Reproductive Treatment Act 2008 – No. 141/2024.

Circular Economy (Waste Reduction and Recycling) Act 2021 – No. 138/2024.

County Court Act 1958 – No. 135/2024.

Fire Rescue Victoria Act 1958 – No. 131/2024.

Magistrates' Court Act 1989 – No. 134/2024.

National Gas (Victoria) Act 2008 – No. 137/2024.

Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 – No. 132/2024.

Residential Tenancies Act 1997 – No. 130/2024.

Service Victoria Act 2018 – No. 140/2024.

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 – No. 136/2024.

Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal Act 1998 – No. 133/2024.

Water Industry Act 1994 – No. 139/2024.

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 –

Documents under section 15 in relation to Statutory Rule Nos. 129/2024, 131/2024, 133/2024, 134/2024, 135/2024, 136/2024, 138/2024, 139/2024, 140/2024 and 141/2024.

Legislative Instruments and related documents under section 16B in respect of –

EPA Designation – Classification of PFAS-impacted soil, under the Environment Protection Act 2017.

Order to fix the 2025 greenhouse gas reduction rates, under the Victorian Energy Efficiency Target Act 2007.

Proclamations of the Governor in Council fixing operative dates for the following acts:

Aboriginal Land Legislation Amendment Act 2024 – Whole Act (other than Part 2) – 1 January 2025 (*Gazette S671, 3 December 2024*).

Energy and Public Land Legislation Amendment (Enabling Offshore Wind Energy) Act 2024 – Remaining provisions – 19 December 2024 (*Gazette S686, 10 December 2024*).

Health Legislation Amendment (Regulatory Reform) Act 2024 – Parts 2 and 3 – 1 January 2025 – Parts 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 – 1 March 2025 (*Gazette S700, 17 December 2024*).

Prahran Mechanics' Institute Repeal Act 2024 – Whole Act – 1 January 2025 (*Gazette S700, 17 December 2024*).

Committees

Economy and Infrastructure Committee

Inquiry into Pig Welfare in Victoria

The Clerk: I have received the following paper for presentation to the house pursuant to standing orders: government response to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee's inquiry into pig welfare in Victoria.

Petitions

Responses

The Clerk: I have received the following papers for presentation to the house pursuant to standing orders: Minister for Environment's responses to petitions titled 'Resolve corella issue in Bridgewater' and 'Stop the aerial culling of deer', Minister for Local Government's response to petition titled 'Cease the rollout of the rainbow libraries toolkit', Minister for Planning's responses to petitions titled 'Desist from high-rise, high-density zone planning' and 'Kongwak Butter Factory development', Minister for Ports and Freight's response to petitions titled 'Restore the Newhaven Jetty', Minister for Transport

Infrastructure's response to petition titled 'Halt the closure of Progress Street in Dandenong South' and the Premier's response to petitions titled 'End partnership with Elbit Systems'.

Production of documents

Infrastructure contributions

The Clerk: I table a letter from the Attorney-General dated 26 November 2024 in response to a resolution of the Council on 15 May 2024 on the motion of Mr Davis relating to the ministerial advisory committee on infrastructure contributions. The government has identified 11 documents within the scope of the order and makes a claim of executive privilege over two documents in full. I further table nine documents and schedules of the identified documents.

Housing

The Clerk: I table a letter from the Treasurer dated 20 December 2024 in response to a resolution of the Council on 16 October 2024 on the motion of Dr Ratnam relating to the social housing regulation review final report. The government has identified one document within the scope of the order, and I table the document and the schedule.

Mount Arapiles rock climbing

The Clerk: I table a further letter from the Attorney-General dated 31 January 2025 in response to a resolution of the Council on 27 November 2024 on the motion of Mr Limbrick relating to land use in the Grampians and Arapiles region. The letter states that the date for the production of documents does not allow sufficient time to respond and that the government will endeavour to provide a final response to the order as soon as possible.

Dingo protection

The Clerk: I table a further letter from the Attorney-General dated 31 January 2025 in response to a resolution of the Council on 13 November 2024 on the motion of Ms Purcell relating to the unprotection of dingoes order in Council. The letter states that the date for production of documents does not allow for sufficient time to respond and that the government will endeavour to provide a final response to the order as soon as possible. The letter further states that there is currently a legal proceeding in the Supreme Court relating to the dingo order in Council, and notes that the sub judice convention is observed and applied by the Council.

Police conduct

The Clerk: Finally, I table a letter from the Treasurer dated 3 February 2025 in response to a resolution of the Council on 27 November 2024 on the motion of Ms Payne relating to the review of police oversight. The government has identified one document within the scope of the order. I table that document and the schedule.

Business of the house

Notices

Notices of motion given.

General business

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (14:38): I move, by leave:

That the following general business take precedence on Wednesday 5 February 2025:

- (1) order of the day 2, second reading of the Constitution Amendment (Abortion) Bill 2024;
- (2) notice of motion given this day by me on crime in Prahran;
- (3) notice of motion given this day by Evan Mulholland on infrastructure in Werribee;
- (4) notice of motion given this day by Georgie Crozier on Victoria's health system; and

- (5) notice of motion given this day by Sarah Mansfield on access to abortion.

Motion agreed to.

Members statements

General practitioners

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:38): It is great to have the chance to contribute on the first day back at Parliament for this year. A few weeks ago I had the opportunity to attend the Harp medical centre in Kew East in the fantastic electorate of Kew along with Mr Batchelor. The Minister for Health in the other place, Ms Thomas, was there to announce the first 400 grants worth up to \$40,000 for medical graduates who take up a career in general practice. We all know how important a GP is to our health. I have been lucky enough to have had the same GP for decades, and that relationship and understanding of your health can make a real, tangible difference in your life. For too long new doctors have not had the right incentives to enter a career as a general practitioner. This \$32 million program addresses that, and we know it is making a difference, with 13 per cent of those taking up the grant moving to Victoria from interstate or overseas because of the program. Well done to everybody involved.

Prahran Mechanics' Institute

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:39): On a second matter, I recently visited Prahran Mechanics' Institute after we passed a bill in this place that affects them. They are an important part of our community, and I thank them for all the work that they do.

Community safety

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (14:39): I want to draw the chamber's attention today to what appears to be a really concerning development in our policing. I have the highest regard for Victoria Police and the men and women who serve in uniform, but we have seen a terrible rise in antisemitism. We have seen a series of shocking incidents occur in early December – the shocking incident that occurred down at the Adass centre in Ripponlea. I know many in this chamber have visited to see the terrible results there and what I think is frightening for many in the Victorian Jewish community, many of whom of course are clustered in Southern Metropolitan region. Menachem Vorchheimer on social media draws attention to the Summary Offences Act 1966, section 21, subsection 1, and draws attention to those who interrupted prayers and the activities at a synagogue in November 2023. These matters have been going on for a concerning period of time. What I am saying here is: it does not appear the government is getting to grips with it. Particularly on the Adass matter, I do not understand why there have been no positive developments. I am just very worried and genuinely concerned. If the police need more resources, they should get them. But why has this not occurred?

Gambling harm

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (14:41): We have just had a summer of fantastic sport, with much of it played here in Melbourne. But infuriatingly, along with that summer of sport there was a relentless stream of gambling advertising. The community is sick of it. An overwhelming majority of us want to see our governments protect us from this predatory industry. We know that Australians outspend the citizens of every other country on all forms of gambling online and in venues. We know that this gambling harm also is wreaking havoc within our communities, far beyond the financial. The federal parliamentary gambling inquiry chaired by the late and respected Labor member Peta Murphy unanimously recommended that gambling advertising be phased out and then banned altogether. The Prime Minister spent last year dithering, prioritising consultation with vested interests in the gambling industry, and now he has kicked the can further down the road again, with no reforms expected in this term of government. When we look at state reforms, we see we have the reform bill currently before our Parliament, and it is not before time. We see that the data from the *Victorian*

Population Gambling and Health Study 2023 shows that gambling harm has increased and shows a sharp rise in young men aged 18 to 24 gambling on poker machines. Let us not bake gambling harm into the next generation. I sincerely hope we see these reforms implemented and operating throughout all venues in this term of government. We need our government to protect communities, not provide cover for industries that exploit them.

Emergency services

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (14:43): This summer has been especially gruelling for our frontline emergency services workers as they battle heat exhaustion and changing conditions to keep Victorians safe. Some of us have seen this damage firsthand and for some it has been on our screens, but I am sure we can all agree that it is hard to see our state in flames. To our frontline emergency services workers that have sacrificed precious time with their loved ones over the holiday period, we give our thanks. Our beautiful beaches and waterways can be unpredictable places. Luckily, we often have the benefit of our lifeguards and lifesavers, who are entirely dedicated to keeping Victorians safe. Can I take a moment to thank everyone at Life Saving Victoria for all that you do to help prevent tragedy around the water. However, all of us have a responsibility to stay safe around beaches and waterways, because any death is a tragedy. Always, always swim between the flags, and never alone or after consuming alcohol. Can I just reinforce that message to the community today. Let me take this opportunity to give my heartfelt thanks to the CFA, Life Saving Victoria and all the emergency services members and volunteers across the state. Our community would not be what it is without the selfless service that you give to your fellow Victorians. Thank you so very much.

Crime

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:44): It is a bit late for the Premier to concede that Victoria has a crime problem. In fact Victoria has had a crime problem for years. You do not have to see the crime statistics to know that that has been happening. People do not feel safe in their communities, in their workplaces or in their homes, and it is a disgrace. Jacinta Allan and her government have given the green light to crime, to drug taking, to antisocial behaviour and to social unrest. We have seen what is unfolding in our streets time and time again. We are seeing what is happening in our communities. I was on a pre-poll in Prahran on Saturday, and a woman, Kate, came up to me and said she no longer felt safe in Prahran after all the crime. She has lived there for 25 years. I told her I understood her fear. This time last year I was the victim of an aggravated burglary. It is terrifying to have somebody trying to break into your home. It is equally terrifying when they are trying to kick in your front door. The Premier is a bit too late to come to the party on this, and no-one should believe her, because she just wants to fix a political problem. She wants to get this issue out of the way. The only way that people in Prahran and Victorians are going to feel safe is when a Liberal MP is elected in Prahran and a Liberal government here in Victoria.

School students

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (14:46): My members statement today is dedicated to all of our young Victorians who are heading into their first full week back at school. From the newest little preppies to our year 12s in their final year, I would like to wish a very productive and educational 2025 to them all. I am particularly excited to finally see our Minister for Education, Minister Carroll, launch the new L-plater curriculum, which he promised would be happening right about now. With our roads still taking the lives of many young drivers, it will surely benefit our young Victorians who are learning to drive. To all of the parents and carers of these students, I wish you all the luck and patience in your constant support of moulding our future generation. I know the free taxi service we provide as parents takes its toll.

Australia Day

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (14:47): I would like to commend the 47 of the 79 Victorian councils who proudly celebrated Australia Day on 26 January, showcasing the unity and strength that

make this country exceptional. These councils rejected the divisive rhetoric surrounding our history and embraced the opportunity to celebrate our collective achievements. They embody the spirit that has built Australia into one of the best nations and the best democracies in the world. It is, however, deeply disappointing that 28 councils have chosen to deliberately disregard this important national day as a stance of opposition. Their refusal to host events or participate in citizenship ceremonies is a direct insult to the spirit of unity that Australia Day represents. These councils chose to foster division instead of patriotism, turning their backs on the very values that make our nation strong: respect, integrity, equality of opportunity. Let us embrace our pride in being Australia, celebrate our shared heritage and continue to uphold the values that make this country strong.

First Nations communities

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (14:48): On 26 January I joined thousands of others in Torquay as the sun rose over Warri Dja for Pilk Purriyn, a truth-telling event where Wadawurrung community members shared stories of their families and history. It was once again a profoundly moving event that reminded me of the importance of genuinely listening to our First Peoples and the need for truth-telling and respect as a foundation for our journey towards reconciliation and justice. Later that day I attended a rally in solidarity with First Peoples from across Geelong hosted by Be Tru 2 Uluru. Aunty Wendy Brabham, Jordan Edwards and Julie Saylor were amongst others who shared the stories and painful significance of 26 January for them and their families. Meanwhile both Geelong and Queenscliffe councils have recently walked back on agreed actions towards reconciliation with First Peoples. The deep hurt and offence this has caused cannot be understated. Not only has it shown extraordinary disrespect for First Peoples and the broader community who were involved in developing these actions, but it has also emboldened those who are intent upon spreading hate and racism. What has occurred in my region should serve as a wake-up call for allies in leadership positions who want progress on First Nations justice. We need to listen, to act and to do better.

Australia Day awards

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (14:49): Today I would like to congratulate my constituents who were recipients of Australia Day honours. In all, 13 Northern Victoria residents received honours. Seven were awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia, including David Blackmore of Alexandra for service to the beef cattle industry; John Head of Shepparton for service to the arts and community; Alison MacGregor of Mildura for service to music and horticulture; Kay Martin of Merbein for service to the communities of Merbein, Mildura and the Mallee; Lynette Maskell of Elphinstone for services to the community of Brighton; the late Neville Seymour of Wodonga for service to the community of the Upper Murray region; and Debbie Lee Van Corler of Yarrawonga for service to the community through charitable contributions. Three were awarded a Member of the Order of Australia: Dr Christine Craik of Darraweit Guim for significant service to the community, to tertiary education and as a volunteer; Jodie Goldsworthy of Beechworth for significant service to primary industry in the honey bee and pollination sector; and Alister Purbrick of Nagambie for significant service to the wine industry. Timothy Smith of Hurstbridge was awarded an Australian Fire Service medal, Peter Weeks of Alexandra an Emergency Services Medal and Luke Wilson of Wodonga a Public Service Medal. Congratulations to all, and congratulations to all recipients of local Australia Day awards in each of the municipalities in Northern Victoria. It is your contributions that make our region such a great place to live.

Men's mental health

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:51): My members statement is regarding the mental health of men. A few weeks ago I popped into the Blackburn RSL and I happened to bump into an organisation called the Nunawading Wargames Association. The NWA cater for everyone: men and women, young and old. They have these intricate models and do war games, re-enacting historical events, fantasy and other things with these beautiful models – very complicated rules. Last week they had quite a large tournament as well, with 90 people crowded in the room playing all these

large-scale board games – really wonderful stuff. I have also been engaged with the Surrey Park Model Boat Club and the Waverley Model Railway Club and numerous other men's sheds. What these organisations have in common is that they are a great way for people, often older men, to socialise, get out of the house and overcome any social inhibitions by doing things together, because in my experience that is how men bond – by doing things. We have mental health days, we even have Movember, but as a society we are still failing many men, who are feeling left behind and lonely in this modern age. I believe it is incumbent on all of us here – members and ministers – to do whatever we can in our power to support these groups that support those men, to stop the scourge of suicide for the young and the old and to beat the loneliness epidemic in our community.

Werribee by-election

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (14:53): This weekend voters in Werribee and surrounding suburbs in my electorate are heading to the polls to select a replacement after the retirement of the former member for Werribee. It is an opportunity for Werribee locals to cast judgement on the Allan Labor government's failure to properly invest in the roads, health and transport infrastructure our growing community so desperately needs. Werribee, like many suburbs in the outer west, is experiencing significant pressures and growing pains and has been largely forgotten by Labor. I encourage locals in Werribee to deliver a message to the Allan government that they demand strong representation from someone who has dedicated their life to service and who will deliver change and make Werribee a seat that matters. If you are frustrated at being overlooked and are tired of driving on second-class roads, vote for change. If you are tired of being promised upgrades like the *Western Rail Plan* before an election and not having them delivered after the election, vote for change. If you are worried about the rising rates of crime in the City of Wyndham and across our community, vote for change. I know with Steve Murphy you will have an active, committed and trustworthy local representative and someone who will never forget his local constituents. I urge you to vote 1 for the Liberal Party and Steve Murphy this Saturday.

Australia Day

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (14:54): As we start the new year with the first sitting day in the state Parliament, I reflect on January and the wonderful celebrations that were held across Northern Victoria on Australia Day. I especially want to congratulate all those who took the step to become Australian citizens from countries all over the world, and that is because we live in the best country in the world and we can be proud to call Australia home. I want to thank the volunteers who helped behind the scenes at community celebrations. I know there were Rotary groups, Lions Clubs and Scouts. Many were up at 6 am to get that barbecue going. It was great to see community leaders like Glenda Serpell, founder of the charity Sunshine Bendigo, and also long-time Girl Guide Pollyanna Smith recognised for their service.

Country Fire Authority

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (14:55): It has also been a tough start to the year with bushfires, and we are still in the heat of summer. I would like to acknowledge the incredible work of our CFA volunteers. Many brigades across Northern Victoria have responded to support the firefighting efforts in western Victoria – a bushfire that destroyed nearly 70,000 hectares within 24 hours. Last week I visited Bendigo CFA in their temporary shared facility with my federal Nationals colleagues Senator Perin Davey and Darren Chester. It is now over 170 years old. Bendigo CFA is the third-oldest brigade in Victoria. A huge thankyou to captain Ian Ellis, who has served for nearly 45 years. Last year their brigade responded to over 120 incidents – that is an incredible effort. Their heavy tanker and brigade members were deployed to assist with the Grampians and Little Desert bushfires, and I know many other brigades did the same. To all our CFA volunteers, we say thank you.

Gambling harm

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:56): Before I start my members statement, I just want to say something in response to Ms Copsey's members statement about gambling harm. Somebody just sent me this headline: 'The Greens' financial support'. The article states:

Gold Coast gambler Duncan Turpie, the largest donor to the Greens, contributed \$575,000 to the party, including \$250,000 given to the federal branch.

It is typical of the Greens: 'Do as I say, not as I do.' They might be against gambling harm, but gambling is not harming their bottom line. That is an aside.

White Ribbon Art Gallery

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:56): I just want to rise today to give an important shout-out to a community organisation which is working to reduce family violence in my community. The White Ribbon Art Gallery, now in its fifth year, has been bringing together artists to raise awareness about the prevalence of family violence in our community and to fund projects to end it. Effective prevention and intervention require a whole-of-community effort – efforts, such as this gallery, which foster dialogue, understanding and unity. I want to acknowledge the newly elected committee, led by its president April Whitelaw, and the many artists who have given to and participated in many different ways at this gallery. They have shown enormous strength and commitment by investing their time, their skills and their artistic talents into our community and into starting important conversations. Thank you for all you do. If you can, support the gallery.

Business of the house**Notices of motion and orders of the day**

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:57): I move:

That the consideration of notices of motion, government business, 278 to 778, and orders of the day 1 and 2 be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Bills**Education and Training Reform Amendment Bill 2024*****Second reading***

Debate resumed on motion of Harriet Shing:

That the bill be now read a second time.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (14:58): I rise to speak to the Education and Training Reform Amendment Bill 2024. I am very pleased to be able to do so, because obviously this is an important bill in a very important area of government business, and that is to ensure that standards in our education system are adhered to and that Victorian children can get the quality education that they deserve and need. I will come back to a bit more on the education system and where we are going in Victoria with it. The results say quite a bit, actually, and I think it would be very concerning for many Victorian parents to understand the state of our education system. I know that there have been some concerns raised by various Victorians to members and colleagues around ensuring that standards are adhered to but also that parental choice and other aspects are able to be upheld.

Back to the bill, the purpose of this bill is to improve, as I said, the regulation of schools and other educational institutions across our state. Specifically, the bill aims to do a number of things, but before I go to that I want to speak to the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, or the VRQA, which has responsibility for ensuring that these standards are adhered to. There are a number of technical amendments to the act that appear to be aimed at strengthening deterrence mechanisms

against unregistered schools and school boarding premises. That is when the VRQA can actually look at some of these issues that are raised throughout our education system. It also empowers principals to delegate their current authority to make work experience arrangements.

In saying what it does to make that series of amendments to the act, what it does actually do is it removes the show cause process where cancellation of the registration of a non-government school or a non-government school boarding premises is voluntary or the school or school boarding premises has ceased to operate; increases the maximum penalties for carrying on or conducting an unregistered school or school boarding premises; clarifies that the VRQA may share information, including documents, with a prescribed person or body without receiving a written request; enables the VRQA to issue notices to produce and notices to comply to a person, body or school that the VRQA has reasonable cause to believe is required to be regulated; and expands the scope of matters in relation to which the VRQA may accept an enforceable undertaking from a non-school senior secondary and foundation secondary provider, an institution approved to provide courses to overseas students, or an institution approved to operate a student exchange program. It amends various references to days in various parts of the act to improve consistency of terminology, enables principals to nominate other persons to make work experience arrangements and structured workplace learning arrangements in accordance with any ministerial order, standardises and streamlines provisions relating to the appointment and fixing of remuneration and fees and resignation of members of boards, allows the VRQA to consider whether an applicant for registration or re-registration as a registered training organisation or an RTO or a high managerial agent or the applicant has ever failed to comply with the child safe standards regardless of whether the VRQA is the integrated sector regulator for the applicant and makes various minor and technical amendments to improve the operation and clarity of the act.

I have gone through the shopping list of what this bill does, but it is actually quite important, because what it is aiming to do is improve those standards and their compliance. It does provide a number of provisions aimed at strengthening the compliance and enforcement powers of the VRQA. As I said, it is increasing the maximum penalties for entities found to be conducting an unregistered school or school boarding premises in Victoria. And why is that important? Well, it actually is important. You cannot have schools or boarding premises that are not regulated and not registered. You need to ensure that these education facilities do have proper regulation and proper oversight. So I do think this is an important component around the main thrust of what this bill is talking about.

As someone who went to a boarding school, I understand the complexities of how they operate and the enormous responsibility on teachers. They are entrusted to look after children 24 hours a day, seven days a week, sometimes for weeks on end before there are any exits or any holidays. It is an enormous responsibility, and you need to have proper compliance and proper standards in place to ensure the safety of those children. Sometimes in boarding schools there are hundreds of children that are educated and cared for, and there are an array of issues, like in any school, that children might be confronted with around their needs and the complexity of their learning capacity and their overall educational experience.

I thank you, Ms Bath, for bringing up something that I forgot to bring up. When I was preparing to speak on this bill, it took me back to the very important parliamentary inquiry that we undertook here in the Parliament in 2013, for which I was the committee chair and which had an enormous impact on what we do in this state. The Family and Community Development Committee, which was a joint committee – unfortunately, we do not have those joint committees between the two houses anymore – conducted an enormous inquiry. For years the former government had done nothing, but it was the Baillieu government that took on this very important task. We inquired into the handling of child abuse by religious and other non-government organisations. In that, we specifically looked at safety

standards in the education system, and as the report states, one of the areas we looked at was standards for Victorian teachers. We go on to say that:

Teachers are required by the Victorian Institute of Teaching ... to meet specific standards relating to codes of conduct and professional development. The standards are broad and are relevant to knowledge, practice and engagement in ongoing learning.

Teachers in Victoria are expected to meet the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, which are monitored by VIT. In the context of ensuring children's safety, the relevant standard is Standard 4, which requires teachers to 'create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments' ...

The report goes on and we make various recommendations, and one of the findings was that:

Funded organisations and registered professionals are expected to meet standards relating to child safe practices that vary considerably across sectors such as early education, teaching and community services.

Then we went on to make the appropriate recommendation around the issue of a child safe environment. So it was in the context of that, because we did hear from so many victims of child abuse that were subjected to some heinous crimes. Over the coming years, when the national royal commission was undertaken, a lot of the abuse in schools was exposed or further exposed. So it is important to have these child safe standards in place. I wanted to just make that point, because governments have that responsibility to ensure that children, when they do attend school or a learning facility, are safe, and I do not think anyone in this chamber would doubt that aim. Unfortunately, things do happen, but nevertheless, as I said – I have gone off on a bit of a tangent – I do think it is all related to standards and safety aspects of the bill.

I mentioned the issue around penalties and the increasing of penalties. The amendments will increase the maximum penalties for unregistered schools or school boarding premises from 10 penalty units to 120 units. These significant increases in the penalties are for the offence of carrying on an unregistered school or boarding premises. I think it is actually very interesting and very relevant to discuss this aspect. I got an email overnight from a constituent, and I am sure the government members have received the same email. It was from somebody, a concerned Victorian, who wrote to me about this very bill. He was urging me to vote against it, talking about the issue around the pandemic and when homeschooling became not just an alternative but, as they say, a lifeline.

I do understand that during that very significant dark period of this state, when children were not allowed – shamefully, the Labor government did not allow children to attend school, even though the experts, the medical experts, were saying that they should attend school. They were not allowed to, and there was concern from many Victorian parents about the homeschooling that the parents had to do because the children could not attend their school. That is a slightly different issue, but now that the pandemic is over, there are still many parents that are worried about the standards and the education that their children are receiving in the state system, so they are choosing to homeschool their children.

As Liberals and Nationals, we are very supportive of parental choice. We understand that there are issues around parents wanting the choice to have their children homeschooled. But this bill came out of what was happening at an education facility in Hawthorn where there were concerns around how it was being regulated – Riverside Grammar. The VRQA, which I mentioned, had investigated Riverside Grammar and found it to be an unregistered school. It appeared there was no accountability mechanism in the current regulatory framework to inform any legal consequences as a result of that school providing education in the way it was without having those safeguards in place.

I do think there was real concern, understandably, in the department that Riverside Grammar provided an 'education-like' – and I have that in quotation marks – environment for troubled teens, but there was no attempt to meet any of the educative, child safety or quality standards that schools must meet. That is my understanding of the point of this bill – that there are establishments like this. Riverside Grammar sounds like a school that is conducting what you would presume to be a very worthy education curriculum for students. But in actual fact there were problems with that, and that is why these standards and why this bill have come about. So I do not have any problem with any of that. As

my colleague Ms Wilson has pointed out, the concept of a school is very important. It is an institution providing educational instruction to children. You cannot have entities set up that claim to be such organisations when in actual fact they are not providing what Victorians think they are. That is why the Liberals and Nationals are not opposing this bill.

I do have some questions for the committee stage, but I just want to make a couple of other points before I finish. I think it is concerning to note that Victorian students are really falling behind in so many areas. I want to just commend those members – and Ms Bath is in here – on the education inquiry that was conducted recently for their findings and their recommendations. It has been noted that one of the issues that they did point out was the shortage in the teacher workforce – and it is a huge issue. The government has spent something in the vicinity of \$1.6 billion, and we are still short of hundreds and hundreds of teachers in the system. It is a huge amount of money, and we are still short of hundreds and hundreds of teachers. I do think that is an absolutely massive issue for the Victorian community and Victorian parents.

The other point is that, very concerningly, one in three kids are failing the basic maths and reading standards based on the international data – the Programme for International Student Assessment data. There are record lows for 15-year-olds in maths and science. Those results need to improve. You cannot have these results and standards going backwards. Our children need our education facilities – our schools – to be absolutely going as hard as they can to get to the highest of standards. Often it is not the fault of the teachers. Far from it. The government has to provide the gaps in those shortfalls. But we do know that the curriculum is very crowded.

I think there was another aspect of the inquiry, and I am sure Ms Bath will speak to some of the findings of that inquiry. But the curriculum is so crowded with so much stuff. Really, is it necessary? What do our kids need to learn? We need to raise those standards. We need them to be the best they possibly can. Not everyone is going to be of the highest academic standard, but you need to give children the best opportunity to be able to get to their best capacity. That is about bringing it all together and having an education system that is absolutely working.

We are seeing terrible situations in some of our schools. The level of violence in our schools is completely unacceptable, and this goes back to a range of education initiatives that need to be drawn back. We need to be looking at what we are doing in our schools to ensure that we get the best outcomes for our children – absolutely critical – and that no matter a child's capacity, they can rise to their capability and be the best that they possibly can. Only a good education will enable a student to do that. It sets them up through their pathway to whatever they might do in their adult life. It starts at a very young age. Far too much emphasis is on issues that, in my opinion, need to be scrubbed – some of the rubbish that is taught to preschool kids. Get them back into the basics so that they have got the building blocks to be able to then participate appropriately and properly in primary school, then go on to secondary school, then go on to university. Those educational building blocks are critical. As I said, there is too much crowded into the curriculum. You need to give kids just the basic building blocks so that they can achieve to the best of their capacity.

Again I say this is an important bill. We need to ensure that safety standards are in place for children, that children do feel safe, that parents have the confidence in the education system to know that their children are safe, that these institutions that want to pop up and just be created without any oversight do not occur, that we do have proper oversight and that there are mechanisms to ensure that those standards are in place to ensure that proper educative systems are there for Victorian children. I say it is another important bill that is coming through this place. But there is lots to be done, and I do have concerns around the government's approach in many areas in the education system. They need to do much better to lift those NAPLAN results, to lift where children are falling behind so that they can have the best opportunities in the lead-up to their adult life and are able to do whatever they choose to do.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (15:18): Today I rise to contribute to the discussion on the Education and Training Reform Amendment Bill 2024. This bill is the incredible work of my

friend in the other place Minister Carroll, our Minister for Education as well as our Deputy Premier. I would also like to thank the Deputy Premier and Minister for Education for bringing these prospective reforms to the Parliament. His continued attention and efforts on education reform ensure that Victoria remains the Education State, and they do not go unnoticed by us or Victorian students and teachers.

The bill we discuss today amends the Education and Training Reform Act 2006. It includes a series of reforms that strengthen the compliance and enforcement powers of the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, known as VRQA. Through these reforms the VRQA is afforded greater oversight and regulatory authority over entities that may be considered unregistered schools. The expansion of the powers of the VRQA proposed in this bill is accompanied by increases to the maximum penalties for unregistered schools and boarding facilities.

It also enables school principals to nominate others to create work experience arrangements and structured workplace learning arrangements. It is a sensible and practical change to existing legislation, which mandates that school principals approve every work experience and structured workplace arrangement at their schools. It will enable principals to nominate other persons to make work experience arrangements and structured workplace learning arrangements in accordance with any ministerial order. Examples of nominated persons might include an assistant principal at a school or a teacher or education support member who has the responsibility for coordinating the school's work experience program.

I had the pleasure to supervise a young person named Kevin Raju, who is currently completing his education at Mount Waverley Secondary College in the great electorate of Ashwood in my community of Southern Metro, which is dutifully and diligently represented by my friend in the other place the member for Ashwood and Deputy Speaker, no less, Matt Fregon. So I know firsthand the importance of getting the paperwork right. The student's host employer – earlier this year that was me – has the duty of care for the student while they are in the workplace, and why shouldn't they? This amendment does not impact that duty of care at all. Merely it reduces the burden on principals and allows work experience and workplace learning arrangements to be made by staff who are more familiar with the individual students.

All together, these reforms will make it more difficult for unregistered and noncompliant schools to operate unnoticed, and they will reduce the administration burden on principals, allowing them to focus their energy on managing their schools effectively. They will improve how schools and other education institutions are regulated and create better outcomes for students and teachers. We know what happens when there are gaps in legislation and when we let the private sector run rampant through our kids' minds.

Take, for instance, the sad case of Riverside Grammar school. What started with optimism on the banks of the Yarra, where a Mark Twain quote hung that said, 'Don't let the schooling get in the way of my education,' we found out later much worse. As we know, the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority began investigating whether it was compliant with the legislation that we are amending today. But even worse than being noncompliant, we know the school was referred to the independent body that oversees the care and safety of vulnerable Victorian children. It is really a sad affair, and I know it touched my community of Hawthorn in my great community of Southern Metro. The bill seeks to address these sorts of problems from occurring in the future. It seeks to close the existing legislative gaps that are present that enable schools to operate in the wild west unregistered, disjointed and rampant, without meeting the minimum standards – standards that all Victorians expect from their education system and what our children deserve.

To ensure that no schoolkid in Victoria falls through the cracks, this bill prioritises, protects and promotes the safety of our schoolchildren. We are the Education State for a reason, and we must protect it. We have a global reputation as an education city, and we must fight for it. As a father of six kids who all attended school in Victoria, I know the importance of this bill. Our students are engaged in education at the highest rates in the country. I am particularly proud of this. More than 80 per cent

of our students complete year 12, and 96 per cent of those who start year 12 complete their VCE. These statistics do not exist due to chance. We owe a massive debt to our teachers, who are the backbone of our education system. They play a critical role in shaping the minds and futures of Victorian students. Strong legislation is how we as members of Parliament support our teachers and empower our students. This is not an area of policy we can neglect. The Allan Labor government stands with teachers. Our government school teaching workforce has grown by almost 1700 teachers since 2023. I am proud to support this bill. It is a continuation of the Allan Labor government's record investment into teachers and students.

The amendments that this bill make to the Education and Training Reform Act 2006 are as follows. It will remove the show cause process, where cancellation of the registration of non-government schools or non-government school boarding premises is voluntary or the school or school boarding premises has ceased to operate. It will increase the maximum penalties for carrying on or conducting an unregistered school or school boarding premises. It will clarify that the VRQA may share information, including documents, with a prescribed person or body without receiving a written request. It will enable the VRQA to issue notices to produce and notices to comply to a person, body or school that the VRQA has reasonable cause to believe is required to be regulated. It will expand the scope of matters in relation to which the VRQA may accept an enforceable undertaking from a non-school senior, secondary or foundation secondary provider, an institution approved to provide courses to overseas students or an institution approved to operate a student exchange program. It will amend various references to 'days' in various parts of the act to improve consistency of terminology. It will standardise and streamline provisions relating to the appointment, fixing of remuneration and fees, and resignation of members of boards. It will allow the VRQA to consider whether an applicant for registration or re-registration as a registered training organisation or high managerial agent of the applicant has ever failed to comply with the child safe standards, regardless of whether the VRQA is an integrated sector regulator for the applicant. Finally, it would also make various minor and technical amendments to improve the operation and clarity of the act.

It is our intention that the provisions of this bill come into effect by October next year. The amendments this bill makes pertaining to the VRQA empower it to: firstly, issue a notice to schools and other educational providers requiring them to produce documents or information that it reasonably believes are necessary to determine if a person or entity is engaging in conduct requiring VRQA regulation under the act, and secondly, issue a compliance notice to any person or entity that it reasonably believes should be regulated under the act, requiring them to apply for registration or approval under the act or to stop the relevant conduct.

Currently the VRQA cannot require schools or other educational providers to produce this information or documents, which limits its authority as a regulatory body. The VRQA's present limitations as a regulatory body inhibits its effectiveness and puts students at risk. This is not an area of policy we can neglect. By providing the VRQA with greater powers of oversight and enforcement, this bill aims to provide a greater deterrent to schools, boarding premises and other education providers from operating without registration or approval. Amendments to the maximum penalties for unregistered schools and boarding premises will act as a further deterrent. Presently, the maximum penalties for these offences in the 2006 act are only 10 penalty units. It is both insufficient as a deterrent and inadequate as a punishment. Further, there is little value in prosecuting these entities that commit these offences for such a small maximum penalty. The maximum penalty will be increased to 120 penalty units for an individual and 600 penalty units for a body corporate. This will bring these penalties in line with the penalties of similar offences under the Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010 and the Children's Services Act 1996. These amendments further the ability of the VRQA to deter individuals and corporations.

The primary purpose of this amendment is to reduce the administrative burden on our school principals. This process is a massive burden for principals at large schools where dozens of students participate in these programs. The amendments to the bill enable schools to amend this process in a

way which makes sense for them and their individual circumstances, whether they be delegating to individuals or to teams of staff. The ability of principals to delegate under this reform additionally enables the responsibility of approving workplace arrangements to be handled by teachers and staff close to the students.

The bill also legislates numerous reforms to affect the boards within education as well as the training and skills portfolio. The bodies that are affected by these amendments are: the pools of merit protection boards, the pools of disciplinary appeals boards, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, the council of the Victorian Institute of Teaching, the VIT hearing panel pool, the board of the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership, the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, the Adult Community and Further Education Board, and the board of AMES Australia. Finally, this bill makes minor amendments that improve the consistency of terminology in the act.

The purpose of these reforms is to increase the standardisation and streamlining process through which members are appointed and resign. They also deal with amendments regarding the fixing of the remuneration and fees as they relate to the board and board members.

Only under a Labor government Victoria will remain the Education State. The most important public investment any government can make for our future, whether it be phonics or updating our teaching or learning model to embed explicit teaching at its core, including the use of systematic synthetic phonics, our record funding of medical practitioners, the head start of apprenticeships and traineeship programs and doctors in high schools – all the state is benefiting from our reforms. We are supporting disadvantaged students through the school saving bonus; the Camps, Sport and Excursions Fund; affordable school uniforms; free period products in all government schools; breakfast club program delivering free school breakfasts; Glasses for Kids; Smile Squad; out-of-school care; student excellence program; primary mathematics and science specialists; reduced face-to-face teaching hours; active sports programs; additional school nurses and allied health services; establishing the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership, including the teaching excellence program; support for tertiary teachers, teaching students and teachers to work in regional Victoria; and of course free kinder and further expanding our kinder spots to all Victorians.

In my patch, who could forget the almost \$10 million – a record, massive amount of money – invested in a great local school in my community of Hawthorn, Camberwell Primary School. Since being elected in 2014 we have funded over 2200 school upgrades at more than 1150 government schools and we have funded 66 school expansions. In fact 50 per cent of the schools that have been built in Australia over the last 10 years have – surprise, surprise – been in Victoria. But there is always more to be done.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:30): I am glad to have an opportunity to make a contribution to the debate on the Education and Training Reform Amendment Bill 2024. The Minister for Education was quoted in an article about homeschooling earlier this week, stating:

The best place for students to learn is in the school ... the most important protective factor for a young person [to be] in the school in front of a qualified teacher ...

This quote is a good one for explaining the difference between the government's position and the Libertarian position. My view is that the best place for students to learn is a place where they are safe, their education is supported and they have their best opportunity to thrive. For some kids, and an increasing number recently, school is not the best place. Parents and families agree. A recent article on the ABC noted that Queensland had seen a doubling of homeschooling registrations in the past four years. I do not know the figures for Victoria, but conversations I have had with people who are involved in the sector have told me that there is definitely an increased interest. Some people make this choice because they believe they can deliver a better and more well-rounded education experience for their kids or maybe the local schools do not match their values or priorities. Others have taken their kids out of school because of bullying issues. But there is also another reason, which has been more of a COVID phenomenon. There has been a lot of reporting about the school refuser challenges. After

the lockdowns and home learning enforced by the government's response to COVID, some students have developed severe anxiety and other mental health issues, something I warned about at the time.

Fortunately, there is also a growing number of organisations dedicated to supporting homeschooling families, with networks of homeschoolers organising meet-ups, sporting activities or excursions to museums and other venues. There are also organisations dedicated to helping families navigate the shift to homeschooling or assisting their learning needs with professional tutoring services. This really gets to the heart of the difference in perspective. I do not think the government really likes this trend at all. They would prefer everyone go through the standard education system, as central planning is part of their DNA. Libertarians are the opposite of this. We support maximum freedom, diversity, innovation and competition. It has been a longstanding policy of our party that funding should follow the student and allow maximum freedom for families in how they choose to allocate that funding. In this country this idea has not gained much traction yet, but I think that we are going to see increasing interest in education reform to support greater diversity. The idea itself has a long history, with Thomas Paine suggesting that the government should support, but not direct, the education of poor families in his book *Rights of Man* in 1791. John Stuart Mill made a similar argument in 1859, stating that:

All attempts by the State to bias the conclusions of its citizens on disputed subjects, are evil ...

This is undoubtedly a common reason for parents choosing non-government schools or homeschooling. Mill did, however, support ensuring that all children had an education and, where required, government support be allocated to the family for them to choose where best to source that education. In more recent years it was Nobel Prize winning economist Milton Friedman who popularised the idea of school choice with a school voucher system in a 1955 book and reiterated it in his famous book *Capitalism and Freedom* in 1965. It is not just a theory, though. This model has been trialled in several places and is increasingly popular in the United States of America. Sweden used to have a highly centralised education system, probably far worse than here. But in 1992 they shifted to a voucher system. This was done partially to allow more freedom and choice and partially to encourage competition and innovation in the education sector. There have been many reviews, but it is likely that these reforms led to better outcomes overall – and not just in independent schools – slowed the increasing costs of delivering education, reduced violence in schools and allowed for different specialisations.

Millions of students in the USA now participate in some kind of school choice program, from school vouchers to tax credit schemes and others. This policy approach is receiving a lot more interest, with multiple jurisdictions considering implementing or expanding programs. Homeschooling is now the fastest growing education choice in the United States, with about 2.5 million students in 2019 growing to almost 4 million in 2024. Corey DeAngelis and the Educational Freedom Institute, amongst others, are helping to support this change.

Back here in Australia it is all a bit of a mess. Overlapping state and federal responsibilities and funding make truly radical and ambitious reform difficult. There are frequently debates about funding for private versus public schools, and the poor homeschoolers are lucky to get a few crumbs. It would be simpler, more effective and likely lead to better outcomes to simply fund each student and allow maximum freedom. Our policy settings are still embedded in 19th-century thinking, and no amount of centres of excellence are going to boost standards and innovation in the ways that we need to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

As for the bill itself, it does several things that I support, such as streamlining some processes and allowing principals to delegate some authorisations. It also tidies up a process around schools that cease operating and makes a few other minor amendments which I support. Mostly the bill is either benign or has provisions that libertarians could support. There are some issues, however, the first of which is that the whole policy area is devoid of any substantive ideas for reform, efficiency, freedom or innovation. That is a broad critique of high-level policy and funding, though.

In terms of this bill, I have received a lot of correspondence from people involved in the homeschooling sector. They have expressed a range of concerns, some of which I will seek clarity on during the committee stage of the debate. Before I go into these, though, I do want to thank the minister's office for providing a briefing to discuss these matters.

Some of the concerns are related to the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority and whether they are going to target homeschoolers. I do not believe that this is the case, or at least not directly, but I do have concerns about how the regulator is currently engaging with businesses that provide support to homeschoolers and how this legislation might give even more power to the VRQA. One of the main concerns is around requests for documents that are currently occurring. Several organisations providing tutoring and support to homeschoolers have stated that they have received notices to provide documents that they believe would be breaching the Privacy Act 1988 to comply with. I do not know if this is the case, but I would be unsurprised, as we saw it during the COVID pandemic. Everybody just seemed to ignore the requirements for businesses to hold certain medical data in ways that likely breached the privacy act, but no-one seemed to care – for the greater good or something like that. The key concern is that there seems to be no justification for them to do this. It is not clear that there have been any complaints, and I struggle to understand why there would be a reasonable suspicion that these tutoring services are operating in a way that would require them to be registered as a school. The whole thing seems like an unnecessary targeting of the homeschooling support system when the VRQA likely has more important things to do.

I have been hearing whispers for a while now about the quality of education being provided by many registered training organisations, and I believe that recent scandals are the tip of the iceberg. We can probably expect more revelations over the course of the year and probably an inquiry at a minimum by next year. What I would like to see is maximum freedom and options with private schools, specialist schools, homeschooling cooperatives and microschools and a streamlined system which reduces bureaucracy and provides more sensible oversight, focused on child safeguarding and ensuring basic quality and service delivery.

While there are aspects of the bill that I like, I am reluctant to support giving more powers to the regulator to go on witch-hunts without strong justification, so I will not be supporting this bill. I will seek further clarification on aspects during the committee stage of debate.

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:39): I also rise to speak on this reform bill for education and the amendments that have been prescribed here. I want to first of all thank my colleague Jess Wilson, the Shadow Minister for Education, for the work that she has done in preparing for this and engaging stakeholders. She has clearly done an excellent job, particularly in her own area, where she has looked at some of the issues that have been of concern to her particular constituents.

I want to start by going through the actual definition of a school. As many of you may or may not know, my background is in education. I am a qualified and experienced schoolteacher, having trained in the secondary system. I have also had the opportunity to work in the primary system, and what might surprise some people is I have also had the opportunity to homeschool my children. I would say that in the beginning I was not a tremendous fan. It was a great idea of my husband's, who had looked into it before we got married. It was, for me, a very difficult undertaking, even though I had been a schoolteacher, because I did not really have much of an opinion or any understanding of it; I did not know anyone that did it. It was, for me, an incredible undertaking, which I must say I did not last a long time doing – it would be less than two years. I would say that in that time I met some of the most amazing families. I came across incredible resources and recognised the value of what homeschooling could actually provide. That, for me as a teacher, might seem a surprise, but I can say where I found it difficult was I tried to create school at home instead of trying to understand the difference and the nuances in the different academic and educational options that homeschooling actually provided and does provide. So it took me on a journey of reading a whole lot of resources that I would never have engaged in had I not undertaken this for a short period of my life, for which I am very, very grateful. I think that my children are also very, very grateful, because it allowed us to have more time as a unit

and for me to understand my children in a way that perhaps I would never have had the opportunity to had I been working in a school and not spending time with them.

I want to start by actually defining a school based on what this whole amendment in this bill is looking at, the definition of the school and not referring to it in a direct way; I want to give that to us so that I can expand on some of the concerns. 'School', by definition in the actual act:

... means a place at or from which education is provided to children of compulsory school age during normal school hours, but does not include –

- (a) a place at which registered home schooling takes place;
- (ab) a school boarding premises;
- (b) a University;
- (c) a TAFE institute;
- (d) an education service exempted by Ministerial Order;
- (e) any other body exempted by the regulations ...

I realise that when this was being drafted that was taken into consideration and constantly heard, and I want to thank the department for providing me with an additional briefing based on concerns that I have had from homeschooling-providing resource groups. I realised at the time that this has been an issue. Since this bill was passed in the lower house there are homeschooling resource groups that have become aware of the bill being passed who were not even aware that it existed and have become extremely concerned.

I will come back to the homeschooling issue, but I first want to tackle one of the things that I did mention when we had our briefing. Again, like I said, I do want to thank the minister for making the departments and the heads and the advisers available for me to ask questions of. I too will have questions when we go into committee.

I want to raise, first of all, the issue of work experience, and I know that I have raised that in this time. I know from experience working in a school that if you are in a big school you can have a whole section of people who are working in compliance. You can be paying the lawyers; you can have that huge response from staff that can be making the calls to make sure that with something like work experience every i is dotted and every t is crossed. When you are in a small-to-medium school – and let us take a non-government small-to-medium school because clearly the government is intending, I would think, to help its small and regional schools that may want to have work experience and provide that to students. Clearly I am assuming from this that they are going to be undertaking to provide services to support these schools given that it is now going to be allowed, with this bill, to prosecute individuals if they make a mistake and not actually look at the school as a whole or the leadership.

I want to say that in the non-government schools I think that the government is now undertaking with this bill to actually make sure that it provides the additional support and education to the non-government schools to ensure that they understand the signing off made by a teacher, which could change every year as to who is in charge of work experience. They always do this, usually with one teacher who is in charge of it, but it gets signed off currently by the principal and it is all covered by school insurance. It is now looking to me, and I will be looking for answers on this, like that is not necessarily going to be the case – that individuals can be prosecuted should they make a mistake in the work experience situation and in the way that all of the paperwork is done.

As an educator I am all for child safety. In fact you could not find someone that would want to work hard enough and advocate strongly enough for child safety. What happens to our children in schools is incredibly important to me and what happens to our children in this state is incredibly important to me. I am a mother of four kids myself, and I have worked with young people who have been out of home. I have seen the distress that goes on both in school and out of school because of decisions that get made either in the family or because of, at this stage, the lack of services provided by this

government to actually protect our children who are under 18 and may not have anywhere to live, making them vulnerable even when they are trying to attend school.

Moving on from that, I do want answers in this particular area. I am concerned that we are putting our educational staff at further risk and at a time when it is so difficult to retain teachers, a time when it is almost impossible to keep teachers in schools and young people who are training do not even want to go into the teaching profession and be locked in to having to prepare for classes. They are all opting to be relief teachers because they do not like the responsibilities, and here we are making it so that a person that takes on the responsibility of work experience could actually be also undertaking a situation where they can personally be sued if something is not quite right. That is a genuine concern for me.

Moving on, I want to take up some of the things that Mr Limbrick has mentioned, because I too have been contacted by a number of businesses. I have discovered some of these businesses only just recently. I have never actually met these people face to face. I have only talked to them via the internet and on the phone based on them contacting me, and I want to thank them for doing that. They have businesses – they are constituents of mine – and they are providing resources and opportunities to homeschooling families. I can say that any resource that is provided to a homeschool family is of great value to that family. Families want to have options. I met with one of these providers that was interstate, not the ones that are my constituents, and they mentioned to me, ‘Look, English is my second language. I wasn’t born in this country. But my kids were suffering from anxiety, and the situation was that I needed a resource that could provide support for me in teaching English, in teaching language and in teaching things that were going to help my child to be at the level that they needed to be in English and in that area of education.’ That meant looking for resources.

As I understand it, the resource groups that are based in areas of my electorate and sprang up during COVID actually were providing for many of these families where there is school refusal – where there are young people who do not want to go to school. They actually sprang up during COVID when there was not the opportunity for children to go to school and for young people to go to school. In that time the level of anxiety rose, and as a result of that level of anxiety rising, some of those kids, once it was time to return to school, found that they actually had issues and found it more difficult.

As has been mentioned before, bullying is also an issue behind why some parents choose to homeschool. I can say that there can be learning needs and an understanding of what is going on in that young person’s life. Homeschooling in Victoria is actually meeting a need for families that is not being met by this current government. Not everybody can afford to have a private school education. Or do they live in an area where they feel that that private school is going to be the one that they would want to send their kids to? There are many families who are bravely undertaking the task of wanting to teach their kids at home – often, I will say, because of anxiety that was caused during COVID or in the COVID period and often because of bullying or because their child has different learning needs that cannot be met in the system as well as the parents feel that they could do – and they are willing to look for those resources.

The Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, which we are about to give the most incredible powers with this bill, has never been known to actually allow online learning to be approved as an educational resource. In fact it appears to me that for any of these groups that provide tutoring, that provide learning, whether it be videoed, whether it be individual or whether it be provided to them in small groups, it is something that they have a real issue with. I think that that is a backwards step. I remember being part of a discussion group about what we have learned in education as a result of the COVID lockdowns. I remember having to be able to teach using the online learning systems, and I can say it revolutionised my thinking. I thought there are new ways to do school, there are new ways to do learning and there are new ways that we need to start to explore so people can have options and resources. I think it would be a backwards step if we start to now discriminate against groups that are providing resources to families. They are not schools. They have not in any shape or form pretended to be a school. They are not a school. They are simply providing resources. The VRQA have given us the undertaking that that is not what they are going after, and we are going to be watching. I can tell

you that both my colleague Jess Wilson as the Shadow Minister for Education and I will be monitoring very, very closely what happens to these particular businesses, because we will support – we will absolutely support – the right for parents to have the choices and the opportunities for education available to them.

We are not going to support taking down small businesses. We are not going to support taking down medium-sized businesses. We are not going to support taking down the opportunities that should be freely available in a country like Australia and in a state like Victoria, which I know under this government has made everybody nervous when you look at the sorts of powers that we are now attributing to the VRQA through this bill. It concerns me because the penalties could actually cripple and take out people that are providing services that we desperately need, which this government is not tackling. This government has record highs of teachers that do not want to teach. It has record highs of students that do not want to go to school. It has record highs of students that have been suspended. It is an appalling mess, our education system, with this cluttered curriculum that is driving people and even teachers mental because they cannot even get through it. I remember one principal saying to me, ‘Oh, my goodness, they’ve just sent us another email of something else they want us to stuff into the curriculum.’ It is just getting ridiculous.

I actually think that homeschooling provides a tremendous opportunity. I think the proof is in the pudding when you meet, perhaps, not all homeschooling families and not all homeschoolers, but let me say there are some fantastic families out there who are homeschooling, and they deserve to have choice in their resources. These businesses also deserve to be allowed to stay open and to continue to provide opportunities for resources for families, whether it be during school time or after school; after all, these families are homeschooling. I just want to say that we will be looking into that. I do have questions that I will be taking to committee. Our shadow ministry here will be absolutely committed to following up any concerns – and I say any – and please contact us if you have any concerns. My name is Ann-Marie Hermans. Jess Wilson is our shadow minister. I am the assistant shadow minister. Please contact us if your resource group and your provision of homeschooling is under attack from the VRQA. We want to hear from you. We will stand with you and have a look at your issues, because we want to make sure that options and opportunities are available to all Victorians who want to have choices in their education.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (15:54): On this, the first bill that I am speaking to here in 2025, can I take a moment to say happy new year to all those listening at home or indeed in the chamber, and what a good one it is because we are starting our parliamentary year here in the Legislative Council with a bill about our youngest Victorians and those that are looking to educate themselves for the big, bright futures we know that they have. It really is my honour to get up and speak in support of the Education and Training Reform Amendment Bill 2024, and support it I do indeed. You see, this bill is an important step towards ensuring that Victorian students receive the highest standard of education in a safe and a really well regulated environment. In particular, can I take a moment, now that we have gotten past their first week of school, to acknowledge and commend the tireless efforts of the schools in the Northern Metropolitan Region and of course right across the state. To those in the northern suburbs, the principals, the teachers, the support staff and the broader school communities who have dedicated themselves every day to fostering the development of our youngest Victorians, can I say thank you for all that you do.

Education truly is the foundation of our society, and in our schools here students are not only taught academic subjects but also instilled with values – values of resilience, collaboration and curiosity that will serve them throughout their lives. The dedication and passion of school leaders and staff in our region cannot be overstated. In Northern Metro, whether it is Epping or Preston, Coburg or Craigieburn or all the way out to our outer suburbs, educators work beyond the classroom and are supporting students’ wellbeing, championing inclusive education and ensuring that every young person has the opportunity to thrive, which is just so good.

I have had the opportunity over the course of my time here in the Legislative Council to visit many schools across Northern Metro and have seen firsthand the exceptional work that they do, whether it is the innovative STEM programs at Thomastown Secondary College, the outstanding arts and music initiatives at Northcote High School – which I know the member for Northcote is deeply, deeply committed to – or the inspiring VCE success stories coming from Glenroy College. The member for Broadmeadows speaks about that with such pride – and so regularly too, I might say. Thank you to Kathleen Matthews-Ward for making sure that I know all about the inspiring VCE success there in the northern suburbs.

Can I also say our schools continue to go above and beyond in providing high-quality education for all their students. I have got the occasion to head to some school assemblies in the next little while, which I am very much looking forward to, and it is a chance for me to acknowledge and thank them. It is for so many reasons that I just want to extend my deep appreciation to the principals, the teachers and the staff in the public, independent and Catholic schools right across the northern suburbs for their truly unwavering commitment. Their work not only shapes the future of individual students but strengthens the very fabric of our local communities.

Going back to this bill, can I just say one of the key aspects of the bill before us is a reform that enables school principals to nominate other staff members to make work experience and structured workplace learning arrangements. This is really a much-needed change, one that will significantly ease the burden on our principals and our school leaders, and allows some career coordinators, teachers and support staff, who often have the most direct knowledge of the students' needs, to take on this responsibility. We know that work experience is really an invaluable opportunity for students to gain firsthand exposure to the workforce, develop employability skills and explore potential career pathways. Whether a student is gaining experience in health care, technology, construction, retail or hospitality, these placements provide a vital bridge between education and employment.

I will just take a moment to acknowledge the work experience student I had in my office last year. I know they are a little shy, so I will not put their name on the record. I know that my office as well as many others right across the Parliament proudly supports local students through work experience placements, and every year we welcome here into the Parliament schools from across the Northern Metropolitan Region, giving them insights into the workings of government and public policy. I kind of wish that was something that was available to me in high school; that was not something that I did in high school. I instead went and hung out at an engineering firm and learned a thing or two about what goes into world-class infrastructure in our state and indeed overseas. I have got to tell you, some of the most phenomenal engineers, building world-class projects right across the world, come from this state, and maybe some of them are through some of the great initiatives like the STEM schools that we have got.

Back to the other point about work experience programs, throughout this program, students really do gain hands-on skills in research, public engagement and legislative processes. I know that the program that we have got here at the Victorian Parliament has been around a little while, and it is pretty good. I know that because of the big smiles on the faces of not only the participants, but the families as well, who I had the good fortune to meet as I celebrated the work experience students that have come through my office and just loved immersing themselves in the legislative processes of our state, knowing that the decisions made here, in this place, impact their lives – like the bill that we are discussing right now. I would love to see a higher uptake of this great program from our public schools. In recent times, participation from our private schools has been higher than our local public schools.

Even though public school students make up nearly 65 per cent, in fact, of the secondary schools, inclusion in the program has not been reflective of that, and I would like to see that change. Just know that is something that I am thinking about and others are as well. I take the opportunity then to encourage the public schools in the Northern Metropolitan Region to get that application in for the Parliament of Victoria work experience program. It is really critical that our students from all backgrounds have access to these experiences and understand the impact that public policy and

governance have on their lives. My office will continue to work with school leaders and career advisers to increase participation and ensure that more public school students benefit from these opportunities.

I know that other speakers, including the first government speaker Mr Berger, who spoke earlier about the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, has talked a little bit about changing the regulatory environment around education, and I thank him for those contributions.

We have got some really rapidly growing schools in the northern suburbs, and the demand for school placements really is rising. Whether that is from the growing areas up in the north or some even closer to this building, I have got to say families need to have the confidence and must have the confidence that every school operating within their community is properly registered, adheres to child safe standards and meets educational requirements. I am so happy to see some of the measures in the bill. This is not standalone. This is around to complement the existing work of the Minister for Education, including delivery of some key reforms and programs to support our school students. They include the strong commitment to mental health and wellbeing programs, and the Head Start apprenticeships and traineeships. I am a big fan of the apprenticeships, and I have spoken about them many times. We have got the minister in here, so I am just going to have another plug.

I encourage students to consider apprenticeships. They are incredible choices for life – ones that I wish we had spoken about and had more pride in many, many years ago. But right now there is never a better time to take up an apprenticeship. To the young fella I know that is about to start his tunnel-boring apprenticeship, you are going to have the very best time, because you are very much changing the fabric of our state each and every day with your apprenticeship. There are not only great programs that are out there, but through some of the enormous investments we have made with apprenticeships and traineeships in some of our exciting projects, there is a very big future for you.

There is also the doctors in schools program. I know that it is hard as a busy student to find the time to see a doctor, and so big thanks to the minister for that program. I know that there are all the other things that we do, things that we are celebrating – things like the school saving bonus and the Camps, Sports and Excursion Fund. It is just absolutely incredible. Big thanks to each and every school for helping do what they do to make those possible.

I might finish up a little bit early, but know that I am eternally grateful for all of the programs that are out there to support our school students. Before you get to school, you of course are going to be supported in our state through our amazing three- and four-year-old kinder. To all of the principals, teachers, education support staff and school councils, who make it possible for us to have such incredible programs right across the state, thank you for all that you do. Education truly is at the very heart of our state's future. This bill only strengthens that through some improved oversight, access to our work experience program and of course reducing the administrative burden on our school leaders. I am looking forward to hearing contributions from other speakers in this chamber. With that, I will finish my remarks and commend this bill to the house.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (16:06): I am pleased to rise today to make a contribution on the Education and Training Reform Amendment Bill 2024. In noting the importance of education, there are a number of speakers on this bill today, and I think there is an overwhelming sense of the vitality of a workable, supportive, comprehensive and functioning education system. By 'system' I mean the way to enable young people in our state to become the very best of themselves; to feel confidence in their ability to communicate, to read and to be able to work their way through the world; to have mathematics and a comprehensive understanding of how to be when they leave the halls of the education institution or the homeschool that they are in; to make a positive contribution; and to feel safe in this state.

Just for context, because the Nationals and the Liberals certainly agree with choice and the importance of having a choice, if we look at the students in Victoria – I think these stats are reasonably relevant – there are approximately 63 per cent in government schools and 21 per cent in Catholic schools, and in

independent schools there are around 16 per cent. I was just doing some research before and noted that the number of children with parents and guardians choosing to homeschool their children has escalated – doubled – since 2019. There were about 5500 students back in 2019 in the state, and there are upwards now of around 11,500 to 12,000. You can see when you look at that graph that there was a spike in 2021 and thereafter – around that time. That will not be a surprise to many parents, and certainly we on this side understand. We were in our electorate offices speaking with frustrated parents about having the situation where students were being schooled at home or having lessons at home during COVID. It certainly did not suit the overwhelming majority of those students to be learning from home and learning in front of a computer. There were mixed and varied reports on how effective and committed and able particular schools were in meeting the needs of those students while learning from home. Of course there were a few that had to go in because they were children of essential services workers.

Nonetheless, just as I begin my contribution I do want to say that I am pleased that on the Liberals and Nationals side here we will be asking the relevant minister at the table today about the concerns that have been flagged by the homeschool parents and the homeschool fraternity. I note our shadow minister Jess Wilson has been forensic in her analysis and her contribution in the lower house but also in investigating with the department. I know she thanks the department for answering further questions about ensuring that people are not continuing businesses who are unregistered and unworthy of providing education material and that that does not disadvantage those who are exemplary and are providing a very good service in the homeschool area. I just wanted to put that on the record. We very much support education on this side – and I am sure all members will make that same statement – but we also want to ensure that this bill is doing its job without diminishing the fact that people do have the right to homeschool their children.

In relation to strengthening this bill and its aims, it certainly helps to strengthen the deterrence mechanisms by increasing penalties for operating unregistered schools or school boarding premises and by empowering the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, which we affectionately call the VRQA, with greater oversight and regulatory authority. I want to make some comments about the VRQA in a little while.

Also this bill seeks to allow principals to delegate authority, particularly in that work experience space and in relation to work experience teachers. They are fantastic. We had a great one at my school. They are very busy because they have to cover a lot of students, but they are really on the pulse. They are often doing those negotiations or discussions with industry and workforce, the local hairdresser, the local mechanic or wherever else, so for a principal to be able to delegate to the appropriate teacher or leader in that school is certainly something that we would support. It is also about improving administration, looking at standardising and streamlining provisions that relate to board appointments and resignations.

The other part I would certainly like to touch on is around enhancing information sharing and compliance in relation to the VRQA but also in relation to the child safe standards. I think it is part 3 of this bill that looks at child safe standards. This is a really important instigation. It has been around, I think, for almost 20 years now. I would like to drill down into some of the important work that these child safe standards should be doing. Without going through each and every one, I just want to capture the flavour of some of those 11 child safe standards. They look at providing a culturally safe environment which will support diverse and unique identities. They also provide that child safety and wellbeing are embedded in the organisation, in the leadership and in the culture of the school; that families and communities are informed and involved in promoting child safety and wellbeing – ‘informed and involved’ is a really important one; that people working with children and young people must be suitable and supported to reflect child safety and wellbeing values; that staff and volunteers are equipped with knowledge, skills and awareness in relation to keeping people safe through their education and training; that the physical and online environments must also be safe for those children

and young people; and that the implementation of child safe standards is regularly reviewed and improved.

One of the things that I have heard in my time is that, unfortunately, it seems to be parents, carers and guardians of children in the disability sector that have come with the most concerns around child safe standards. It is a policy of government, but it also has to be a practice of government and embedded by government every day in the schools, whether it be in our state schools or in our independent and Catholic schools et cetera. It needs to be a practice. What I have heard during my time is concern from those parents whose children may be non-verbal. They cannot communicate what has happened in the day through their expression, but they can act out what has happened. That parent often relies on the school – and part of the child safe standards is about good communication between school and parent – to have those communications and to write them in the book. But I was only speaking to someone quite recently, a parent, who was saying sometimes those communications are limited to non-existent. So how do they know? How is there confidence that that school is providing a child safe environment?

Indeed the CCYP, the Commission for Children and Young People, have on their website today – and I thank the commissioner and indeed the traditional owner commissioner for coming and speaking at our inquiry some months ago, last year – some of the examples of child safety concerns. These are quotes off the CCYP, concerns about child safe standards:

My child has been harmed or abused by another child at the organisation and when I told the manager they told me it was not their problem.

A different quote:

I asked the organisation for their Child Safe policy and code of conduct and they said they did not know what I was talking about.

And:

A person engaged by an organisation has a proven history of inappropriate behaviour with children, but the organisation engaged them for a role with unsupervised access to children.

Then it goes on to talk about reportable conduct and raising the concerns. I think the CCYP do a very good job, an exemplary job, and they have made multiple recommendations to government. I think there were 46 in one of those to do with out-of-home care, and those recommendations should be accepted in full by this government. It is important that when a bill looks at considering compliance with child safe standards for registering of training organisations, whatever those training organisations be in that form, it ensures that they actually have not only the policy but the practice of that policy. Our children are the most important and most fragile asset that this state has, and we need to be, first, educating them better but protecting them and ensuring their safety better.

Some of the other points that I would just like to go to in my contribution are around the principal workload and the administrative burden on principals, as I said, to approve work experience and also around streamlining processes and cutting red tape. One thing that we heard about in our inquiry as well was that burden that teachers and principals have. It seems to be an ever-growing burden. As I was in school, I know that for some of my colleagues who were retiring, part of their parting gift to me was to say, ‘Once upon a time we were able to teach students. Now we just seem to write forms about them.’ So there is a balance. I am not saying that we should not keep that balance in a good state education system – there needs to be that balance – but streamlining certainly is needed.

I do want to put on the record some sobering statistics about principals. This has come to me – and I am going to say that it is a fact – in a quiet sense, so I will not be talking about individuals by any stretch. In the important region of inner Gippsland, that fantastic area in my electorate, there are 12 secondary colleges. Seven of those secondary colleges have acting principals, so not a stable principal population. One principal is working part time and four are full-time substantive principals, but two of those four are in their first two years of the role. So if we look at that corporate knowledge, that understanding, that maturity of leadership, we see that there are some pressures happening. It is

not only in Gippsland – I am sure it is right across the state – but there are some examples of the pressures on schools, the pressures on principals and the pressures on teachers. I have heard of regular occasions where principals are having to backfill into classes because there are multiple staff missing. Either they just cannot fill that staffing position, that teaching position, or indeed teachers are away on extended illness or leave. Indeed in outer Gippsland secondary schools we know that on average there is only 0.7 of an application per job. Again, we were in Bairnsdale at the time, and we heard there was some astronomical number of advertisements that went out. It was frightening – I cannot remember it off the top of my head, but there were many, many jobs still going that could not be filled.

I understand also that Jenny Atta – and I am sure she is a very conscientious person – has now moved on and the Department of Education is looking for a new deputy secretary. I am aware that her parting email was actually in relation to praising very much the education department staff – and maybe that is rightly so – but ahead of the school staff, so I want to put on record my thanks to all the teachers who front up every day to do their very best in what I consider in many cases very trying circumstances. Education is important. This bill will go through and we do not oppose it, but we need a better system in our state.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:21): I do rise today to speak on the Education and Training Reform Amendment Bill 2024. I am very excited to be speaking on the first bill before us this parliamentary year, and in doing so I acknowledge that it is quite appropriate for us to be doing an education bill at the same time as so many new schools are opening across the state of Victoria. Indeed just in the past week we have seen three new government schools open in my region alone, which has been wonderful to see – all of them in Clyde North – two new primary schools and also the new secondary school as well, Wulerrp Secondary College. It is very exciting to see those schools now opening to students, continuing to round out this government's commitment to build 100 new state schools across Victoria.

I reflect on the regional schools that have opened, the inner-city schools and especially those schools such as Mirniyan Primary School, for example, in Clyde North in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region. Also of course we had a new Catholic school open just this week in my electorate in Clyde North, St Josephine Bakhita Catholic Primary School, which is going to be wonderful to have contributing to the educational outcomes of our local community, providing, along with Clyde Grammar, alternative schooling options for my very large growing community out in Clyde North.

Indeed this is a government that has consistently delivered on the mantle which we have put for ourselves and has consistently risen to that title of making Victoria the Education State, whether it is within these 100 new schools that are being built right across Victoria or whether it is with the introduction of phonics, another significant announcement by the Deputy Premier just last year –

Ann-Marie Hermans interjected.

Michael GALEA: It is not shameful, Mrs Hermans. It is actually a very good announcement. It is a very, very good announcement that is going to considerably improve the educational outcomes of our youngest Victorians. It is a very good thing in fact that we have the implementation of phonics in the state of Victoria. Do you agree that is a good thing?

Ann-Marie Hermans interjected.

Michael GALEA: Good. I am glad that you do agree, Mrs Hermans, because it is. It is going to contribute to those improved educational outcomes for our youngest Victorians and set them up well. We are setting them up through free kinder for three- and four-year-olds. We are setting them up at the later stage with free TAFE courses and with those investments in 100 new schools – including, Mrs Hermans, in our electorate in the south-east, which you should be very much supportive of, I am sure; I hope you are – these new schools that have opened this year, and of course more are coming next year.

This is a government that has continued to invest in our young Victorians, and indeed it is a government that has not been afraid to speak up for these young Victorians. In the past several months there have been a number of conversations between the Deputy Premier and the Premier herself and their counterparts at the federal level. We have seen strong advocacy on behalf of Victorian students for our fair share of Commonwealth funding. As members will know, there was an offer made by the Commonwealth for 20 per cent of funding to be provided to Victorian public school students by the Commonwealth government. It was not good enough. It was not the full amount that we are supposed to be receiving under these funding models. While some other states did accept that lower offer, Victoria held out. Victoria held out, and we have a minister that worked diligently and relentlessly in that pursuit. I spoke in adjournments last year about the impact that that funding would have – the difference between 20 and 25 per cent, the hundreds of thousands of dollars per school per year and in some cases for some of my larger high schools more than a million dollars worth of funding that this government was fighting for on behalf of Victorian school students.

And what did we see over just the last few weeks? A wonderful announcement that the federal government has come to the table. Whilst I was happy to be criticising and holding them to account last year, I will in equal measure give them much credit for coming to the table and providing Victorian students with the most significant increase in federal funding in a generation, if not ever. I congratulate the Albanese federal Labor government for coming and meeting us at that 25 per cent, and I particularly congratulate the efforts of a very hardworking minister, Deputy Premier Ben Carroll, who has been relentlessly fighting on behalf of Victorian students to get that outcome, including, as I understand, right over the Christmas break as well. Whilst the Liberal Party members were fighting over their own numbers, our Minister for Education was fighting for the numbers that matter, and they are the dollars that go into the funding for our school students.

That is the most perfect illustration of the contrast that we see here: when we have contributions from those members opposite, such as Ms Crozier and others who have been speaking before me today, that is the contribution that they make. Whilst we are focused on getting the educational outcomes of Victorians improved, whilst we are focused on getting the funding for the Victorian students that they need, for those opposite the numbers that they are looking at are their own spreadsheets, their own factional figures. Who has got the numbers? Mr Mulholland got through by two votes. Who else has got the numbers? We have seen the wonderful, regal rise of Mrs McArthur, but above all we have seen just relentless focusing on themselves, because that is all they do and that is all they have done for the past two years in this place.

Meanwhile, though, we will continue to do the hard work in education, in reforms, in the significant new schools.

Ann-Marie Hermans interjected.

Michael GALEA: Again, Mrs Hermans, you are free to tut at me for saying that, but it is a very important set of new schools that we are delivering. It is a very important set of improvements in policy, such as in phonics. And even, shall we say, less large-scale bills such as those before us today are nevertheless very important contributions to the improvement of the educational landscape and to the impact that it will have on Victorian students – making it easier for principals, making it easier to facilitate work experience arrangements and the like, including defining schools in terms of the powers of the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, the VRQA. This is a bill that does many important things which will improve and simplify that back-end paperwork that schools have to deal with and improve those outcomes, freeing up those teaching resources to focus on what is really most important, and that is the education and training of our next generation of Victorians.

Like many members in this place, like Mr Batchelor and Dr Heath over there, we did partake in an education inquiry as part of the Legal and Social Issues Committee last year, and it was very wide-ranging inquiry. We got to hear from students, from teachers, from principals and from other stakeholders in the educational system, and a very enlightening inquiry it was. I will not dwell too

much on what I have already talked about. But most particularly on this there was the serious advocacy we saw on behalf of phonics. It was wonderful to see the announcement made that this government would indeed hear those concerns and implement a phonics-based training system in Victoria.

We also heard the concerns from schools and teachers about recruitment and retention and worked together to find ways in which we could really improve those outcomes, because when you have the unprecedented level of investment that this government has put in for Victorian students it is important that you are doing that in the smartest way possible. That is why we have to show for it now the 100 new schools that are being built by this government for Victorian students. Indeed my colleague Mr Tarlamis knows all too well – again, also from the South-Eastern Metropolitan region – we have had Topirum Primary School last year and one new primary school in Clyde North; this year we have two new primary schools and a new high school as well. I was out –

Lee Tarlamis interjected.

Michael GALEA: That is quite right, Mr Tarlamis, there is more to come next year, with Clyde Creek North primary and secondary schools. I understand we will have confirmed new names for them as well.

I do not often as a member for the south-east find myself in Werribee, but I did actually quite a few times over the past couple of weeks, supporting our fantastic candidate John Lister in the Werribee by-election. He is a true local; he rents in the area. He is going to make a great contribution to this Parliament, I know. So I am very excited to hopefully see him joining us in this place in a couple of weeks. I did note in fact when doorknocking an outer suburban area, part of Wyndham Vale, that there was a brand new school right across the road there too. It is great to see that the infrastructure that we are building is not just in the south-east, it is right across Melbourne. It is right across Victoria.

There are a number of things that I could continue to talk about with this bill. There are a number of very important things that this bill will do. This bill is one more piece of the mantle, as I say, that is making Victoria the Education State, which this government is doing.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (16:31): Once again we have witnessed the absolutely jaw-dropping delusion of Labor, who manage to have the most disconnected and outrageous contributions, calling this state the Education State when one-third of children do not reach reading or writing proficiency and in our areas 50 per cent of children cannot read properly – and they manage to stand there and talk about being the Education State. That is obviously one of two things: ignorance or something completely worse. This government is all about announcements and very little about outcomes. No matter the outcome, no matter what is happening to the children in this state, they manage to find a way to pat themselves on the back. You have to give it to them; it is quite a talent. They are more obsessed with the Liberal Party and the coalition than they are with the outcomes for the Victorian people that they were put there to serve. It is unbelievable.

This bill focuses on peripheral issues rather than tackling the structural challenges in Victoria's education system, such as student learning outcomes, which I have gone through briefly and I might just talk about a little bit longer if time permits; teacher shortages, which are actually staggering, especially in our area, Mr McIntosh; and curriculum reform. As a result, it risks alienating families seeking better options outside of the mainstream system, which people have completely lost trust in after the world's longest lockdowns caused a mental health crisis in our kids, no matter the fact that there have been more and more investments into education over the last 20 years. Despite that – despite more money spent – over the last 20 years as the funding has gone up, the outcomes for our students have gone down. That is a devastation. That is a waste of public funds, and it is something that needs to be changed.

I was amazed to hear over and over again members of the government spruiking the Education State while completely ignoring the devastating statistics and the facts – it has been absolutely amazing – forgetting that behind every child that cannot read, behind every child that is struggling in

mathematics, is a child with dreams and aspirations that are being paralysed by a system that is not there to serve them, that is teaching about ideology rather than education. It is just absolutely wrong.

During the education inquiry we heard many, many staggering stories – devastating stories – about kids that could not focus in a chaotic classroom, about kids who because of the woke agendas and because of the overcrowded curriculum –

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

Renee HEATH: If you like, Mr Batchelor, I can refer to the Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO) report that actually says the curriculum is overcrowded. But laugh away; that is fine. It is what you do best.

Regardless of that, they have not made the reform necessary to serve the next generation. What our education system should be doing is it should be laying a foundation that kids can build their dreams on and become fantastic citizens, that can not only build their personal dreams but can continue to build a fantastic Victoria. If members of the government approached this subject with honesty, they might actually be talking about the crisis in this state, the crisis of education, an education crisis that is affecting the most vulnerable in this state, the children.

The facts are this education system, our education system, is at breaking point, and we have to actually dig down a little bit and look at why people are beginning to look at options other than the traditional state system. Anyway, I am going to talk about a couple of quick points. The first one is teacher shortages and burnout. Teachers in this state work so hard to serve children, but this state does absolutely nothing to serve the teachers. In fact they graduate from universities in Victoria and they have not been taught how to teach, they have not been taught how to manage a classroom, and because of that, most teachers that are up against it from the beginning burn out and get out of the education system within five years. That is a fact. Victoria's outcomes show that whether it is the flawed curriculum or universities not equipping them to do their job, from day one teachers are up against it and it is hard. The cross-curriculum priorities that overcrowd our curriculum are ensuring that children are indoctrinated from day one and struggling with their education. We should be laying that foundation, not having a state school system where we manage to completely pat ourselves on the back, yet one in three children cannot read –

Tom McIntosh: On a point of order, Acting President, I see the members have come back from the break with a lot of excitement with this contribution, or perhaps lecture, but there is continual finger-pointing, which I think we all understand here from recent years that we do not accept.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): I have not seen any finger-pointing since I have been in the chair – I may have previously – but I will ask Dr Heath to direct her comments through the Chair.

Renee HEATH: Maybe I was speaking with my hands too much. It is a bad habit, so thank you so much, Mr McIntosh, for pointing that out to me. But I bring us back to the fact that in Mr McIntosh's electorate one in two children cannot read proficiently, and this could be to do with the fact that across Victoria there are 2500 vacancies in teaching. In outer Gippsland, Mr McIntosh's area, secondary schools say that per job vacancy there is an average of 1.7 applicants. That is really devastating. One in five graduate teachers leave the profession within five years. The teacher shortages and administrative burdens are more severe in our area of regional Victoria, with nine out of 10 principals in Gippsland reporting a teacher shortage. So regardless of those facts, I do apologise if it maybe looks like I am pointing and it offends people. The shortage exacerbates workloads for existing staff, leading to burnout among teachers and admin staff, and this bill does not go far enough to reduce that administrative burden, and I am going to talk about that shortly if time permits.

First, I want to talk about the academic and social decline among students. According to NAPLAN results, one-third of Victorian students fail to meet basic reading and numeracy standards, and that is

while the government are spruiking the Education State. One in three children – that is devastating. Rural and regional areas show even worse outcomes, with half of students unable to read properly. There is nothing good about that. There is nothing to brag about there. I pointed briefly before to the VAGO report, which highlights worsening learning outcomes for Indigenous and disadvantaged students.

We are failing the most vulnerable in this state and patting our backs at the same time. It is unbelievable. The Grattan Institute's *The Reading Guarantee* report revealed one in four Victorian children cannot read properly. Again, I mentioned before, this rises to almost half – actually half – in regional areas, and recent NAPLAN results showed one-third of Victorian students are not meeting standards. That is 300,000 Victorian students who are not meeting the most basic standards. They are not being taught adequately, and their options are limited because of it. Ms Crozier spoke before, Ms Bath spoke before and so did Mrs Hermans about the overcrowding in our curriculum. Some opposite like to say that that is some sort of ideological thing. It is actually not. If you are overcrowding our curriculum with things that are not building blocks for these children's future, you are serving yourself, not the next generation. There is some evidence around that. The Auditor-General's report emphasised widening gaps for disadvantaged students.

I remember the day that I met the Acting President, Mr Galea. I remember I said to him, 'Why the heck would you be a member of Labor? That to me just seems a very odd choice.' I still remember what he said. He said, 'It is because I believe in equality' – you remember it, don't you? You said, 'I believe in equality of opportunity, not equality of outcome.' I said, 'Hang on a minute. You should be a Liberal, then. That's a Liberal value.' If we do not get this situation sorted out in the state of Victoria, children will not have equality of opportunity, and they most certainly will not have the chance of the best outcome.

In the next few minutes I just want to ask these questions: why is it that there is public dissatisfaction in the education system, and why is it that there is a rise in homeschooling? I think the inability to address these systemic failings is driving parents towards alternatives like homeschooling. This bill may inadvertently target those families, increasing their frustration without providing solutions for the broader crisis that we are facing. I will skip all of this because I really wrote a lot of things down just in response to some of the statements from those opposite.

This bill allows principals to delegate work experience matters, but this change is unlikely to benefit regional schools struggling with severe shortages and compliance burdens, and the reason for that is they just do not have the staff for it. The proposed changes in this bill fail to address chronic challenges facing regional schools, particularly teacher shortages and compliance burdens. Schools need relief from excess regulation, and they need to return to evidence-based teaching practices to improve student outcomes and ensure that education serves the purpose that it is meant to serve.

Here are just a couple of statistics in my region. In outer Gippsland secondary schools I spoke about how nine out of 10 principals reported a teacher shortage. Schools cope with this by merging classes, sending students home and holding study sessions under principal supervision. A lot of teachers that I have spoken to have said, 'This is just not working. We are absolutely exhausted. The kids that we want to serve – we want to see them achieve their dreams. They're not getting that.' That is actually devastating. We need to really address what those key compliance demands are, and these can be mandatory reporting standards or conducting risk assessments. All of these things are very important, but there is just not the staff and the ability to do that. I just wanted to address those few issues, because sometimes, I tell you what, listening to those opposite pat themselves on the back continually while the next generation cannot read, write or add up – I believe it is completely wrong. Some of the things in this bill I absolutely support, but I think we cannot focus on the periphery and fail to address the real issues.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (16:44): I am pleased to stand and support the Education and Training Reform Amendment Bill 2024. Education is incredibly important, and it is something I am

incredibly proud of as a member of the Labor Party, as a member of the Labor movement: to support the work that generations and generations of people from the Labor Party have done to ensure that we have investment in improving, supporting and enabling the education of Victorians and indeed Australians. I will go to some of Dr Heath's comments in a moment. I do want to pick up on some of those, because it is farcical for the Liberal Party, indeed the coalition, whether it be in this state or in this nation, to lecture this side about education when I do not believe we have seen a policy or investment from them in probably the last 10 or 20 years in Victoria or Australia that has seen an improvement in education. I will go so far as to say that the economic policies that underpin their thinking actively suppress wages, whereas this side wants to see an improvement in people's wages.

There are many reasons why education is so important. One is obviously the emotional capacity that kids now get as they start early education and go through to primary school, high school and whatever people go on to do. But it is also that ability to be a full participant in our economy – to be able to work in a job that these young people see that they want to work in and to earn their best income so they can support themselves and, if they choose to, support a family and make active contributions to our communities.

I am really proud of the way that we support education – our teachers and the work we do with teachers to support them in the work that they choose to do. And it is far more than work; it is taking on something bigger than themselves to support the next generation. I am proud of the investment we make in education infrastructure, in the buildings. I am so proud that across my electorate, whether it is in Korumburra, Rosebud, Dromana, Paynesville, Leongatha, Mt Eliza North or Lakes Entrance, just to name a few, there are the upgrades we are making to schools to ensure that our kids and our teachers have the best facilities possible for them to go on and get that world-class education.

As I said before, it does not matter whether our students are leaving for university at the end of school or indeed if they are leaving to do a trade or a traineeship, it is absolutely so valuable to the rest of that student's life – the skills they get in literacy, in maths – to be able to take that skill set and apply that wherever they may go in life. More and more we see that people will work in multiple jobs throughout their time and their lives, and that skill set to be able to problem-solve and have those fundamental literacy skills and those mathematics skills enables that versatility to be able to work in jobs that they choose. It is so great to have had some students in the gallery just now.

This bill will amend the Education and Training Reform Act 2006 to strengthen the compliance and enforcement powers of the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, the VRQA. The bill also amends the Education and Training Reform Act to allow school principals to nominate other persons or classes of persons to make work experience arrangements and structured workplace learning arrangements, to streamline and standardise processes relating to board appointments to education portfolio entities and skills and TAFE portfolio entities and to reduce the administrative burden for the VRQA, other portfolio entities, regulated entities and school principals.

I have talked a bit about teachers, investment and infrastructure. I also just want to touch on so many of the other services that are within schools that I am so proud of and that this government has invested in, whether that be school nurses and allied health, our breakfast club program, Smile Squad, Glasses for Kids or of course out-of-school care – because I talk in this place a lot about that early education piece and getting families back to work. It is the same with out-of-school-hours care to enable parents to go on in the workforce while their kids are getting an education.

I could go on for the full time, but I am going to stop here. But I just think it is very interesting that those opposite want to come in and lecture Labor about education when we know that for decades it has been a fundamental Liberal policy to underinvest in education and to close schools. If we want to talk about regional Victoria and the Liberals and the Nationals, I am not even going to go there because we do not have enough time – school closures, a lack of investment in teachers and all the flow-on that has to regional towns and to the workforce of future generations. I am proud that we have made

the investment that has seen around 8000 more registered teachers in 2023 than there were in 2020 and proud that we are making all these investments right across the board in education.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (16:50): We know that education has the power to change lives – that for children, their education, their schools, their teachers, their parents and their families can be transformational. Education provides the building blocks of knowledge. Schools provide those building blocks – a power to unlock a world of opportunity. For a government, particularly a state government here in Australia, education must be a top priority, and for the Labor government here in Victoria, education is a top priority. We made the commitment to make Victoria the Education State when we were elected in 2014, and for the last period we have been absolutely focused on making that the case. The legislation before us today is part of the necessary administrative amendments that we need to make to ensure that from a quality point of view our education regulatory system is modern and meeting the needs of our school system and the students that are in it. There have been a number of contributions about the details in this bill; I think they have been exceptionally useful. I want to spend the limited time I have got today just talking about a couple of things that make those administrative changes so real and important.

I have said that education has got to be a priority for a Labor government – it is for the state Labor government. It is gratifying to see that we have finally got a federal government in the federal Labor government that also views public education in this state as being a priority. After nine years of neglect when the coalition were in power in Canberra, we have now got a federal Labor government that is stepping up, putting money on the table and finally agreeing to invest in public schools here in Victoria. The agreement that was recently struck between the Commonwealth and the Victorian government will finally see the Commonwealth step up and fund the 25 per cent of the schooling resource standard under the National School Reform Agreement. The largest ever investment in Victorian public schools from the Commonwealth has been signed – an agreement reached, negotiated hard by the Allan Labor government and by the Deputy Premier, Minister for Education Ben Carroll, that is going to see \$2.5 billion coming into Victorian schools over the next 10 years. It is the biggest ever additional investment to help Victoria deliver excellence in every one of our public school classrooms, because that is the goal of our Education State agenda: to bring excellence in every classroom.

Dr Heath, in her contribution, wanted to talk down the achievements of our government schools. She wanted to talk down some of the outstanding achievements that the students in this state have realised for themselves in a range of benchmarks in reading, writing and numeracy. Our year 3 students lead the nation in reading and numeracy, and last year was the third year in a row that Victorian year 3 students led the nation in their reading and numeracy. Victorian students achieved the first- or second-highest scores of any jurisdiction on seven of the eight measures in NAPLAN. They were top of writing in years 5, 7 and 9, and in reading, years 3, 7 and 9 improved on their 2023 results. In numeracy in primary schools we are leading, but we know we need to do more in our secondary schools, particularly on the numeracy front.

We are aware that we must do more and that we can do better. That is why the Victorian Labor government is introducing changes to improve the teaching in our classrooms. That is why our Education State agenda, at its core over the next couple of years, has improvements to the way that reading is taught and the introduction of a structured synthetic phonics program in all Victorian government schools, starting this year, to be completed by 2025. It will see 25 minutes of structured synthetic phonics education in our prep, 1 and 2 classrooms. It is going to vastly improve the way that our schools teach kids how to read and write. Those foundational skills are very important. That effort will now be supported by more money from the Commonwealth government into our public schools – the biggest investment the Commonwealth has ever made into Victorian public schools. This government, this state, prioritises our education system. Excellence in every classroom in the Education State – that is Victoria under Labor.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (16:55): I too am delighted to speak on this bill and endorse all of the speeches that I have already heard, particularly around the fact that Victoria is the

Education State. I too wanted to acknowledge the efforts and advocacy for the Victorian education system by Deputy Premier and Minister for Education Ben Carroll. He refused to accept a lower figure and achieved a terrific improvement in the figure, increasing the funding for the education system in Victoria. All of this advocacy happened around about the time that Christmas was occurring, at the time those opposite were perhaps otherwise occupied in their latest episode of leadership biff.

This bill secures further education refinements for principals and teachers. It amends the Education and Training Reform Act 2006 to strengthen the compliance and enforcement powers of the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, or the VRQA. These amendments provide simpler and shorter administrative processes for principals and teachers so they can do what they want to do and what students and families want them to do, which is spend more time with their students and supporting their teachers. The Allan Labor government is determined to simplify and streamline administrative workloads for schools, and that is why this bill is before us today.

The Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority will now have the necessary powers to respond to the increase in unregistered schools. A school registration regime provides a framework to support student and workplace safety, student welfare, curriculum development, curriculum consistency, checking teacher qualifications and assessment processes. They provide suitably qualified teachers that are trained to deliver the effective instruction required. I was educated in the state and the Catholic systems, and in the Catholic system back when I was at school the process for appointing teachers was more focused on their religious qualifications, perhaps being a nun or a brother or a priest, and so most of the teachers were qualified, but there was not always the same level of qualification and accountability as there is today. Let me say the majority of my teachers were good at their job, though often their qualifications were focused on religion and vocation rather than education. This resulted in an incredible hit and miss. Some teachers were brilliant and some were not.

Registered schools provide for accredited student welfare and safety within strict safety protocols and procedures. They offer services that are required to comply with child protection laws and regulations. The bill absolutely ensures that responses in schools now are less focused on spiritual responses to children's safety but rather are focused on their compliance with Victorian law around child protection, which is very important. Of course there is a place for each. We can see that a framework to ensure schools are administered in accordance with all expected standards is central to accountability for students, families and community.

This bill will also alleviate some of the ongoing administrative burdens for principals and teachers, which have already been referred to today in the chamber by members from all sides. As the Minister for Education Ben Carroll stated:

School leaders, teachers and staff play a vital role in supporting young Victorians – while administration is a necessary part of their roles, we need to make sure they have as much time as possible to teach and support students.

We have terrific examples of that in the south-west of Victoria. The principals in the south-west are relieved the government is working on administrative reforms. Tara Hulonce is the principal of Narrawong primary school, and she acknowledges that a certain amount of administration comes with the job but is also pleased that efforts are actively being made to reduce the admin workload. She feels her main role is to help support teachers to improve and build their capacity in teaching and learning in order to best support our students. Dean Clements, principal of the Merri River School, our special education school in Warrnambool, also welcomes these changes. He personally sees his role as not being stuck in the office. It is important to him that he is visible to parents, visible to kids, visible to staff and visible to the school community. Sean Fitzpatrick, principal of Brauer College in Warrnambool, was pleased Brauer took part in the independent review into schools' admin burden last year and said it was a great opportunity to give frank feedback. He believes principals need to be able to give priority to focus on improving students' outcomes by building relationships with teachers and students, backed by a robust and achievable curriculum.

Schools do shape the lives of young people. In summary, this bill strengthens the compliance and enforcement powers of the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority to help ensure all children have access to a high-quality education in a safe and supportive environment, and I commend this bill to the house.

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (17:01): I thank all members for their contributions this afternoon to this debate. It is pleasing to see such strong contributions on the bill, albeit that there were many contributions that did not actually specifically deal with the bill before the house today, shall I say. I want to take an opportunity to address some of the issues raised by members in the other place as well. I will take a moment to respond to the issues raised in the debate.

I understand that the Minister for Education's office has provided numerous briefings on this bill to members of the opposition as well as to the crossbench members, with follow-up correspondence and information. We believe that the bill will strengthen the compliance and enforcement powers of the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA), and it will also allow school principals to nominate others to make work experience arrangements and structured workplace learning arrangements, easing the administrative burden on principals and allowing them to focus their energy on running their schools. The passage of these amendments in the bill will improve the operation of the act to make sure students are getting the best education in a safe and supportive environment and streamline and simplify administratively burdensome processes.

One member spoke about the amendments in the bill that expand the VRQA's oversight of unregistered schools and noted a potential concern that the bill might unintentionally capture legitimate homeschool activities. I just want to put on the record that this bill does not make provision for further oversight or regulation of homeschooling families and legitimate homeschooling activities. In fact correspondence from the executive director of the international education and partnerships division of school education programs and support, in a letter to stakeholders and in particular homeschooling organisations, says:

The Victorian Government supports parental choice in education, and I would like to assure you that the Bill does not propose any changes to homeschooling regulation or parental autonomy.

I hope that that also allays concerns that have been raised in the last 24 hours or so.

These reforms, we believe, will make it harder for unregistered schools, schools that are already legally required to be registered but are not, to fall through the cracks and will help ensure all students who attend schools get the safe, high-quality education they deserve. I appreciate the concerns some of the providers of education services have raised with me and of course the Minister for Education and some of the concerns that have been raised in the chamber today. However, as I have said on the record, in *Hansard*, please be assured this bill does not make any provision for further oversight or regulation of homeschooling families and legitimate homeschooling activities. This is not what we are doing today.

The VRQA will continue to work with organisations to ensure their compliance with existing legislation and other standards. As I understand it, one of the main issues that are of direct concern in this bill goes to the point of penalties and another, as I understand it, is purely in relation to the powers of the VRQA. I am sure that we can quickly deal with those in committee.

In summary, though, the bill contains a suite of amendments to improve the regulation of schools and other educational institutions across the state, including the removal of the show cause process where cancellation of the registration of a non-government school or non-government school boarding premises is voluntary or where the school or the school boarding premises has ceased to operate. It increases the maximum penalties for carrying on or conducting an unregistered school or school boarding premises; clarifies that the VRQA may share information, including documents, with a prescribed person or body without receiving a written request; enables the VRQA to issue notices to

produce and notices to comply to a person, body or school that the VRQA has reasonable cause to believe is required to be regulated.

It expands the scope of matters in relation to which the VRQA may accept an enforceable undertaking from a non-school senior secondary and foundation secondary provider, an institution approved to provide courses to overseas students or an institution approved to operate a student exchange program. It amends references to 'days' in various parts of the act to improve consistency; enables principals to nominate other persons to make work experience arrangements and structured workplace learning arrangements in accordance with any ministerial order; and standardises and streamlines provisions relating to the appointment of, fixing of remuneration and fees for, and resignations of members of boards. It allows the VRQA to consider whether an applicant for registration or re-registration as a registered training organisation or a high managerial agent of the applicant has ever failed to comply with the child safe standards, regardless of whether the VRQA is the integrated sector regulator for the applicant, and it makes various minor and technical amendments to improve the operation and clarity of the act. For these reasons I am pleased to commend the bill to the house.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (35): Ryan Batchelor, Melina Bath, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Gaelle Broad, Katherine Copsey, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Shaun Leane, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Sarah Mansfield, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Evan Mulholland, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Sheena Watt, Richard Welch

Noes (1): David Limbrick

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Committed.

Committee

Clause 1 (17:15)

Georgie CROZIER: I will just ask the minister all my questions, if that is okay, on clause 1. I would like to go to a number of issues. One is about the homeschooling component, but also the bill increases the maximum penalty for unregistered schools. Will these changes align the penalties for comparable offences in this act or other related acts?

Gayle TIERNEY: Yes, they will. It will be consistent with section 103 of the Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010 and also with section 99 of the Children's Services Act 1996. I can be more specific in terms of the money amounts, but they are within the ballpark. Would you like me to put that on record?

Georgie CROZIER: Yes, please, within the ballpark of what has been stated in the bill around the penalty units. Is that what you are meaning, Minister?

Gayle TIERNEY: Yes, that is right. The amendments will bring the penalties for these offences in line with similar offences in other legislation, specifically section 103 of the Education and Care Services National Law Act, which for the offence of providing an education and care service without provider approval or service approval provides for a maximum penalty of \$22,900 for an individual and \$114,900 for all other cases. Section 99 of the Children's Services Act 1996, which is for the offence of providing a children's service without service approval, provides for maximum penalties of 120 penalty units, the equivalent of \$23,710.80 in 2024–25 for an individual, and 600 penalty points, equivalent to \$118,554 in 2024–25, for all other cases. The amendments in the bill will increase

the maximum penalties for carrying on or conducting an unregistered school or school boarding premises from 10 penalty units, equivalent to \$1975.90 in 2024–25 for a person, to 120 penalty units, equivalent to \$23,710.80 in 2024–25 for an individual, and 600 penalty points, equivalent to \$118,554 in 2024–25, for a body corporate.

Georgie CROZIER: Minister, the bill also expands the scope of matters to which the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) may accept an enforceable undertaking from a non-school provider. What is the current scope, and what additional matters will now be included given these changes to the legislation?

Gayle TIERNEY: I just want to double-check on something.

The key point here is that the broadening of the framework for these persons and bodies will allow the VRQA to use enforceable undertakings more broadly as a compliance and enforcement tool, consistent with how the VRQA can currently use undertakings for schools, school boarding premises and registered training organisations. The framework for non-school providers, institutions approved to provide courses to overseas students or institutions approved to operate a student exchange program to give enforceable undertakings is more limited than the framework for schools, school boarding premises and RTOs. Currently the VRQA may only accept enforceable undertakings from the providers in the VRQA's capacity as an integrated sector regulator for the child safety standards. The reference to the VRQA's capacity as an integrated sector regulator has caused confusion as to whether the matters for which enforceable undertakings can be accepted are limited to enforcing compliance with the child safety standards. In practice, this has limited the VRQA's ability to use enforceable undertakings as a tool to support compliance of non-school providers, institutions approved to provide courses to overseas students or institutions approved to operate a student exchange program to enforce compliance with all of the standards for registration.

Georgie CROZIER: You referred to schools and RTOs, but you did not actually talk about the homeschooling framework. I know that in your summing-up you referred – and you were very specific – to there being no further oversight for homeschooling, but can you provide a brief description of the current homeschooling framework and the role of the VRQA within it given what you have just spoken to the committee about in relation to that framework that is specific for schools and RTOs?

Gayle TIERNEY: What I can say without going down that pathway is that this is a bill that is not in any fashion connected to homeschooling. It is just not. It is about the VRQA and its powers, and it is about increasing the penalties so that there can be greater enforcement.

Georgie CROZIER: In that respect, then, there will be no impact to providers of services to homeschooling families. Is that the case?

Gayle TIERNEY: Yes, because there is nothing to do with homeschooling in this bill.

Georgie CROZIER: Okay. Thank you for that clarification, because there is concern amongst the community around the impacts of how homeschooling tutors and services et cetera will be provided to those homeschoolers and whether the VRQA will have greater oversight of those individuals who are providing the services to parents who are homeschooling. I am just wondering: can you provide assurance to the house if that is not the case?

Gayle TIERNEY: The bill will not enable the VRQA to regulate any providers that it does not already have power to regulate under the act. The bill will not amend the existing definition of 'school' in the act or the existing provisions relating to registration for and regulation of homeschooling in the act. I do not know what else I need to say to make that absolutely clear, because it is clear that some people have made up their minds that there are elements of what is before the house today that are directly connected to homeschooling, and there simply are not.

Georgie CROZIER: With all due respect, this is an opportunity for us to ask questions so we can get on the record and clarify some of the issues that are concerning Victorians around this element. I know that you have tried to explain it, but I am trying to be a little bit more specific. I know Mr Limbrick has got questions; I will leave those for him.

If I could go to another matter, then, the bill enables principals to nominate other persons to make work experience arrangements. Is this amendment based on feedback from principals?

Gayle TIERNEY: I believe so. I know even in my own electorate this has been an issue that has been raised with me. The administrative burden is often spoken about by principals, and I was actually quite pleased to see this in the bill.

Georgie CROZIER: Thank you for that clarification. I have just got two more questions. The bill allows the VRQA to consider whether RTO applicants have ever failed to comply with the child safe standards, so it is a bit surprising that this is not already the case. Can you explain the current regulatory setting and how this bill would alter that?

Gayle TIERNEY: Currently the act only enables the VRQA to consider whether an applicant for registration or re-registration as an RTO or a high managerial agent of the applicant has ever failed to comply with the child safe standards if the VRQA regulates the compliance of the applicant with the child safe standards. The amendment in the bill will enable the VRQA to consider historical noncompliance with the child safe standards when the applicant was regulated by a different regulator. The amendment in the bill will allow the VRQA to conduct a proper assessment of an application for registration or re-registration as an RTO and more thoroughly investigate the RTO's operations, including its key management and educational leadership staff.

Georgie CROZIER: Finally, the bill makes some amendments around board members' remuneration as well as appointments, resignations and the impacts to the boards et cetera. Which boards are specifically affected by this amendment?

Gayle TIERNEY: The boards affected by the amendment to standardise the resignation of provisions for the –

Georgie CROZIER: Sorry, could you repeat that for me?

Gayle TIERNEY: The amendment to standardise the resignation provisions for Governor in Council appointed members affect the following boards: the pools for the merit protection boards; the pools for the disciplinary appeals boards; the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority; the council of Victorian Institute of Teaching, the VIT council; the VIT hearing panel pool; the board of Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership; the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, the VRQA itself; the Adult, Community and Further Education board, the ACFE board; and the board of AMES Australia.

David LIMBRICK: My first question for the minister is: is it the case that these document production powers could be used by the VRQA to determine whether or not an entity that it is making a request of is or is not a school?

Gayle TIERNEY: The answer is yes.

David LIMBRICK: Despite statements earlier by the minister that this does not affect homeschooling, I am aware of a particular situation at the moment with a business which runs coaching programs one day a week. All the facilitators and the support members have working with children checks and appropriate industry skills to provide services to homeschoolers. They were contacted by VRQA and instead of asking questions about their business and how they operate and determining whether or not they are a school that way they were hit with a demand for records containing confidential information which they believe cannot and should not be released. So my

question is: is the regulator currently operating beyond the scope of the legislation as it exists prior to the passage of this bill?

Gayle TIERNEY: That relates to the normal activities of the VRQA; that does not relate to this bill, Mr Limbrick.

David LIMBRICK: But is it not the case that the VRQA, under these new production of documents powers, could demand a whole set of documents from organisations – and I have spoken to organisations that are currently going through this process that are being met with demands from the VRQA – that to my mind are clearly not schools? They do not cover all of the subject areas; they do not operate within school hours. In fact they offer tutoring services to homeschools, and yet they are being hit with these demands. Could it not be the case that they will be hit with these demands for documents?

Gayle TIERNEY: My understanding, again, is that this is the normal activity of the VRQA. In terms of the sorts of things that you are talking about, they are not about school activities. You are making it very difficult for me, because there are obviously some investigations going on, and I cannot go into detail. But what I can assure you of is that there are things that the VRQA does that are not connected to the entity of a school as such. It is about checking and finding out more about activities of a business.

David LIMBRICK: It would seem that some of the changes with regard to information requests could relate to individuals. Will the VRQA be potentially targeting individuals providing tutoring services rather than just organisations?

Gayle TIERNEY: It will apply to individuals and/or organisations, and that is the way that the penalties have been structured as well – to individuals and organisations.

David LIMBRICK: I thank the minister for clarifying that. Could the minister please outline what dispute mechanisms will exist for people who believe that the regulator may be acting inappropriately?

Gayle TIERNEY: The Ombudsman.

David LIMBRICK: With regard to the documents powers, we have heard about some limitations on these powers, such as that there must be a reasonable belief. I wonder if the minister could clarify: what are the actual limits on the powers around information requests that are being given to the regulator by this bill?

Gayle TIERNEY: Currently, Mr Limbrick, the act generates an expectation that a request to the VRQA for documents must be in writing. However, this is burdensome and sometimes does not reflect how the specified persons and bodies actually communicate and work together. The existing provisions in the act enable the VRQA to share information with a specified person or body. The amendments in the bill do not change the meaning of the specified person or body. The VRQA will still be able to share information with the Secretary of the Department of Education or the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions; the secretary to another department in the Victorian public service; a public sector body in the Victorian public sector; a municipal council; a body equivalent to the VRQA in another jurisdiction that is responsible for the registration of training organisations for the purposes of vocational education and training or responsible for the registration of schools; a department of the Commonwealth or another state or territory; or an agency of the Commonwealth. The existing provision in the act that refers to sharing documents in writing also partially duplicates and arguably appears to be inconsistent with the broader information-sharing powers of the VRQA.

David LIMBRICK: My final question is just around many of these organisations that may be subject to these documents orders. Understandably they are very concerned currently about their privacy obligations. Could the minister please outline how these documents requests might interact with, say, the Privacy Act 1988 and what sort of protections they are provided?

Gayle TIERNEY: Small business operators with an annual turnover of \$3 million or less are not subject to the Privacy Act; there is no applicable common law in place of the Privacy Act for these operators. These providers would be required to produce information under proposed notice powers of the bill. Larger providers that are subject to the Privacy Act would also be required to comply with any notices issued from the VRQA under the proposed powers. This would not be a breach of the Privacy Act as the Privacy Act permits disclosure where there is authorised under the Australian law such an act of a state.

There are existing powers in the current Education and Training Reform Act 2006 that enable the VRQA to obtain similar information from registered providers. Examples of other regulators with similar notice of powers in legislation are the Commission for Children and Young People, Social Services Regulator and Wage Inspectorate Victoria. There are also existing reasonable excuses in the ETR Act for refusing or failing to comply with a notice to provide or notice to comply, which will also apply to the proposed notice provisions in the bill. These include that the person took all actions reasonable to take in the circumstances and a person believed that they could not produce the document or information specified in the notice.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Minister, thank you for your time in answering these questions. Many of my fears are only more realised by your responses rather than being alleviated. I just want to go back to the first one. Given that principals no longer need to sign off on a work experience student with this bill, will the approving school employee teacher who signs off on them – and from my reading this is the case – be indemnified against any liability? Please show us in which section that is stipulated.

Gayle TIERNEY: Can I take some other questions and we will come back to that one, if that is okay, Deputy President?

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Are there any other questions?

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Section 4.9.4A states that the:

... Authority may request information to determine compliance with prescribed minimum standards.

You have mentioned privacy laws preventing that from occurring, but it could, of course, if there was a \$3 million business, you said that there would be a difference in that. Can you tell me how we are going to resolve this situation in this instance?

Privacy laws currently can prevent this from happening in the case of what you mentioned was a \$3 million business, of which I do not think there would be very many of those in this industry. How will this be resolved?

Gayle TIERNEY: There is a bit of confusion in that you mentioned that the vast majority are under the \$3 million. Is that right?

Ann-Marie HERMANS: There are bound to be some that are, and there are going to be –

Gayle TIERNEY: But the vast majority, as you say, are basically –

Ann-Marie HERMANS: My estimate and guess would be, and I have not done that research –

Gayle TIERNEY: So they would need to comply with the powers and the regulations of the regulator, essentially. And in terms of the answer that you are seeking, I think I executed that with the question from Mr Limbrick in relation to how it faces off with the Privacy Act.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: You did, but you did mention that there was the exemption in the Privacy Act for larger businesses. I was just wanting a little bit more clarification on that.

Gayle TIERNEY: We believe that you have just got it the wrong way around. That is why I am having difficulties in trying to give you an answer on this, Mrs Hermans.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: I do not find that an actual substantial answer at all.

In terms of the bill's impact on individuals and groups that provide material or services to homeschools in – let us say, for example, I have got a couple of things here – number one, online learning: how will this bill impact individuals or groups that provide online learning material or services to homeschools that can be accessed during school hours?

Gayle TIERNEY: Well, they are not operating as a school, so they are not impacted or affected.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: You are affirming that businesses that provide online learning and resources to homeschool families during school hours are not considered by the VRQA as a school? Is that correct?

Gayle TIERNEY: Again, it is a determination of the VRQA, but that is not what this bill is about.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: I beg to differ with you given the powers that we are now providing to the VRQA through this bill. This bill is actually allowing the VRQA to determine – without significant guidelines, through a very broad definition of 'school' – whether this will apply to online learning resource providers that can be accessed for homeschoolers during school hours. So I would like to ask again: how will this bill impact these providers that provide online learning to homeschool families during school hours?

Gayle TIERNEY: Mrs Hermans, again, it is clear that you are not wanting to understand the basic proposition here, and that is that the provisions that currently exist in relation to this area are not changed as a result of this bill before the house today.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: But we do confirm that we are giving these unlimited powers to the VRQA through this bill to be able to determine without set boundaries whether any of these organisations that provide online learning to homeschool families during school hours in any shape or form of that homeschooling is considered to be a school or not regardless of whether it actually fits what we would all call a school at the moment. I say that because I know this. There are constituents in my area that I have only recently discovered, as I mentioned when I spoke, who actually are providers of this who are currently receiving information from the VRQA clearly wanting them to hand over – which they have done. They have always worked in collaboration with the VRQA – whatever it has asked. It says, 'Do this and you'll be fine. Do that and you'll be fine.' They have continued to do this, and yet now we are going to give these unlimited powers to the VRQA to be able to stop this. That is what I see in this bill.

Can you confirm whether this is going to impact these online learning resource providers that provide online learning, be it tutoring, be it recorded information, to these homeschool families? Are they going to be now considered to be a school and required to register, or are they going to be, by this bill, left alone to be able to continue to provide resources to these families as required, as they have been, as long as they are abiding by what are currently the rules? Because what I see here is an unlimited power to determine without great boundaries what constitutes a school and then to stop these businesses from being able to operate. Can you please confirm that?

Gayle TIERNEY: What I can confirm is that the existing provisions will apply. We can stay here until 1 o'clock in the morning – I am happy to do so, absolutely happy to do so – but it is not going to change my answer. I suspect it is not going to change your position either, Mrs Hermans, so we are going to have to agree to disagree. But the facts are the facts. The existing provisions are the provisions that will apply in the cases that you are speaking of.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: But the facts are that this bill provides more provisions for the VRQA. It is not less and it is not the same; it is a lot more. That is why the question actually deserves an appropriate answer, I think.

Gayle TIERNEY: Well, there are increased penalties in relation to set arrangements, but in terms of the provisions that apply to homeschooling and the provisions that apply to other associated businesses, they are the same provisions that apply and are exercised by the VRQA now.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Minister, my understanding is that 1 penalty unit in Victoria from 1 July 2024 to 30 June 2025 is \$197.59, so the total fine through this Education and Training Reform Amendment Bill, which is taking it up to 600 penalty points, is \$197.59 by 600, which would be \$118,554 for each organisation that the VRQA determines, 'Yes, we're going to call that a school now and now make them unregistered.' And is it true that a natural person could also face a penalty of 120 units, as it reads in the bill, and that that would be currently a \$23,710.80 fine for a natural person and that this bill actually empowers the VRQA to be able to do that?

Gayle TIERNEY: Again I state: the provisions as they pertain to homeschooling and other associated services do not change as a result of this bill. In terms of allegations of the unlimited powers of the VRQA, they are completely false; those powers are defined in the act. In response to Ms Crozier's question about penalties, I explained that those penalties, the penalties that are prescribed in the amendment before us today, are consistent with a range of other acts and provisions. I will find them again if you wish and take you through them. What is being proposed is that the penalties are similar in other legislation, specifically section 103 of the Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010, which for the offence of providing an education and care service without provider approval or service approval provides for maximum penalties of \$22,900 for an individual and \$114,900 for all other cases. Section 99 of the Children's Services Act 1996, for the offence of providing children's services without service approval, provides for maximum penalties of 120 penalty units, equivalent to \$23,710.80 in 2024–25, for an individual and 600 penalty units, equivalent to \$118,554 in 2024–25, for all other cases. The amendments in the bill will increase the maximum penalties for carrying on or conducting an unregistered school or school boarding premises from 10 penalty units, equivalent to \$1975.90 in 2024–25, to 120 penalty units, equivalent to \$23,710.80 in 2024–25, for an individual and to 600 units, equivalent to \$118,554 in 2024–25, for a body corporate. So they are consistent with other things that are happening in jurisdictions that are similar.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Just a couple of more questions, please. Thank you for that; you have confirmed what I have said. Again, we looked at online learning; I did not feel that that was necessarily satisfactory. In terms of group and individual tutoring which may take place after school or during school hours, how is the bill seen to impact these individuals or groups that provide these materials or services of tutoring during school hours or after school?

Gayle TIERNEY: Again, the bill will not amend the existing definition of a school in the act or the existing provisions relating to registration and regulation of homeschooling in the act. The bill will not enable the VRQA to regulate any providers that it does not already have power to regulate under the act. I have said that several times now.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Yes, but in each case you have not clarified, because this bill is not exactly the same as what it is; it is an amendment, so it adds additional powers to the VRQA. That is the whole purpose of the bill, and so to say that it is exactly the same, to me, is not an appropriate answer as I read it, because we are giving more power to the VRQA – actually quite unlimited power to some degree – to determine all sorts of things.

But I do want to go back to my first question –

Gayle TIERNEY: Sorry, can I just correct you on that: as I said when you made those claims repeatedly, the fact of the matter is that the powers are not unlimited, of the VRQA. They are absolutely defined in the act.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: I think we will have to agree to disagree about what the amendment actually says. Given that principals – remember I mentioned about the first one? I have not yet received an answer, so I will go back to the question. Given that principals will no longer need to sign off on a

work experience student, will the approving school employee or teacher who signs off on them be indemnified against any liability? Please show me where that section is stipulated in the bill.

Gayle TIERNEY: Again, there are no changes. It is in part 5.4 of the act. These are the existing provisions.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: I am sorry, Minister, but it actually does say quite clearly – and we had that discussion when we met together with the ministerial team – that an individual, in this case it could be a teacher from a small to medium school, can be prosecuted.

Gayle TIERNEY: Government schools are indemnified. Again, nothing changes here. In terms of private schools, well, it is up to them, as it is with many other things in the way that their school operates.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Just to clarify, you are saying that the non-government schools, if they have a teacher that signs off and there is some fault in the work experience documentation – and this would apply particularly to small to medium schools who are on a budget, a very tight budget in many cases – the individual teacher that actually oversees this area of compliance can and would be prosecuted in this.

Gayle TIERNEY: The answer is no.

Clause agreed to; clauses 2 to 68 agreed to.

Reported to house without amendment.

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (17:59):
I move:

That the report be now adopted.

Motion agreed to.

Report adopted.

Third reading

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (17:59):
I move:

That the bill be now read a third time.

Motion agreed to.

Read third time.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Pursuant to standing order 14.28, the bill will be returned to the Assembly with a message informing them that the Council have agreed to the bill.

Adjournment

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (18:00):
I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Patient transport

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (18:00): (1351) My adjournment matter is for the attention of the Minister for Health, and it is in relation to VPTAS, or the Victorian patient transport assistance scheme, which is a very important scheme. Deputy President, you would understand, being a regional Victorian, how impacted Victorian patients are in the regions and how they are reliant on this scheme. VPTAS provides financial support for people from rural and regional Victoria when they

are travelling long distances to access essential health care such as cancer treatments. There are many – far too many – Victorians who are really doing it so tough, and when they need this vital treatment VPTAS is absolutely necessary. I have raised this issue on a number of occasions in this place around claims processing after hearing from patients saying that the processing of claims for travel and accommodation is blowing out weeks and sometimes months longer than the six- to eight-week timeframe that the government’s website gives for processing a payment.

In April of last year the minister responded to my question around this very issue and said the scheme was ‘back on track’ – we know that phrase, but it is not in relation to this, it is in relation to trying to get this country back on track; nevertheless this is an important issue – to process payments within the guidelines. In September the member from Mildura sought an explanation for outstanding payments of over \$100,000 in total that were owed to Sunraysia Cancer Resources, with some claims taking longer than six months. I am still hearing from regional Victorian patients who are frustrated with the delayed payment system. They rely on prompt processing of claims, and it is causing real hardship in a cost-of-living crisis. They know that the government is under huge financial stress. They have blown the budget. Waste and mismanagement have gone on. They are seeing the government prioritise things like the Suburban Rail Loop rather than paying for the VPTAS and getting those things sorted. The government has absolutely no regard for the huge pressures that it is putting on so many Victorian patients. I note the government said, in the *Weekly Times* on 15 January, it is:

... in the process of hiring and training more staff “to speed up the claims process”.

The action I seek from the minister is to explain when the additional staff will be in place and the processing times for VPTAS claims will be ‘back on track’ with the needs and expectations of the organisations and those individuals who use this very important program.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region schools

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:03): (1352) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Deputy Premier in his capacity as the Minister for Education, and the action that I seek is an update on the new schools being delivered by the government and others in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region and how these new schools are benefiting local families. The south-east is one of the fastest growing parts of our state – nay, our nation – and areas like Clyde North are home to rapidly expanding communities that require increased services and infrastructure investment to deliver what they need. This year three brand new modern schools have opened their doors for term 1. This includes Mirniyan Primary School and Turrin Primary School, which will each provide hundreds of prep through to grade 6 places.

Wulerr Secondary College also opened for their year 7 cohort this year, with ongoing works on the STEAM building. Following some advocacy from Mr Tarlamis and me to Casey council, I am also particularly pleased to report that the much-awaited Bells Road extension was completed in time by council, in partnership with local developers, ahead of that school’s opening. It was a critical concern for that new school’s community that they would be able to have safe and proper access to the school, not just from the old Soldiers Road at its back, which was well past its use-by date and well and truly not fit to handle the vast amounts of students that will now be using this wonderful new school. I very much appreciate the local community in Clyde North for reaching out to Mr Tarlamis and me and letting us know about the dire need for Bells Road to be completed. That helped us to have those discussions with council, which got that road delivered in time for term 1 this year.

Wulerr is going to be a fantastic school, and I am very excited to see how that school continues to grow and build over the coming years. Out of the six new government schools that have opened this year, that includes three in Clyde North, and that continues to demonstrate this government’s commitment to supporting the educational outcomes of young people in Melbourne’s south-east. In addition, St Josephine Bakhita Catholic Primary School is opening its doors for the 2025 school year. This school also received some funding of \$5 million from the state government for its stage 1, with stage 2 expected to commence this year with funding from the Allan Labor government.

The action that I am seeking from the education minister is an update on these new schools which are being delivered in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region in the suburb of Clyde North and the impact that will have on families in my constituency.

Wildlife protection

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (18:06): (1353) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Premier, and the action I seek is for her to urgently create a new role of parliamentary secretary for environment. In 2020, following a mass poisoning of 406 wedge-tailed eagles which resulted in a fine equivalent to \$6 per bird, the Victorian Labor government announced they would review and modernise our state's broken wildlife laws. Five years later they have failed to deliver these laws. They tell us that it is a huge piece of work and they just want to get it right. With every single day that goes by, illegal acts of cruelty to our native animals are receiving measly punishments, if any at all. As part of this reform, they created an expert advisory committee to give them advice on how the Wildlife Act 1975 could be improved in this state. It cost taxpayers \$3 million. They handed down their findings in 2021. Four years and three ministers have gone by since then, and the report is gathering dust. They refuse to even release it. Jack Pascoe, an Aboriginal man with ecological research and conservation management expertise, has since expressed frustration at the delay, after dedicating time to the report. He said:

There's no such thing as an iron clad commitment in politics but there was a commitment to reform this legislation that was drawn up in 1975.

But in the recent cabinet reshuffle, what new role did the Premier decide to create instead? A Parliamentary Secretary for Outdoor Recreation.

Native animals across this state are being poisoned, trapped and killed for fun. Each day iconic species we can never get back become more and more at risk. We know the real reason why these laws have not been delivered, because you cannot protect wildlife and permit their destruction at the same time. Native ducks are protected year round, until it comes to the recreational shooting season. Wombat numbers continue to dwindle, yet landowners can obtain permits to kill them for minor inconveniences. Our iconic kangaroos are shot commercially for their skins and exported overseas.

The Minister for Environment does not need extra resources to appease the shooting lobby, who seem to be the real protected species in this state, but he clearly does need support to honour the overdue commitment to developing these laws that properly protect our wildlife. I urge the Premier to create a new parliamentary secretary role for environment, and then perhaps this government can finally actually get it right.

Greater Bendigo crime

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (18:09): (1354) My adjournment is to the Minister for Police for urgent action to address the rising crime in Greater Bendigo, which continues to spiral out of control. I could read you the statistics in Bendigo from the 12 months to September 2024: stealing from retail stores has doubled, aggravated robbery jumped 69 per cent, residential aggravated burglary has risen by 89 per cent, motor vehicle thefts are up 50 per cent. But statistics do not matter until you actually meet the people. I have spoken with residents in residential streets of Bendigo who are fed up with the hoon drivers, the reckless drivers who are regularly screeching in the streets, and you see the marks and the burnouts on the road in the morning. A couple of weeks ago a 67-year-old man in Long Gully was bashed and run down with a car after he told a gang of hoons to stop doing burnouts. I visited a local newsagent just last week in Bath Lane, Bendigo. He has faced personal threats. They threatened to bash him. His business has been robbed, and his wife witnessed a group of youths brutally bash another young person in broad daylight in the middle of Bendigo.

I could tell you about many people I know whose cars have been stolen, whose homes have been broken into. I can tell you about the lady that I met who 12 months ago had her home broken into. A man tried to steal their car. In the process he actually ran over her husband. A neighbour who tried to

assist was stabbed three times. In court the perpetrator had 80 pending charges and was told he would get 15 months imprisonment. But within a week he was out on bail, and he has broken the law countless times.

We called for tougher bail laws 12 months ago. Labor has done nothing. It takes an election this weekend in Prahran and Werribee for the Premier to admit that Victoria's bail laws are failing. Look at the tobacco licensing laws. It took forever for the state government to introduce a bill to regulate the industry, and then they delayed the date of implementation. Over 110 stores have been firebombed, including in Bendigo and Rochester.

Police are frustrated. They are doing what they can to get criminals off the streets, only for a magistrate to let them off the hook because our laws need reform. Victoria also needs to follow the lead of other states and introduce permit-to-protest laws. Melbourne is now known as the capital of protests, and police resources are being absolutely wasted. I witnessed a protest myself in front of the Flinders Street train station. Masked protesters took over the whole major intersection there and dumped rubble in the middle of the road, and hundreds of people swarmed to that protest and set off flares and sirens. It was extraordinary to watch that happening in our city. With a growing population we need a growing police force, and right now we have over 1100 vacancies and no recruitment campaign. Crime is out of control in this state, and I ask the minister to address the reforms needed to change it.

Parks Victoria

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (18:12): (1355) My adjournment is for the Minister for Environment, and the action I am seeking is for the minister to commit to a major increase in funding for Parks Victoria in the upcoming state budget. It has been a trying summer for people in western Victoria. In the past two weeks fire has ripped through 70,000 hectares of the Little Desert National Park, and over Christmas, bushfires decimated an additional 70,000 hectares of national park and agricultural land.

Parks Victoria has the challenging mission of rehabilitating devastated ecosystems, home to a range of unique flora and fauna, including critically endangered species such as the southern brush-tailed rock-wallaby. Parks Victoria is also expected to manage significant and often highly charged community consultation processes. This is work that requires significant investment in lengthy on-the-ground community engagement, yet they simply are not resourced to do this. The consequence of this is growing community hostility towards Parks Victoria, division in communities and often difficulty building broad support for their work and the government's own agenda.

Rather than recognising their huge and growing workload by increasing funding, this government has chosen to hamstring Parks Victoria by cutting their funding by \$95 million last year, leaving them with just \$338 million to manage 3000 land and maritime parks. How can a government agency be expected to operate effectively, especially in the face of devastating bushfires and worsening climate change, when it does not receive the funding that it needs? How can they be expected to undertake often complex and sensitive community engagement in any kind of meaningful way? It is in everyone's interest that the Labor government address the chronic underfunding of Parks Victoria and give this essential government agency a chance to do their job well.

Suburban Rail Loop

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:14): (1356) It is a new year, but if Victorians held out any hope for a new approach or maybe a modicum of reflection or serious economic understanding of the problems with the Suburban Rail Loop project, that hope evaporated with our first question time this morning. The new Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop was clearly unprepared and unequipped for her brief and failed to answer questions on whether the federal government would fund \$11 billion of cost and was unable to answer what year the SRL would reach Werribee – very basic questions. It was not a good start. It was not a good look. If that is the quality of ministerial

oversight we can expect, it is going to be a very long year for anyone attempting to vainly defend the SRL project.

We already know there is an \$11 billion funding shortfall because the federal Labor government will not fund it. The Victorian people need to understand there is another \$11 billion that must also be raised in value capture taxes. Not only is this a financial black hole, it explodes the fantasy to rebrand the SRL as a housing project to build 70,000 new homes, because the building of those 70,000 new homes will be subject to value capture tax – \$11 billion of tax against the cost of development of those properties. Raising \$11 billion in value capture is effectively a surcharge on every apartment built, a surcharge that at this point only applies to SRL precincts. Eleven billion dollars divided by 70,000 equates to around \$180,000 of added cost to each and every apartment. This more or less removes the economic incentive to invest in the precinct, because they face a unique substantial extra cost that does not apply just 3 kilometres down the road. In this sense the government's strategy is pulling in two different directions. On one hand you have abandoned our local residents, removing all planning controls to promote intense property development, yet at the same time you are taxing anyone who develops, to the point where the projects either become unviable to finance or the developer is forced to build high-end, high-yield properties only – luxury apartments – where the cost of the SRL value tax can be absorbed.

So the action I seek from the minister is to urgently provide certainty to the building sector and to the communities under the heel of the Suburban Rail Loop Authority and release the value capture formula. It is completely unacceptable to be this financially committed to a project with this level of funding shortfall and no clarity for investment. Hand in hand with this action is an update on the project costings, which have not been updated for more than two years and are clearly out of date and therefore cannot be calibrated against the value capture taxes required to meet that cost.

Dederang battery energy storage system

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (18:17): (1357) My adjournment this evening is for the Minister for Planning, and the action I seek is for the minister to reject planning permit PA2403308 by Mint Renewables for the Dederang battery energy storage system (BESS) facility. Dederang is a beautiful community nestled in the Kiewa Valley. Surrounded by bush, Dederang is in a high fire risk area. During the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, fire crews from New South Wales were sent to protect the Dederang terminal station, nicknamed the 'light switch' to Melbourne. This facility serves as a hub in the electricity network. My constituents are concerned about the dangers of putting a large battery facility in such a vulnerable place next to such vital infrastructure. Dederang has some of the best agricultural land in the state according to the *Hume Regional Growth Plan*, North East Catchment Management Authority and Alpine shire documents. Such high-value agricultural land should be protected at all costs, and the placement of battery infrastructure could put that land at risk.

This battery facility has no social licence. In fact the community are so against its construction they have resorted to hanging large banners and signs on fences, gates and buildings in the surrounding areas. Community consultation by Mint Renewables was minimal at best. They refused to meet with the community as a whole and only met with individual neighbours. One meeting of 20 residents was held, and the promise of those meeting minutes being published on the proponent's website was not fulfilled. I have been given pages and pages of objections by my constituents in the Kiewa Valley to this planning application. The harm this is causing in the community is indescribable. Minister, do the right thing by my constituents and reject planning permit PA2403308, the Dederang BESS.

Homelessness

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (18:19): (1358) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Housing and Building. These statistics are frightening because at the end of these statistics are human beings. Rising by 60 per cent between the census, from 2016 to 2021, Gippsland homelessness rates have surged to a crisis proportion, and we are not alone. Exacerbated by a lack of available accommodation and housing options, housing affordability stress, the cost-of-living crisis

and a shrinking rental market, a net loss of housing stock in our region, a lack of staffing resources for providers and the failure to deliver more social and affordable housing, homelessness in Gippsland now is everywhere. However, funding for Labor's rough sleeping action plan lapses at the end of this financial year. Tents beside freeways and on banks of waterways, people sleeping under bridges, bus shelters and on park benches – and I do see it as I drive around; these are people in these places. A public rotunda serves as a makeshift home. These are daily occurrences for the rough sleepers – and not just individuals; there are families and there are children here. In 2023 the Morwell homelessness entry point recorded 123 people experiencing primary homelessness, 111 people in emergency accommodation and 84 living in rooming houses and caravan parks and the like. One catchment, one entry point. Extend that across our region and these are truly frightening statistics. The Regional Housing Fund stated that there were to be 110 houses for inner Gippsland and 65 for outer Gippsland – woefully inefficient – and these have not begun.

So what is the answer? It is service coordination and increasing housing supply. It is complex and varied: tackling mental health, tackling domestic violence and reducing crime in our regions. Supported by community networks, safety networks, our overstretched Victoria Police members and our local government, Gippsland is crying out for assertive outreach workers. These people engage with homeless people at their face: at the bus shelter and underneath the viaduct. They bring them into an entry point, start to assess them and give them hope. Gippsland Homelessness Network has identified a minimum of six outreach workers: two for Bass Coast, two for Latrobe Valley and two for East Gippsland. The action I seek is for the minister to continue the funding for the rough sleeping action plan well past this year, well past next year and into the future and ensure that six assertive outreach workers are funded to begin to meet the needs of vulnerable families and people in Gippsland.

Gender services

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:22): (1359) My adjournment matter is to the Minister for Health, and the action I seek is that she makes a commitment to expand and improve access to transgender health care in this state, as recommended by coroner Ingrid Giles in last year's investigation into the tragic deaths of five Victorian trans women.

Last week the Queensland Liberal–National government made the disgraceful decision to halt essential transgender healthcare measures for people under the age of 18. The Queensland state government made this decision not based on the facts but based on a tired ideological viewpoint that the far right have been desperate to import into this country for years now. The Australian Medical Association has implored us all to listen to doctors ahead of our own ideological views. Every single prior investigation into this health care in this country has come back with the same conclusions: transgender health care needs urgent investment. There need to be fewer barriers to gender-affirming health care, more clinics, more support for these services, uncompromising support, to make trans health care safer and more accessible for trans and gender-diverse people of all ages.

To the federal government, make it clear you support trans and gender-diverse people. To the state government, if you genuinely support transgender health care, then what is the delay in implementing the recommendations from coroner Ingrid Giles? These people are some of the most vulnerable in this country, with high rates of depression, anxiety and extreme mental distress. But this community of young people, I must implore, is strong. They deserve our unwavering support. If you oppose transgender health care, you oppose science, you oppose human rights and you oppose protecting young people, and we all see you for what you are.

Youth crime

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (18:24): (1360) My matter is for the Minister for Police and Minister for Community Safety regarding the rise in knife crime incidents among youth offenders. The action I seek is for the minister to invest more in crime prevention programs to prevent knives from getting into the hands of young offenders. In December a constituent of mine was stabbed in

broad daylight while exiting a train at Werribee station, just down from my office. He was attacked by a group of 10 teenagers and sustained multiple cuts and a punctured lung.

A recent report from Monash University's Victorian injury surveillance unit indicated that knife wound admissions to hospital have risen by over 88 per cent from 2014 to now under this government, with children up to the age of 14 representing the largest increase in hospital admissions. However, these figures do not accurately reflect the true impact of knife assaults on the public. Some instances do not receive media attention, and others have not been reported to police. Victoria at the moment is facing a crime crisis. Last year alone Victoria Police seized over 14,800 edged weapons, averaging 40 knives, machetes and other blades per day. How can Victorians, especially those in my electorate of Western Metropolitan Region, expect to feel safe when every day 40 knives, machetes and other blades are seized from young offenders? When will this government prioritise investment in crime prevention programs instead of focusing on the \$216 billion Suburban Rail Loop? If we take action now, we can reduce the number of victims in hospital and limit the number of young offenders who end up incarcerated. We need to ensure that young offenders can reach their full potential. Will the minister commit to investing more in crime prevention programs to prevent knives from getting into the hands of young offenders?

Waste and recycling management

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (18:26): (1361) My adjournment matter is directed to the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC in the other place and relates to the establishment of a toxic chemical storage taskforce for the western suburbs. I originally raised this matter as a constituency question back in August in the wake of the Derrimut fire, which was one of the biggest chemical explosions in recent years. Unfortunately, it bounced between two ministers without being addressed by either. But the issue of toxic chemical storage in the west and the danger it exposes residents to is still very much a live one for my constituents. The sort of weather we are experiencing at the moment – hot weather and high winds – tends to make western suburbs residents particularly nervous. We know that communities in Melbourne's west are exposed to much higher levels of air pollution than other parts of Melbourne. This was highlighted in the 2021 Environment and Planning Committee *Inquiry into the Health Impacts of Air Pollution in Victoria* report – a report, I note with great disappointment, that the government is yet to respond to.

Along with that, they also must contend with the risk of living close to toxic chemical stockpiles housed in warehouses and factories, largely unregulated and often very close to homes. Often residents are only made aware that they are living within metres of one of these dangerous stockpiles when it explodes and envelops the neighbourhood in a plume of toxic smoke. People have no idea what is being stored at these sites. Critically, what actions, if any, are being taken to minimise this unacceptable risk to their health and to the environment? The laws designed to protect them from the effects of pollution are not being enforced by the EPA with anywhere near the sort of required rigour. The EPA instead is consigned to assessing the damage after the catastrophe occurs rather than working proactively to reduce the risks of it happening in the first place. Having spoken with a number of our courageous firefighters in the west, who put their lives on the line when chemical fires erupt, this is also a huge issue for them. Many of these men and women live in the west as well as work there, so it is double jeopardy for them. We need proactive measures to protect residents, first responders and the environment from the large-scale fires and pollution incidents that happen fairly regularly across the west and other parts of Melbourne. We need a comprehensive audit of chemical waste stockpiles in Victoria. My request is for the minister for WorkSafe to establish an independent taskforce to look into how and where chemicals are stored and the state's response to dangerous chemical fires.

Murchison–Toolamba Football Netball Club

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (18:29): (1362) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Corrections, and the action that I seek is for the minister to meet with the Murchison–Toolamba Football Netball Club to explore opportunities for the transfer of sheds from the Dhurringile Prison,

which has been decommissioned, to the club. Sporting clubs are the heart of many rural and regional towns. They are not just about playing sport and getting fit, they also connect people together and nurture relationships. Country sports clubs deserve support from the government because they play a vital role at a point of contact for organising the community and supporting each other when towns face natural disasters or hard times.

One club that has done incredible work for its community but has not received the government support it deserves is the Murchison–Toolamba Football Netball Club, known as the Hoppers. I have spoken in Parliament several times about the Hoppers and how the club deserves transformative funding. They have been planning a three-stage redevelopment of their facilities for many years but have been repeatedly let down by state Labor governments. The Hoppers find themselves in a particularly difficult situation, stuck in a funding no-man’s-land because they play on Crown land. Most state government grants to sporting clubs require the local council to apply or support the application, but council will not apply for funding for facilities that are on Crown land. That means that the Murchison–Toolamba Football Netball Club can only get funding directly from the state, but the state Labor government continues to ignore their request.

Now the Victorian government has an opportunity to finally do something for the Hoppers, and at very little cost to itself. The government is currently decommissioning Dhurringile, and the club is interested in acquiring sheds from the Dhurringile Prison site, especially the larger shed previously used as the wooden products factory. The club want to dismantle and reassemble the shed at the recreation reserve where they play and use it for their clubrooms. Ownership of the facilities would remain with the state. The current rooms were constructed in 1981, and they have not been renovated or upgraded since. Club officials have met with officers from the AFL, who after inspecting 3000 other football clubs deemed the condition of Murchison’s facilities to be in the bottom 5 per cent in the nation. I have visited the club myself and I can only agree.

The club desperately need investment to bring their facilities into the 21st century, which will encourage wider participation and secure a sporting future for local kids. The club is willing to cover the cost of relocating the shed and will seek to raise further funds to fit out the clubrooms. Repurposing the old shed instead of building new rooms from scratch would represent a significant financial saving to the club and community and leave a lasting legacy for future members.

Community safety

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (18:33): (1363) I want to raise a matter for the Premier. I have a letter in my possession from the office of the mayor, Cr Simone Zmood, of the City of Glen Eira, and it is addressed to the Premier, Jacinta Allan, and it is signed by not only Mayor Zmood but former mayors Anne-Marie Cade, Jim Magee, Margaret Esakoff and Jamie Hyams OAM – five mayors from the City of Glen Eira. Along with the four previous mayors of Glen Eira, it says:

... I write to you with a deep concern for the safety and well-being of our community.

While recent events have raised increased awareness of antisemitism, disruptive community behaviour and violent attacks, for our community these are longstanding issues that continue to erode their fundamental right to feel safe. This issue extends beyond the Jewish community and affects all residents, making it imperative that both immediate and permanent action is taken.

Mayor Zmood’s letter continues:

In light of these ongoing security concerns, we formally request a permanent (not temporary) increase in police presence in Glen Eira, with particular attention to Caulfield Police Station. While we appreciate the temporary measures that have been taken, it is evident that a long-term solution is required to ensure ongoing safety and restore the trust and confidence of our community.

It goes on to say:

We feel strongly that maintaining public safety and an environment where everyone feels welcome are critical responsibilities of government. Council is investing in a range of measures to improve safety and build social

cohesion, working collaboratively with community groups and organisations. But what is needed and expected is a more visible local police presence to send a strong message that helps deter criminal activity, reassure community members, and foster a greater sense of security for all.

I think this letter is a timely letter. It is a serious matter in the City of Glen Eira in my electorate, Ms Crozier's electorate. It is an electorate that is actually facing a real threat. The City of Glen Eira – I was at a citizenship ceremony the other day – is a very important municipality. It has a very significant Jewish community, and they have a right to feel safe. Police presence has been wound back by this government. I can even go further and say that the figures that I have on the number of police in Prahran show very clearly that the number of police available both on the weekend and during weekdays has fallen in recent years under this government. You get rid of long-term patrols and you get rid of visible police and there are very poor outcomes. So I say the Premier needs to respond to this. She needs to do so urgently. She needs to listen. People should feel safe, and at the moment under Labor in Victoria they do not feel safe.

Victorian emergency services equipment program

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (18:36): (1364) My adjournment matter tonight is for the Minister for Emergency Services, and the action that I seek is for her to organise a visit to a VICSES unit or a CFA brigade which has received a Victorian emergency services equipment program grant. Our new Minister for Emergency Services in the other place Vicki Ward has already started to fill the big shoes left behind by the former minister, and I am looking forward to working more with her as parliamentary secretary. The new minister has already visited an impressive number of emergency services stations and brigades and sites, but VESEP grant recipients were at the front of my mind over the summer break as I saw the positive impacts that these grants have on local communities. VESEP, which stands for the Victorian emergency services equipment program, supports emergency services organisations like the CFA and the VICSES to protect their communities during bushfires and other emergencies. Of course all Victorians know that our CFA and VICSES volunteers are invaluable, but this has really been driven home for me over the last few weeks as our CFA volunteers across the state have come together to protect communities in the Grampians, the Otways, Little Desert and throughout the state's west. VICSES volunteers have also responded to damage caused by extreme weather events, including this week's storms. So to all those VICSES volunteers that are out there: thank you so very much for helping out.

I have been particularly grateful for the CFA's tireless contributions to their communities recently and have been spending a lot of my spare time with a new mate, a CFA volunteer, who is so dedicated that he has become the secretary of his local brigade. So in the course of all of our conversations we have had a good chance to know and understand the very many sacrifices that our volunteers make, and I just want to take a moment to acknowledge that. So for all of the CFA volunteers can I just acknowledge and thank you for the sacrifice that you make to not only yourselves but also your families; your families are in this as well, missing out on celebrations and festivities, holidays and breaks, and I am so grateful for all that you do. I know that he certainly misses out on the opportunity to serve his community whilst being out there in some really, really tough times out in regional Victoria. Having opportunities like this to see the dedicated CFA volunteers firsthand has really reinforced my pride in being part of a government which supports its emergency services through schemes like VESEP, and since my appointment as the Parliamentary Secretary for Emergency Services I have also represented the now former minister, I have got to say, on visits to other CFA and VICSES stations.

Generally these visits are to commemorate other forms of funding secured by the minister, but on almost every visit, I have got to tell you, I have been told by volunteers about the impact of these grants on their unit or on their brigade or even on their esteem as a unit. So tonight I am asking the minister to visit another grant recipient to see more of the positive community outcomes that she will continue to facilitate through her work.

Country Fire Authority funding

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:39): (1365) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Emergency Services. The action I seek is for the state government to properly fund the CFA to enable it to continue to provide its vital work throughout the state by including more money in the budget and also providing an upgrade on the many resources that it needs, which are completely out of date.

The analysis of the CFA's financial statements over recent years reveals how the city-centric state government has slashed the CFA's funding and put the organisation and volunteers under extreme financial pressure. Under total income to the CFA, government grants were \$807 million in 2019–20. It dropped significantly to \$351 million in 2020–21, \$347 million in 2021–22, \$341 million in 2022–23 and just \$339 million in 2023–24. So it keeps dropping. This is a cut of \$468 million, almost 60 per cent of the CFA's grant income. This raises the big question: why is this government effectively defunding the CFA? In fact just recently people have heard firefighters grumbling while they are waiting to order their lunches about how their trucks are over 15 years old. How is that safe? How is that fair on any Victorian, let alone the CFA firefighters? Sadly, for all Victorians the answer to this question is clear: the government would rather fund a card-carrying union member than a volunteer. It is clear that this government is intent on getting rid of CFA volunteers and replacing them with unionised FRV members.

In addition to this extraordinary reduction in funding, the fleet of CFA vehicles is dramatically ageing. As I said, it has been known that we have trucks out there that are more than 15 years old, and this is putting the lives of the CFA volunteers at risk, with unreliable and in some cases unsafe vehicles still being used. I have seen them, I have been in them and I know that you can sit outside in some of these CFA trucks – and they are supposed to be ones for bushfire relief. They are completely outdated. This is outrageous.

Further analysis of the CFA financial statements shows that this government is taking additional amounts of the CFA's budget disguised as contributions towards other so-called costs or equipment. These amounts have also risen dramatically from \$10 million in 2013–14 to \$46 million in 2023–24 and \$67 million in 2024–25. So you are not only giving them less but bleeding their money as well for other uses. Information obtained by Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria under an FOI request revealed that despite government assurances these amounts taken were to be used for CFA equipment, the reality is that some of this money was used to prop up the budgets of other state government agencies such as Emergency Management Victoria. This just shows once again that Labor cannot manage money.

Little River battery energy storage system

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (18:42): (1366) My adjournment debate is for the Minister for Planning and concerns the objections raised by residents of Little River regarding a secretive Barwon solar farm at Mount Rothwell and the proposed battery energy storage system on Sandy Creek Road. Over the weekend Brad Battin, Liberal candidate for Werribee Steve Murphy and I visited Little River, and we were appalled by how unsuitable this location is for major renewable energy projects. Despite the serious implications for local residents, the Labor government has shown no interest in properly consulting the community. No Labor MPs have bothered to visit these Little River properties. I have now been out there three times, and David Davis, the shadow minister for energy, has also inspected the sites. This is not just negligence; it is a deliberate attempt to push renewable energy projects through without listening to the concerns of those who will be directly impacted. The government know that the Little River location is wrong, yet they are still pushing ahead because they are trying to avoid scrutiny. Why? Because they know the truth. These projects will damage the landscape, harm tourism and negatively affect the local community. These projects are on prime agricultural land in a high-wind, fire-prone area on the outskirts of the You Yangs national park, a

significant Aboriginal cultural site and a major tourist destination. As *Getaway* star Catriona Rowntree has said online, the Mount Rothwell property has:

... been the scene of so many incredible movies and productions, bringing in a fortune for the local government.

In their rush for renewables, she said:

Labor are considering all of these completely wrong locations.

In so doing she urged everybody to vote for Steve Murphy. When the government were exposed fast-tracking the lithium battery farm last year, they tried to cover it up with a community consultation survey. The survey closed in September 2024, and residents were promised an assessment by October, a decision by November and notification by December. They rejected the community's request to have the consultation extended due to the short timeframe. But as of today, in February 2025, there has been no assessment, no decision and no communication with the community. This is bureaucratic incompetence at its finest. In stark contrast Steve Murphy, the local Liberal candidate for Werribee, has shown leadership by actually taking the time to visit Little River and speak with residents. So the action I seek from the minister is a commitment to meeting with the residents of Little River before she makes her overdue decision.

Metro Tunnel

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (18:45): (1367) My adjournment is to the Minister for Transport Infrastructure in the other place. I seek the action of the minister to explain the cutting of promised upgrades to the Craigieburn line and the Upfield line from the Metro Tunnel project. Originally estimated at \$11 billion, the Metro Tunnel has now ballooned to about \$15.5 billion, a clear example of Labor's financial mismanagement and inability to manage major projects. Initially slated for completion this year, recent reports reveal the project is facing up to a 12-month delay, and I very much doubt the government's ability to meet its deadlines to deliver the promised operational trains by the end of 2025.

But we know that when you cannot manage money, somebody has to pay for that, and it is Victorians in the northern suburbs that are paying the price. I remember when the government was boasting about the benefits of the Metro Tunnel to people in the northern suburbs, like on the Craigieburn line where you have a frequency of about one train every 20 minutes off-peak on weekdays and up to 40 minutes on weekends. It actually has greater usage than the Frankston line but has about double the wait times in terms of frequency. The Metro Tunnel was meant to deliver at Essendon a turnback and platform extension, which would increase frequency for the good people on the Craigieburn line. For the people on the Upfield line, which has the worst frequency of any line in the state, it was meant to deliver a much-needed turnback at Gowrie to address a single-track bottleneck on the Upfield line.

I seek the action of the minister to explain why the northern suburbs are missing out on the supposed promised benefits of the Metro Tunnel. Where is the member for Pascoe Vale, Mr Cianflone? Is he still boasting about the benefits of Metro Tunnel to his community, because the government is not delivering. Where is the member for the neglectorate of Greenvale boasting about the benefits to the Craigieburn line, because there are none. Where is the member for Essendon Danny Pearson boasting about benefits for the Craigieburn line? There are none. There is absolutely no benefit now to the good people on the Upfield line and the Craigieburn line, because this government cannot manage money. They have blown the budget on the Metro Tunnel, and now it is people in my electorate, people in the northern suburbs, suffering with cancelled trains and unreliable trains on the Craigieburn and Upfield line, who are paying the price as a result of this government's mismanagement of major projects.

Inverloch surf beach

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (18:48): (1368) My matter tonight is for the Minister for Environment, and the action I seek is for the minister to listen to the residents of Inverloch and finally enact a solution to the disastrous erosion of the Inverloch surf beach. Inverloch surf beach is washing

away at an alarming rate, with the beach receding about 10 metres per year. This is putting the entire community at risk, and the government just seems to be ignoring Inverloch. A report last year by the minister's department suggested that they adapt and retreat. What that actually means is that the community should do nothing – allow the erosion to continue. Literally it will mean that the surf lifesaving club, which is only about 11 years old, will wash away into the ocean and then after that there is street after street after street of houses that will be lost. This is just not a solution at all.

Why isn't the government listening to the people of Inverloch? It means the loss of the surf lifesaving building, the loss of public utility infrastructure and the loss of Surf Parade and many, many homes. It is absolutely devastating. In a letter recently the local Labor state member of Parliament said \$3 million of federal government money was being spent to replenish some sand. But this is only a short-term fix. It is literally washing away into the ocean. So the community is asking: where is the long-term solution, why isn't the state government contributing any money and why do we have to wait until late 2025 for this short-term fix when the problem has been known for many years?

I would also like to give a shout-out to Brad Battin, who went down there within his first week of being elected as the leader and listened to hundreds and hundreds of community members who gathered on the beach to tell him what is needed in their community. I want to know: why isn't Labor doing the same thing and listening?

Responses

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (18:50): Ms Crozier raised a matter for the Minister for Health. Mr Galea raised a matter for the Minister for Education. Ms Purcell raised a matter for the Premier. Mrs Broad raised a matter for the Minister for Police. Dr Mansfield raised a matter for the Minister for Environment. Mr Welch raised a matter for the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop. Mrs Tyrrell raised a matter for the Minister for Planning. Ms Bath raised a matter for the Minister for Housing and Building. Mr Puglielli raised a matter for the Minister for Health. Mr Luu raised a matter for the Minister for Police. Mr Ettershank raised a matter for the Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC. Ms Lovell raised a matter for the Minister for Corrections. Mr Davis raised a matter for the Premier. Ms Watt raised a matter for the Minister for Emergency Services, as did Mrs Hermans. Mrs McArthur raised a matter for the Minister for Planning. Mr Mulholland raised a matter for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. Dr Heath raised a matter for the Minister for Environment. I will refer them accordingly.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 6:51 pm.