



Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Wednesday 9 September 2026

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

Bev McArthur (from 18 November 2025)

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	FFV	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 ⁸	Northern Victoria	ON
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 Dec 2023

² Lib from 26 Nov 2022 until 28 Mar 2023;

IndLib from 28 Mar 2023 until 27 Dec 2024;

Lib from 27 Dec 2024 until 28 Jul 2026;

Ind from 28 Jul 2026 until 6 Sep 2026

³ Appointed 14 Nov 2024

⁴ LDP until 26 Jul 2023

⁵ Resigned 8 Nov 2024

⁶ DLP until 25 Mar 2024

⁷ Appointed 7 Feb 2024

⁸ PHON until 3 Aug 2026

Party abbreviations

AJP – Animal Justice Party; ALP – Australian Labor Party; DLP – Democratic Labour Party;
 FFV – Family First Victoria; 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; ON – One Nation Victoria;
 PHON – Pauline Hanson’s One Nation; SFFP – Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party

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Wednesday 9 September 2026

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

*Announcements***Photography in chamber**

The PRESIDENT (09:33): Just so members are aware, there is going to be a photographer today. So if you see someone in the gallery taking photos, chill out.

*Petitions***Western Victoria Region train services**

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) presented a petition bearing 193 signatures:

The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council the poor state of public transport between Geelong and Ballarat, Ballarat and Maryborough, and Maryborough and Castlemaine. These links, along with the good public transport link between Castlemaine and Bendigo define the Western Crescent which links Victoria's second, third and fourth largest cities. The Geelong to Ballarat link, which was serviced by passenger rail until 1978, is currently served by three weekday return V/line coaches. The Ballarat to Maryborough link is currently served by two weekday return V/line trains and the Maryborough to Castlemaine link is currently served by five weekday return V/line coaches. There are now 600,000 people living along the Western Crescent and around 280,000 jobs making existing services clearly inadequate.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Minister for Public and Active Transport and the Minister for Transport Infrastructure to reinstate the Geelong to Ballarat passenger rail services and upgrade Ballarat to Maryborough passenger rail services to hourly frequencies with connecting hourly coach services between Maryborough and Castlemaine.

Nioka Solar project

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) presented a petition bearing 2244 signatures:

The petition of certain citizens of the State of Victoria draws to the attention of the Legislative Council the proposed Nioka Solar Project at Glenrowan West which will consist of 420,000 solar panels on prime agricultural land, alongside and surrounding a landowner's property only two acres in size. Government guidelines require when identifying suitable locations for large scale solar sites, there be adequate space between facilities to avoid cumulative impacts and have access to main roads. The Nioka Solar Project meets neither. Within a designated Bushfire Prone Area, the project also includes the installation of a Battery Energy Storage System increasing the threat of catastrophic fires and explosions and the contamination of critical waterways, feeding into the world-renowned Winton Wetlands. These waterways provide vital corridors for species movement from the foothills to the wetland. Proponents of the project claim the site was chosen as it sits within the eastern section of the Central North Renewable Energy Zone (REZ). A proposed REZ zone that was expanded to include this area without any community consultation. The project would ruin prime agricultural land, threaten critically endangered wildlife, greatly impacting the mental health of residents who fear for the land they love and the way they live.

The petitioners therefore request that the Legislative Council call on the Government to oppose and reject the Nioka Solar Project, including the Battery Energy Storage System, remove the eastern section of the Central North Renewable Energy Zone from the 2025 Victorian Transmission Plan and prevent large-scale cumulative industrial energy developments in designated bushfire prone areas on existing environmentally sensitive vegetation overlays in farming zones.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: As this is a petition qualifying for debate under standing order 11.03(10), I give notice that I intend to move 'That the petition be taken into consideration' on Wednesday of next sitting week.

Bills**Liability for Climate Change Damage (Make Polluters Pay) Bill 2026***Introduction and first reading*

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (09:35): I introduce a bill for an act to impose liability for climate change damage and for other purposes, and I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Sarah MANSFIELD: I move:

That the second reading be made an order of the day for the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Papers**Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action***The Status of Victoria's Koala Population*

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (09:36): I move, by leave:

That the report *The Status of Victoria's Koala Population: Surveys to Estimate Abundance, Genetic Diversity and Koala Health* be tabled.

Motion agreed to.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, this report, as I understand it, relates to a documents order that is forthcoming. Is that correct?

Members interjecting.

David Davis: So this is preparatory. I am just indicating that the chamber welcomes the provision of documents that are the subject of documents orders, but it should be extended to many documents that are outstanding.

The PRESIDENT: That is not a point of order.

Jaclyn Symes: On the point of order, President, Mr Davis's point is irrelevant. Yes, I am tabling a document. Yes, there is a motion. This is not in anticipation of the motion; this is in the ordinary business of ensuring that the report is being tabled today. So any connection is convenient.

David Davis interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Maybe this can be fleshed out during the general business item on this particular issue.

Papers**Tabled by Clerk:**

Auditor-General – Maintaining State Roads, September 2026 (Volumes 1 and 2) (*Ordered to be published*).

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 – Documents under section 15 in relation to Statutory Rule No. 117.

WorkSafe Victoria – Report of requests for the approval of persons or bodies by the Governor in Council, 2025–26, under section 11(2) of the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004, section 10(2) of the

Dangerous Goods Act 1985 and section 595(4) of the Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2013.

Business of the house

Notices

Notice of motion given.

Members statements

St Kilda & Balaclava Kindergarten

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (09:40): Recently I visited the St Kilda & Balaclava Kindergarten to have a look at the works completed last year using funding from the Labor government's Building Blocks improvement grants. The work they have done there is truly impressive. The kindergarten is more than 100 years old. They have refurbished the existing building, preserving their heritage, and added new rooms out the back. The garden area looks fantastic. This kindergarten is one of Melbourne's hidden gems, and the work that has been done there is truly spectacular. The project has not just received praise from the local community but also has won multiple awards, including the 2025 Victorian School Design Awards award for best new kindergarten, the City of Port Phillip's excellence in cultural and community benefit award and a Design & Development Awards award for non-residential projects. I want to congratulate the coordinator Tarryn and the parent committee for the great work they have done on the project.

Jewish community

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (09:41): I also want to use this opportunity to wish Shana Tova to the Jewish community in the Southern Metropolitan Region and across Victoria in the lead-up to the celebration of Rosh Hashanah, beginning on Friday and concluding on Sunday, the commemoration in Jewish tradition of the creation of the world. It is the beginning of the high holidays for the Jewish community, a time for reflection, gratitude, renewal and community over the next 10 days, that will end with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, on Sunday 20 September, which is the holiest and most solemn day in Judaism. I want to extend to all residents of Southern Metropolitan and the Jewish community a respectful and blessed high holiday period.

Climate change

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (09:42): The worst irony of the climate change crisis that is unfolding all around the world is that it is wreaking havoc on communities who have done the least to contribute to it. Right here in Victoria communities are already seeing their lives change forever due to more intense bushfires, killer heatwaves and floods, which will be exacerbated by the state government rolling out the red carpet for AI data centres. We have seen the recent devastating floods in Nepal rip communities apart. A new United Nations report has found we will not be meeting the Paris climate targets of 1.5 degrees. It means something to parents like me who want a safer climate future for their kids. It means something to the Greens, who are the only ones pushing these corporate major parties to take stronger climate action. Meanwhile this arrogant Labor Prime Minister goes to the Pacific Islands, where people are facing losing their islands to rising sea levels, and lies, saying Australia is highly regarded when it comes to climate change. Well, guess what, good neighbours should not drown their neighbours. Labor has approved 30 new coal and gas projects since 2022. They even approved a new coalmine in Queensland at the same time as the Pacific forum. Do you know what is galling about this Prime Minister and what you get with Labor governments? It is the audacity to lecture us about climate action while they continue to bend to the fossil fuel industry.

Casey youth climate action committee

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:43): I am rising today to talk about my wonderful visit with the Casey youth climate action committee last week, who it was wonderful to meet with in a state where we have a passionate and strong Labor government that are leading the way

with climate emission reductions and with more than 10 years of a demonstrated difference in the climate space. It was wonderful to catch up with these very bright young people across different age levels in the City of Casey and to hear about their views and their passions on this issue and the environment more broadly. We had some really great conversations about the local environment, about sustainability, about public transport and even about some other topics as well, including ways in which we can better support and prevent youth crime. It was a really terrific evening with them. I would like to thank all of the members of the group who so generously shared their time with me and Dani from my team. We really enjoyed the experience.

Ukraine Independence Day

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:44): I also recently had the opportunity to attend the 35th Independence Day anniversary special market for the Association of Ukrainians in Victoria in Essendon, along with the outstanding candidate for Essendon Kat Theodosios, who is already out and working very hard and clearly already being well embraced by her community. It was terrific to join her. Thank you very much to everyone for having us on the day.

American football

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:44): Finally, National Football League fever has hit Melbourne. It is great to see so many 49ers fans out and about. Their infectious energy I think is going to make a few more 49ers fans out of us in here too. We are very much looking forward to seeing the game on Friday, as a result of the investment of this Labor government.

Cannabis law reform

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (09:45): I rise to speak on a subject close to my own heart and those of my constituents: gardening. After the long winter stretch, it is delightful to see the blossoming citrus and the daffodils and jonquils emerging in my garden, which is in constant flux, with some delight appearing almost every day. I can attest to the therapeutic value of gardening. Getting your hands in the soil clears the mind and lets you focus on what is in front of you. It is mindfulness in action. Right now across Victoria thousands of keen gardeners are prepping their garden beds in order to sow their annual cannabis crop. Growing your own cannabis is economical and allows for greater control over what you are growing – no need for heavy pesticides or toxic chemicals. Most people do it for the love of it. There is nothing quite so restful as checking, pruning and feeding your plants, and nothing quite so rewarding as harvesting your own crop. Or so I am told. I could never condone such activity, because growing a couple of cannabis plants in the privacy and security of your own backyard, inexplicably and ridiculously, remains a crime in Victoria.

Kensington Road–Epsom Road, Kensington

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (09:46): I rise to recognise the outstanding advocacy of the Kensington community, whose tireless efforts have delivered a major victory for local road safety. Residents have rightly voiced their deep frustration over heavy toll-dodging truck rat-running happening through the residential streets of Kensington. These massive vehicles simply do not belong on local roads where our kids walk to school and families live. They cause unacceptable noise, they rattle homes and they pose a severe safety risk to pedestrians and cyclists. Our Labor government has listened to the community. We are officially implementing a 24/7 long-vehicle turning ban at the intersection of Kensington Road and Epsom Road. Trucks longer than 17 metres are now banned from turning in and out between Kensington Road and Epsom Road. This measure will help return Kensington streets to the local community. This outcome would not have been possible without strong local voices. In particular, I want to thank and acknowledge local councillor and Labor candidate for Melbourne Davydd Griffiths for his work. Davydd is a dedicated, hardworking and passionate advocate for Kensington who always fights hard on local issues. This result is because of a community that cares deeply about its neighbourhood and a candidate who cares too. We will continue working to keep our streets safe for many generations to come.

*Bills***Sale of Land Amendment (Property Developer Integrity) Bill 2026***Statement of charter compatibility*

David ETTERS HANK (Western Metropolitan) (09:48): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

In accordance with section 28 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*, I make this Statement of Compatibility with respect to the *Sale of Land Amendment (Property Developer Integrity) Bill 2026*.

The Bill amends the *Sale of Land Act 1962* to improve transparency and accountability in the marketing and sale of land within large residential developments. The Bill requires the disclosure of specified information concerning proposed services and facilities and provides remedies where purchasers have relied on false or misleading information.

The Bill engages in Section 20 of the Charter – the right to property – to the extent that vendors may be subject to rescission of contracts or damages where statutory disclosure obligations are breached. Any limitation on property interests is reasonable and proportionate, as it serves the legitimate purpose of protecting consumers and promoting informed decision-making in land transactions.

The Bill does not materially engage the rights to privacy, equality before the law or a fair hearing. Any proceedings arising under the Bill would be determined through existing judicial processes and safeguards.

I am therefore of the opinion that the *Sale of Land Amendment (Property Developer Integrity) Bill 2026* is compatible with the human rights protected by the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*.

To the extent that the Bill limits any human rights, those limitations are reasonable and demonstrably justified in accordance with section 7(2) of the Charter.

David Ettershank MP

Member for Western Metropolitan Region

Statement of treaty compatibility

David ETTERS HANK (Western Metropolitan) (09:48): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Statewide Treaty Act 2025:

Overview

In accordance with section 66 of the Statewide Treaty Act 2025, I make this Statement of Treaty Compatibility with respect to the Sale of Land Amendment (Property Developer Integrity) Bill 2026.

The purpose of the Bill is to amend the Sale of Land Act 1962 to require certain property developers undertaking large subdivision developments to provide purchasers with specified information regarding services and facilities represented as forming part of, or benefiting, the development. The Bill also provides purchasers with enhanced rights to rescind contracts and seek damages where false or misleading information has been provided.

Section 66(3)(a) – (c): Opportunity for advice and representations

Gellung Warl was not given an opportunity to advise on the Bill or to make representations regarding the effect of the Bill on First Peoples.

Section 66(3)(d): Compatibility with Treaty objectives

In forming my view about the compatibility of this Bill with the objectives referred to in section 66(3)(d) of the Statewide Treaty Act 2025, I have considered the Bill's effect on the rights, interests and wellbeing of First Peoples, including whether it advances self-determination, addresses disadvantage resulting from historic wrongs and ongoing injustices, or promotes the equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

(i) Advancing the inherent rights of First Peoples and supporting self-determination

The Bill is directed to consumer protection and disclosure obligations in relation to large residential subdivision developments. It requires vendors to disclose specified information about whether promised or proposed infrastructure, services and community facilities exist, who is responsible for providing them, and the status of any commitments relating to their delivery. The Bill also creates remedies where misleading information is provided.

The Bill does not regulate Traditional Owner rights, native title rights, cultural heritage protections, land justice mechanisms, Treaty processes or First Peoples' representative institutions. Nor does it alter decision-making arrangements in a manner that affects the capacity of First Peoples to exercise self-determination.

To the extent that the Bill promotes transparency and informed decision-making in land transactions, these protections are available equally to First Peoples who purchase land within affected subdivision developments. However, the Bill does not establish any specific mechanisms that advance First Peoples' self-determination.

Accordingly, I consider the Bill to be neutral in its effect on the objective of advancing the inherent rights and self-determination of First Peoples.

(ii) Addressing disadvantage arising from historic wrongs and ongoing injustices

The Treaty objectives require consideration of whether legislation contributes to addressing disadvantage experienced by First Peoples as a consequence of colonisation and historic dispossession.

The Bill is a consumer protection measure. It seeks to reduce the risk that purchasers of residential land will be misled about the existence, approval, funding or delivery of important services and facilities such as schools, public transport, shopping areas, health facilities, sporting facilities and community facilities within large master-planned estates.

Access to accurate information regarding infrastructure and community services can assist purchasers in making informed decisions about housing and community participation. To that extent, First Peoples who participate in the residential land market may benefit from the enhanced transparency and remedies provided by the Bill in the same way as other purchasers.

However, the Bill does not directly address systemic inequalities affecting First Peoples, nor does it create targeted measures to remedy disadvantages resulting from historical dispossession, exclusion from land ownership, or the ongoing effects of colonisation.

I therefore consider that the Bill neither significantly advances nor detracts from this Treaty objective. While it may deliver incidental benefits through strengthened consumer protections, its primary purpose is not directed towards addressing First Peoples' disadvantage.

(iii) Ensuring the equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms

The Bill applies uniformly to vendors and purchasers involved in relevant subdivision developments. It does not distinguish between people on the basis of Indigenous status, ethnicity, culture or any other protected attribute.

The Bill enhances the ability of purchasers to obtain accurate information regarding land purchases and provides additional rights to rescind contracts and seek damages where false or misleading information has been supplied. These rights are available equally to First Peoples and non-Indigenous Victorians.

By promoting transparency in the sale of residential land and strengthening legal remedies where misleading conduct occurs, the Bill supports the fair and equal operation of the property market. I do not consider that any provision of the Bill would reduce or impair the equal enjoyment of human rights or fundamental freedoms by First Peoples.

Overall assessment

Consistent with the guidance for Private Members' Bills, I have considered the practical effect of the proposed reforms on First Peoples rather than merely whether the Bill expressly refers to First Peoples.

The Bill is directed at improving disclosure and accountability in large-scale residential subdivision developments. It does not affect First Peoples-specific rights, Treaty processes, Traditional Owner interests, cultural heritage protections or self-determination arrangements. While the Bill may provide incidental benefits to First Peoples through improved consumer protections and transparency in residential land transactions, those benefits are shared equally with all Victorians.

I am therefore of the view that the Bill does not compound disadvantage experienced by First Peoples, does not limit self-determination, and does not diminish the equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Conclusion

In my opinion, the Sale of Land Amendment (Property Developer Integrity) Bill 2026 is compatible with the objectives set out in section 66(3)(d) of the Statewide Treaty Act 2025.

The Bill is a consumer protection measure that enhances disclosure obligations and purchaser remedies in relation to large residential subdivision developments. It does not adversely affect the inherent rights or self-

determination of First Peoples, does not worsen disadvantages arising from historic wrongs and ongoing injustices, and does not impair the equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by First Peoples.

David Ettershank MP

Second reading

David ETTERS Hank (Western Metropolitan) (09:48): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

As you drive around the outskirts of Melbourne's west, or indeed just about anywhere in Melbourne's outer metropolitan area, you'd be hard-pressed to find an empty field without a large billboard advertising a pristine master planned community with all the bells and whistles and lifestyle. Welcome to your new home. New estates are springing up everywhere. As I've said in this place before, 'Stand still in the west for about 40 minutes, and they'll build around you.' The billboards are all essentially selling the same thing: the dream of home ownership – a dream which is becoming increasingly harder to achieve.

Somewhere between the billboard going up and the homes being built, the dream turns into a reality that is far different to what buyers had envisaged. I don't know how many times I've been told, 'I came here, I was promised all of these fabulous things as part of the lifestyle of this development, and they've not been delivered.'

Residents of Mount Atkinson bought into the dream woven by Stockland. Who can blame them when the marketing promised a future town centre – and not just any town centre – a Westfield shopping and community precinct? But that's not all. The master plan contained further proposed amenities such as a retail, business and commercial precinct, two primary schools, a secondary school, an indoor recreation centre, a community centre, a community activity centre, a sports and recreation precinct, a local convenience store, and a train station.

The reality for those residents is that accessing even the most basic essentials – a loaf of bread, a carton of milk, a roll of toilet paper – requires a 40-minute round trip. Out of that long list of proposed amenities, only the primary schools have been delivered, nine years after they were first marketed. After years of living in the estate, thousands of residents are eagerly awaiting the construction of a single convenience store. As one resident told *ABC News* last year, 'The vision is so far from reality.' Some residents paid up to \$60,000 more to be located close to this non-existent town centre.

Stockland continued to pursue these proximity premiums right up until Westfield publicly pulled the pin on Mount Atkinson in September 2024, which begs the question: when did Stockland know that the shopping centre would not be proceeding as promised? Because they were still selling premium properties up to that point. And there's a double whammy. Purchasers who have held off building their dream homes because they doubted the developer's intent to deliver the promised community facilities are now furious to find they are being hit with the vacant land tax.

Just a few kilometres from Mount Atkinson is Bridgefield, Rockbank, developed by 3L Alliance and Goldfields. More than 20 groups of prospective buyers camped out to snap up a block of land in the first release. A major selling point of this estate was 'Club Bridgefield', which was promised to include a swimming pool, tennis courts – plural – a gym, a residents' lounge and function room. The pictures in the brochure look like something out of a Port Douglas resort. Originally sold as common space owned by the owner's corporations, the club was instead owned by the developer and leased to the owners corporation at \$835,000 per annum. As fewer residents agreed to pay for this Temu version of the club, fees continued to rise until it closed its doors.

Allura Estate in Truganina was pitched to buyers as a future suburban hub. Glossy brochures depicted a bustling town centre, along with schools and everyday amenities. Buyers were also told Allura would be a secure, gated community, until council knocked back the installation of cameras on public

property, so that was a nonstarter. Like Mount Atkinson, many buyers paid a premium to be close to the action, so that shops, services and public transport would be just a stone's throw away. Several years after the first residents moved in, Empire Property acquired the estate from original developers Stockland. Their first order of business? Halving the size of the town centre and filling the remaining area with medium- and high-density housing.

These case studies are just a handful of many, all within 10 kilometres of each other. So, imagine how many more are out there just like them. The promises these developers made were at best, speculative; at worst, misleading. When questioned about Allura in 2023, then Premier Daniel Andrews said, 'Those developers say one thing to guarantee the sale and then deliver something very different to guarantee profits. That's fundamentally wrong.' He said he was very concerned by the matter and that the government would look at it closely.

In September 2024 I raised an adjournment on the issue of Mount Atkinson, and in her response, the then minister, Gabby Williams, said she had referred the matter to Consumer Affairs Victoria. Resident advocate groups from all over the west have met with previous ministers for consumer affairs Danny Pearson and Nick Staikos. On every occasion, the same promise is made: 'We will look into this. Consumer affairs will look into this.' Those promises are also yet to be delivered. Members might be beginning to detect a theme at this point.

For decades, successive governments have let property developers get away with blue murder, throwing consumers under the bus. Although that's not strictly true, because in far too many new estates, one of the missing deliverables is, of course, a bus. This is the end result of successive governments' over-reliance on developers to deliver greenfield housing. These companies do not strive for community building, for livability, but are singularly focused on one thing: delivering profits to their shareholders.

In so many areas of consumer law, there's a well-established precedent that if a business makes a representation about a product, they must have reasonable grounds for doing so. If they don't have reasonable grounds, and the consumer has incurred a loss as a result, then avenues of redress are usually available to them. Unfortunately, these protections do not appear to be working for the thousands of Victorians who have been duded by developers.

The regulations are clearly not working. We have overlapping legislative frameworks across state, federal, local government and common law, but the net result is that there are no protections for consumers against 'snake-oil salesman' developers. Developers, estate agents and other vendors all have responsibilities under the Sale of Land Act 1996. Those responsibilities, however, say little in regard to providing adequate information when it comes to advertising future amenities.

There is currently no Victorian requirement that a developer who markets a future amenity, such as a shopping centre, or a school, or a train station, must disclose:

- whether funding has been secured;
- whether approvals exist;
- who controls delivery;
- whether a contract exists;
- whether any work has actually commenced.

Nor is there currently any specific statutory disclosure regime aimed at large master planned estates where future amenities form a significant part of the sales proposition.

Whether it's enforcing existing laws or introducing new, tighter laws, something must be done. These people need to be protected. This bill is not by any means a silver bullet; we simply seek to demonstrate that government needs to step up, and that there are a range of mechanisms available for it to do so.

Among them is precinct structure plan reform, which would likely require a lot more buy-in from government.

The bill does not require developers to deliver any particular facility or service. It does not enforce timelines for constructing amenities, nor does it prohibit the depiction of future amenities in marketing material or other representations; it simply requires that information provided to purchasers regarding future infrastructure is factual and capable of objective verification. Put simply, it ensures that developers cannot hide behind marketing buzzwords like ‘future’ or ‘coming soon’ when it comes to the contract of the sale of land.

Moving now to the key provisions of the bill. Clause 4 inserts new definitions, including ‘subdivision development’, which covers large residential subdivisions of more than 1500 lots where planning documents indicate facilities such as schools, transport, shopping, health, sporting or community facilities may be provided.

Clause 5 sets out a requirement that vendors in those large subdivision developments disclose in the section 32 statement whether proposed facilities actually exist, who is responsible for providing them, what approvals, contracts or funding are in place and gives purchasers a right to rescind the sale if the information proves to be misleading.

Clause 6 creates a right for purchasers to sue the vendor for damages if false or misleading information about those services or facilities was provided in the section 32 statement, including after settlement if the purchaser later discovers the information was misleading.

These provisions aim to hold the sale of land in a major estate to a much higher standard than currently exists. This is about helping consumers make informed decisions. When a big developer builds an estate with thousands of dwellings, they are effectively responsible for creating a new community, a mini suburb. Future amenities are critical to the value proposition of these developments and materially impact the buyer’s decisions.

We simply believe that the contract of sale should accurately represent what they are actually selling and give prospective buyers the full picture. After all, we’re not talking about buying a scratchie or a raffle ticket; we are talking about people’s life savings, possibly the biggest investment they will ever make and their future. Buyers deserve to have every confidence that the information they are being provided by the vendor is clear, correct, and verifiable.

This is a modest bill with a targeted outcome. Put simply, if a developer promises something, and it’s not delivered, there should be redress. No more Mount Atkinson rip-offs. No more Bridgefield rip-offs. No more Allura rip-offs. I commend the bill to the house.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:02): I move:

That debate be adjourned for two weeks.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for two weeks.

Production of documents

Suburban Rail Loop

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (10:02): I move:

That this house:

(1) notes that:

- (a) the Auditor-General’s damning report, *Delivering the Suburban Rail Loop*, revealed that, from 1 January 2025, the government imposed an unannounced ‘rail improvement charge’, secretly adding 1 per cent a year to metropolitan and regional fares above inflation;
- (b) the charge was modelled to raise about \$8 billion in net present value terms to 2062, with \$4.8 billion allocated to Suburban Rail Loop East;

PRODUCTION OF DOCUMENTS

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- (c) in November 2024, the government concluded the charge was essential to generate new revenue to service project borrowings, yet approved a communications plan excluding any reference to it;
- (d) commuters paid the charge throughout 2025 and 2026 without it being disclosed in fare announcements, or the government's December 2025 value capture announcement;
- (2) recalls the Premier's undertaking that 'integrity will not be optional', and notes the charge was first approved in August 2021 when he was Minister for Public Transport;
- (3) considers the deliberate concealment of a charge on public transport users irreconcilable with that standard;
- (4) in accordance with standing order 10.01, requires the Leader of the Government to table in the Council, within 30 days of the house agreeing to this resolution, all documents held by relevant departments, the Suburban Rail Loop Authority and ministerial offices concerning:
 - (a) approval, modelling and implementation of the charge;
 - (b) the November 2024 communications plan and decision to exclude the charge from public communications;
 - (c) the 2025 and 2026 fare announcements; and
 - (d) advice and costings concerning abolition of the charge.

I rise to speak on this documents motion. This documents motion seeks to retrieve documents from the Auditor-General's damning report on delivering the Suburban Rail Loop. When I picked up the Victorian Auditor-General's Office report I saw a few things I expected in that the Suburban Rail Loop costs will exceed what the government had estimated and the timing of it is not likely to be met, but I never in my wildest dreams thought that this Labor government would cook up a secret tax, not announce it and then keep it from the Victorian people. It had already been charging Victorians for two years, so I think it is worth retrieving those documents – not that the government will respond to this documents order; it never does. We saw a slight change in that policy today, but it never releases documents. I hope the Attorney-General will show the same promptness as Minister Symes in regard to this, but we know that Minister Symes has a lot to answer for when it comes to this secret tax. We already see the blame game going on in the corridors of Parliament and through the media, trying to blame other ministers, trying to blame Minister Williams and say that she was meant to announce it at some sort of press conference and trying to blame Tim Pallas and Daniel Andrews. Yes, they cooked it up, but ultimately, when it came time to announce that this new tax was being charged to Victorians, nobody did it. They kept it from Victorians.

When it came to November and December last year, when the government – then Treasurer Symes and the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop – released their value capture plan for the Suburban Rail Loop, we saw car parking levies, we saw windfall and we saw the use of existing land taxes and stamp duty to cover the value capture. What we did not see in that list was the secret tax they had been charging Victorians for two years. They had been charging Victorians for two years a secret tax, which they estimated at about \$8 billion of revenue. It is no wonder S&P has come out and given the government a bit of a warning over this. If you say you are going to raise \$8 billion in revenue and all of a sudden you abolish it, then that obviously leaves a big funding hole in the Suburban Rail Loop, and we know through documents leaked from Treasury to the *Australian Financial Review* the other day that in 2020 the estimated cost of the Suburban Rail Loop East was \$37 billion. The government acknowledges construction costs on all major projects have increased by over 20 per cent since then. They have acknowledged that, which means that we are hurtling towards \$50 billion for one project from Cheltenham to Box Hill. In order to pay for it this government charged a secret tax on all Victorians – an absolute shame. And who knew about it since 2024? Ben Carroll knew about it. The entire cabinet knew about it. It was in cabinet minutes. They all either did not read their cabinet minutes properly or knew about it and did not say anything.

Ben Carroll can act surprised – he said the way it was come up with was not transparent, and he blamed the people on the budget and finance committee when it was dreamed up. Ben Carroll said, 'Allan, Andrews, Pallas and Merlino'. Well, who is chair of the Suburban Rail Loop Authority right now and

serves at the confidence of the Premier? James Merlino. Is he going to do anything about that? He said the way it was come up with was not transparent and named the now chair of the Suburban Rail Loop Authority, who serves at the confidence of the Premier. What is he going to do about that? Nothing. He said integrity was not optional under his government and that he is different from Jacinta Allan and Daniel Andrews. Well, this secret tax and the fact that he knew about it since 2024 proves that he is the same as Daniel Andrews and he is the same as Jacinta Allan. This is a corrupt government that charges Victorians in secret without telling them that they are being taxed. What other secret taxes have they come up with?

Victorians are angry and they deserve answers. They deserve the government being up-front with the Victorian people. 'Oh, I'm not going to relitigate the past' – be honest with Victorians, for once. They all knew about it, and they all kept it from Victorians. It is an absolute disgrace. People are angry, and they want a fresh start. We will deliver a charter of budget honesty so that when governments tax people, they tell them about it. They all knew about it. They are all ashamed of this government. They will not say it, but they are all ashamed of their front bench for not telling anyone they were being taxed in secret.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (10:09): I rise to speak on the documents motion moved by Mr Mulholland today. As is convention, the government will not be opposing it, and I am pleased to say that from the outset. When the Victorian Auditor-General hands down a report, this Parliament and the Victorian public rightly expect it to be treated with respect and taken seriously. The Auditor-General is an independent officer of this Parliament. The Victorian Auditor-General's Office provides independent assurance to Parliament and the Victorian community about the performance and accountability of the public sector and its services. Its audits examine whether agencies and programs are efficient, effective and economical; how public resources are managed; whether legal and other requirements are met; and whether there is waste or lack of probity. Crucially, VAGO does more than identify problems. It makes recommendations intended to strengthen management, service delivery, accountability and future performance. That independence matters. The Auditor-General does not report to the Parliament and does not write reports to suit the government or the opposition.

The report before us, *Delivering the Suburban Rail Loop*, is 171 pages long. It is a thorough, substantive work examining four major public entities. They are the Suburban Rail Loop Authority, the Department of Planning and Transport, the Department of Treasury and Finance and the Department of Premier and Cabinet. It gives a candid assessment of the project, identifying clear risks around timing, costs, procurement and funding transparency. At the same time it acknowledges genuine strengths in precinct planning, commercial strategy and interagency governance. Respecting VAGO means engaging honestly with the whole report, not selecting the most dramatic line for a press release and ignoring findings that do not fit a political story. Engaging constructively with an independent integrity report means engaging with the entire document, not just looking through it to find something that you can clip later for social media but actually listening to the findings and taking action. That is what this government did. On the rail improvement charge, that is exactly what happened. The Premier has made it abundantly clear that under our government integrity is not optional, and when something falls short of the transparency Victorians expect, we front up and we fix it. There was simply not enough transparency about how that charge was developed and put in place, and that is why the Premier acted decisively to abolish the charge. It was scrapped, it is gone, which brings us to why we are even having this debate today.

I must say it is quite curious. If you look at the business program, those opposite have already got a substantive motion on the notice paper dealing with the very same VAGO report. They have already dedicated debate time to ventilate their views, read out their press releases or whatever it is that they want to contribute on the topic. But let me just say: instead of being content with that, they have brought this additional documents motion before this place to give us more time to spout the hot air that we are absolutely expecting to come from those opposite and that has already come. You see, when a problem gets fixed – and that is exactly what happened – they do not know how to respond,

so what we have seen is a frolic and distractions just to keep the argument going. The problem has been fixed. They are tying up the time in this place to demand reams of paperwork from departments simply to confirm a fact that we already know has been confirmed.

Commuters know all about the charge that has been scrapped. I mean, I could quote what the Premier has said on this – and I have got to tell you, the Premier was pretty clear and emphatic. Can I just say that is very, very clear. While the coalition spends its energy looking in the rear-view mirror, our focus, frankly – let me be real about it – is making every dollar count and delivering the transport, housing and frontline services working families rely on. I have got more to say, but I will leave it to others who I know have further contributions to reinforce our point that this has been scrapped by the Premier.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (10:13): I am very pleased to speak in support of Mr Mulholland's motion. On 26 August the Auditor-General revealed that from 1 January 2025 this government has been adding a secret 1 per cent rail improvement charge to every public transport fare in this state – metropolitan and regional alike – on top of the usual CPI increase every commuter already faces. It was first approved in August 2021 when the now Premier was Minister for Public Transport. It was reconfirmed in December 2023. It was reconfirmed again in November 2024. In the very same month the government approved a communications plan whose purpose was to make sure Victorians never heard about it. Two further full rounds of fare increases came and went in 2025 and in 2026, without a word. This is not an oversight repeated four times over three years. It is a policy, and it makes a mockery of the government's own rules. The government's own value creation and capture framework says very clearly:

Value capture is based on the simple principle that those who directly benefit from a project should contribute proportionally to its cost.

Every one of the five mechanisms Labor did announce in December – land tax, the windfall gains tax, developer levies, the car park levy, state-initiated development – taxes people whose land or profits rise because of this tunnel. This levy follows no such principle. It was the single largest of all these so-called value capture measures and the only one never mentioned, because it taxes everyone who buys a ticket, whether they benefit or not. Notice who pays it. This charge falls just as heavily on a pensioner catching a V/Line service from Bairnsdale or Warnambool as it does on a commuter riding the loop it was invented to build. My colleague Ms Lovell rightly called it 'a sneaky tax to pay for city projects while regional roads are left to rot'. Regional Victorians were not treated as beneficiaries. They were treated as a revenue stream, good for \$1.60 extra a day by 2035 and \$12.10 extra a day by 2062 for the same trains that keep getting cut and the same lines that keep getting neglected west of Melbourne.

The Premier's response has been to discover, quite suddenly, the courage to abolish a charge he approved as minister, watched and reconfirmed as Deputy Premier and never once disclosed as Premier. He will not say when he first knew; his own ministers cannot even keep their stories straight. One says she only learned of the deliberate deception in recent days. Another says he found out when the Auditor-General's report appeared, like the rest of us. Apparently, nobody in this government knows anything until somebody independent tells them, and nobody has said how Labor proposes to fill the \$4.8 billion hole that this begrudged abolition leaves in its own budget for SRL East.

On the very day he was caught, the Premier also announced a \$1 billion saving on this same project. The Auditor-General found that saving was largely fiction too. It cut features that were never funded in the first place, already abandoned by the authority months before it claimed the credit for them. That is why this motion requires the Leader of the Government to table within 30 days every document on the approval and modelling of this charge, on the November 2024 plan to hide it, on the fare announcements that concealed it and on what abolishing it will actually cost. If the Premier truly has nothing to hide, this costs him nothing. If he has everything to hide, that is exactly why he will not table the documents. Regional Victoria has waited long enough to see what this government really thinks it owes it. I commend the motion to the house.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:18): I am also happy to rise to speak to this motion. In line with the remarks of my colleague Ms Watt, who spoke very well on this and indeed performs very well as the Parliamentary Secretary for Public and Active Transport, I do affirm that the government will not be opposing this short-form documents motion. Indeed they are always lively debates that we have here on Wednesdays, and it is always enjoyable to get a response from you, Mrs McArthur. But Ms Watt got a response from you in a curious moment actually, because the biggest reaction from you seemed to come when Ms Watt referred to the words 'rail improvement charge', which is of course what we are talking about here. But you seemed to get very excited, Mrs McArthur, at this creative language, and it makes me wonder if you have actually read the Victorian Auditor-General's Office report. If you had read the VAGO report, you would know exactly what the thing we are debating about is called, and you would not be surprised about it in a debate. I am sure Mr Mulholland has read the report. I am not sure if you have read the report, though, Mrs McArthur, but I encourage you to.

If you are going to come into this place and wax lyrical, as you do very well in attacking us, it is perhaps good to engage with the document that you are referring to, because if you are surprised by the name of the actual thing that we are talking about, that does not fill me with great confidence that you have actually read it or engaged with it in any other way. I would caution you against just taking the blind word of Mr Mulholland too. You would want to follow your own advice, Mrs McArthur. You are a fierce, independent person. I am sure you would not want to be –

Richard Welch: On a point of order, President, Mr Galea's contribution seems to be solely an attack on Mrs McArthur. It has got very little reference to the actual production of documents. It is about whether Mrs McArthur has read a report or not. That is not the topic of debate.

The PRESIDENT: It is a debate, and a member can respond to a previous contribution. But in saying that, I do not know what he is saying because Mrs McArthur keeps yelling at him. I will take it into consideration, Mr Welch.

Michael GALEA: In Mrs McArthur's defence, she may have been provoked a bit there to interject. There are a few quite simple truths here. The first is that there is nothing inherently radical about public transport fares being used to invest in public transport, which those opposite seem to suggest that there is some great issue with. There is no fundamental inherent issue with public transport fares being used to invest in public transport.

Members interjecting.

Michael GALEA: That being said, there is an issue here, and if you will stop yelling over me, you will hear that I am about to probably actually agree with what you are saying. The issue is that you do not do it in a way that lacks transparency. That is exactly why the new Premier Ben Carroll, upon seeing this in the VAGO report – and as all members of this place are, we are grateful for the work that VAGO does in being that independent auditor and doing analysis of government spending. Having seen this come to light, Ben Carroll has taken swift and decisive action to remove this charge, because as inherently justifiable as it is, it is perfectly appropriate that it should be something that is clearly communicated, and as it was not, the best course of action is to remove the charge, which is exactly what Ben Carroll has done and is exactly what a new direction looks like. We know that Victorians are looking for that new direction, and that is what they are finding in this new Premier. When he goes and says he is different, it is not just words. He then follows through and he shows that with actions, and he has shown that in many ways. He has shown that on integrity issues, which has put the Liberal Party all at sea.

We know that they are so out of touch, this Liberal Party, because their colleagues in the Assembly were so confused by this and so enthralled and excited that they seemed to imply that \$60 a week was 1 per cent of a public transport fare. Getting quite confused there shows of course that probably most of them do not actually ever use public transport, because if they did, they would know that it is a

fraction of that. And if you did, you would also know that under this government fares are half-price for the remainder of the year. We have had a month and a bit of free travel and the half-price fares, let alone the regional fare cap, which has dramatically cut the cost of V/Line travel on an ongoing and permanent basis, which those opposite are quick to forget when it is convenient for them to do so.

Motion agreed to.

Koala management

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (10:23): I move:

That this house:

- (1) notes that:
 - (a) the government commissioned a \$850,000 report on the health, abundance, and distribution of koalas in Victoria;
 - (b) the report was completed in June 2025 but has not been released;
 - (c) the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action has refused to answer questions about its findings or when the report will be made public;
 - (d) the expert authors of the report have expressed frustration that their work has seemingly been buried;
 - (e) many Victorians are concerned about the government's management of koalas after an aerial shooting operation was undertaken at Budj Bim;
- (2) in accordance with standing order 10.01, requires the Leader of the Government to table in the Council, within four weeks of the house agreeing to this resolution, the report titled *The Status of Victoria's Koala Population: Surveys to Estimate Abundance, Genetic Diversity and Koala Health*.

This is a bit of an odd experience because I am moving a motion requesting documents that the Minister for Environment tabled this morning before we actually got to the debate. My motion requested just one document in our plans to try and request documents that are easier to locate and can be delivered in quick time, so we are very grateful for that.

That document is titled *The Status of Victoria's Koala Population: Surveys to Estimate Abundance, Genetic Diversity and Koala Health*. This is a document that we knew could be critical to the future of one of our nation's most iconic native animals, and this report does not simply count koalas, although that is very important; it examines the abundance, distribution, genetic diversity, health, habitat status and threats facing their populations. It is precisely the kind of evidence we need to understand whether Victoria's koala populations are secure or not.

This is a document that we knew existed and had actually asked for before, but it had never been released – that is, until this morning, when the minister tabled it in Parliament before the debate, a day after I introduced this motion. That is something that is pretty amazing and something we do not often see in this place, so I really want to thank the minister and thank the government for acting with speed in this instance and delivering something that has been incredibly sought after by the wildlife community for over a year now. This report was commissioned by the Victorian government through the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action and cost approximately \$150,000, which is why it is so important that we thought the public should see it. We did not want this to be another review, another report, another taskforce that costs taxpayers and does not see the light of day, just as we saw with the review into the Wildlife Act 1975 and the expert panel, where \$3 million was spent, a documents motion passed and a redacted version released only for the government to turn around some time later, release it with their response and still not put those laws that they committed to in their response through the Parliament. It is obviously incredibly doubtful that we will see that at all this term.

This report was completed in June 2025. We already know when it comes to koalas that there has been a transparency problem, and it certainly did not help that sentiment when this document had not been released. We saw it when there was a sign-off on the shooting of over a thousand koalas from

helicopters following a bushfire at Budj Bim. Of course, I tabled a petition in the Parliament that met the criteria for debate for the government to respond to that decision, which only left more questions from the community and from Victorians who care for our incredible koalas. Despite being an unprecedented method of koala management in Australia, this decision happened in secrecy, with requests from the public for information continuously denied. There was no way for the public to know whether this was the most humane approach, particularly given the well-documented risks associated with shooting programs, particularly aerial shooting programs, and their effectiveness, even more so on small animals and animals with young, including missed shots leading to prolonged animal suffering in areas that are hard to access. What we do know for sure is the events at Budj Bim risk setting a dangerous precedent for how koalas and other wildlife could be managed in the future.

This is something that is so important for our state to consider, as koalas are endangered in New South Wales, Queensland and the ACT. Given the threats that are facing koalas here in Victoria, it is essential that we do everything we can to monitor and protect every surviving population so we do not end up in the same place. People across our state have a right to know when decisions are made that determine whether protected animals live or die. The government's answer has consistently been that decisions are made on science, expert advice and animal welfare, and it is very rare that we actually get to see the reasoning behind the decision-making, as is documented in this report today. I am hopeful, with the swift release of this report under the new environment minister, that we may see a shift and a willingness from the government to be transparent about our wildlife.

This research, from what I have had a chance to read in the short time since it was tabled, has provided some really valuable insights. It monitored 182 sites across Victoria over 2023–24 and estimated that Victoria's full statewide population of koalas is between 217,000 and 225,000. It found the South Gippsland population has the highest genetic diversity and is the most demographically stable, while populations in Mallacoota have the highest inbreeding and lowest diversity. A smaller sample size of koalas found that 43 per cent were in poor health and needed to be euthanised, and 59 per cent carried some sort of infectious disease.

This report made several recommendations, and with the announcement alongside this today that the government has dedicated \$2.6 million to restore habitats, support koala populations and back new research into their health, we are really hopeful that those recommendations will be acted on, and I really want to thank the minister and her office for making this announcement that, again, means so much to my community, the wildlife community, wildlife rescuers and those who love and care for our koalas. We have seen so many circumstances where this has not been the outcome. In fact we were incredibly surprised to see this happen today, and we are grateful for the willingness to act quickly in releasing this report. Hopefully it is the commencement of more action that is meaningful to koalas beyond today.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (10:29): I am very pleased to rise to speak on Ms Purcell's documents motion seeking a report which, as was indicated, was tabled by the Minister for Environment this morning. I have been having a quick read, and I will go to the report itself in a minute. I will just say that koalas are really important to Victoria and to Victorians. As one of the most recognised native species in our country, we know that their conservation and preservation is an exceptionally important part of environmental management here in the state of Victoria. The decisions about the long-term conservation, welfare and sustainability of koala populations have to be driven by science, evidence and responsible environmental management. That is the critical reason why the government continues to invest in the sort of science that is included in this report, which is designed to understand the koala population and seeks to provide detailed scientific evidence as to the current population densities and their characteristics.

I think it is useful to understand what the report itself did and what it found. The report is of sampling surveys of the koala population undertaken in 2023 and 2024. The estimate provided in the report uses monitoring data collected at sites using a statistically robust sampling design. The sites from which they were collected were based on sampling probabilities in concert with the methodology used in the

national koala monitoring program. Surveys were undertaken at various sites in both 2023 and 2024. 139 sites were chosen across public land in 2023, including 107 sites in native forests chosen for the probability of koala existence or habitation and an additional 32 sites selected randomly from eucalypt hardwood plantation estate. In 2024, 141 sites were monitored, including 133 of the sites that had been previously sampled during 2023, and new sites were selected in locations where sampling coverage was poor or where the site intended to be sampled was inaccessible due to plantation harvesting. This gave a total of 182 unique sites for sampling across the two years.

At each of the sites, koalas were monitored using two different methods. In the first method koalas were monitored from the ground by two observers walking transects during the day using double observer distance-sampling methods, involving two individuals walking those transects 10 to 15 minutes apart and searching trees on either side, with observations made. Interestingly, dependent young were treated as a single individual with their parent koala in these analyses. Those walks were done multiple times, and distances were measured. The second monitoring method used passive acoustic detection methods by placing acoustic recorders at each site, attached to trees about 1.5 metres above the ground and left in place for several weeks during the breeding period when koala bellowing frequency was expected to be at its highest. Combining nights from both recorders, the maximum total recording nights were developed. It is very sophisticated science.

The report finds that the total koala population across Victoria was estimated at around 217,000 in 2023 and about 224,000 in 2024. I note there is no evidence that the difference in abundance between the survey years is a real change, with the estimated population change having confidence intervals overlapping zero. Statistical probability means the population is probably about the same. The report contains further details. I think what this demonstrates is the importance of environmental science to environmental management in the state of Victoria. The government is pleased to release this report today. The only other thing I will say is that it is science and evidence supporting environmental management like this that is at risk if the Liberal and One Nation parties form government and enact \$40 billion worth of cuts across the state of Victoria.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (10:34): I am pleased to rise on what would be considered an outlier day in terms of short-form documents motions, because there are so many that we have debated in this house legitimately, from the Greens to the Legalise Cannabis Party to the Liberals and Nationals. We have called for documents in short-form documents motions, the motions have passed this house, and then we have had, some weeks later, the Clerk standing up to say – doing their job exemplarily – that the government have said there has not been enough time for them to find these documents. It has happened time and time again during this session of Parliament. So this is an outlier in the stream of statistics. We have heard the statistics from this document – this document that was only tabled less than an hour ago – and I have asked the table office to print it. I have not had the opportunity to digest it, but the statistic is that it is an outlier because it was actually presented to the Parliament before the motion had passed. It is from the Arthur Rylah Institute, a respected institute doing scientific analysis.

I want to put on record some other information from the Arthur Rylah Institute, which I think pertains very seriously to koala population, koala sustainability and koala habitat, and that is an Arthur Rylah Institute report on the 2019–20 Black Summer bushfires in which Arthur Rylah stated that because of the 1.5 million hectares of incinerated forest and landscape, 244 faunal species – whether they were goannas, other reptiles, mammals or birds – lost 50 per cent of their habitat. If we want to put a lens over the scientific analysis of our iconic emblems, of which koalas are one, the first thing the government should be doing is all that it can to stop out-of-control bushfires. 1.5 million hectares burnt in 2019–20.

Going back to the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, there is a very significant sculpture in the fantastic town of Mirboo North of an iconic koala. They christened her ‘Sam’. She came out of the forest and was sitting on the ground, and a very famous and well-loved identity in Mirboo North called David

Tree, funnily enough, a CFA volunteer of many years – and you will remember it made the papers – was giving Sam, as she was christened, water at the end of that fire incident there.

We know that our landscapes will have fires in them. We saw that this was the case at Budj Bim. Indeed I was shocked and annoyed that the government's port of call was to aerially cull those koalas. I really want to understand, and I do not think it has been forensically analysed – maybe it has been in this document that we have just had delivered – why the choices were made around expert advice on aerial culling, what alternatives were considered and what safeguards were in place. Well, clearly they were not for the koalas that were culled. Humane removal and euthanasia are highly important and preferable, but I am not sure that shooting them out of a helicopter is necessarily the way.

I would just finish by saying that this species is very interesting, because if you go back in time – and we can only rely on documents from the past – Bill Gammage's *The Biggest Estate on Earth* speaks about the fact that there were a lot of different landscapes when white settlement occurred. Our Indigenous Australians, our traditional owners, managed the landscapes, and there was lots of green pasture with native grasses. The argument is that in actual fact some of those koala populations were not as abundant back then as they were later. They do have a boom-and-bust cycle, but there needs to be active management of both our forests and our koala populations for the best outcomes.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (10:40): I too would like to thank Ms Purcell for bringing this documents motion to Parliament. As others have noted, given all the dramas that we have had in this chamber regarding the failure to produce documents, often under the guise of apparently not having enough time, we have, in the second-last week of this Parliament, seen the most timely production of documents you could imagine, where it was tabled before we even had time to get to this motion. But I am really pleased that this motion has been able to prompt this kind of response, because clearly that document had been sitting there. There does not appear to have been a good reason for it not to have been released. There have been calls for it to be released for some time now, and I think this motion is worthwhile if only because it has prompted this long-awaited document to now be out in public.

For a long time there have been serious concerns about the estimates of koala populations and their health in Victoria, and this is something I have heard from many constituents in my region of Western Victoria, where a lot of these concerns are borne out. The issues around the koala populations numbers have perpetuated harmful myths that Victoria has an abundance of koalas, and in some areas, like the south-west in my electorate, it has been characterised as overpopulation. Not only has there been a lack of robust evidence to support many of these claims, it has also miscast the threats that are facing our precious koalas, which in turn has led to misguided policy responses.

With respect to the data itself, I have heard repeated concerns from dedicated forest and wildlife advocates that the numbers that had historically been reported simply did not match what they were seeing every day. There are pockets of Victoria where historic government modelling claims there are healthy and abundant koala populations, whereas the local wildlife carers and other locals are able to count the number of koalas on one hand. These are areas like the Gordon plantation near Ballarat, which I have spoken about in this place before. A few road strike incidents is all it would take for them to become locally extinct in an area like this. There are also claims of overpopulation in the south-west, and this is misleading because the mirage of overpopulation is actually the result of habitat loss. It is driving remaining koalas onto ever-shrinking habitat where they face starvation, inbreeding and disease, and their concentration on this increasingly small amount of habitat means all it would take is one big bushfire to wipe out this population.

The alternative is that they are being forced onto dangerous blue gum plantations where they are at risk of being injured and killed during harvesting. The mass killing of koalas during blue gum plantation harvesting several years ago down in the far south-west and the devastating aerial culls following bushfires in Budj Bim National Park, which have been discussed already, are perhaps some of the more horrific and high profile results of this. I have spoken about both of these things before in

this place. I am conscious I am about to run out of time, but I thank Ms Purcell for bringing this motion and look forward to reading the report.

Motion agreed to.

Members interjecting.

Melina Bath: On a point of order, Acting President, that was unparliamentary, and I ask the member to withdraw.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): As you know, Ms Bath, if offence is taken, the member who has personally been offended needs to be the one to request the withdrawal.

Committees

Select committee

Establishment

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (10:44): I move:

That:

- (1) a select committee of six members be appointed to inquire into, consider and report, within 30 days of the house agreeing to this resolution, on the Auditor-General's report titled *Delivering the Suburban Rail Loop*, tabled in Parliament on 26 August 2026;
- (2) the committee consist of two members from the government nominated by the Leader of the Government in the Council, two members from the opposition nominated by the Leader of the Opposition in the Council, and two members from among the remaining members in the Council, to be nominated jointly by those remaining members;
- (3) substitute members may be appointed and the provisions outlined in standing order 23.08 will apply;
- (4) the members will be appointed by lodgement of the names with the President within five calendar days of the Council agreeing to this resolution;
- (5) the chair of the committee will be a non-government member and the deputy chair will be a government member;
- (6) the first meeting of the committee will be held within one week of members' names being lodged with the President;
- (7) the committee should conduct at least one or two full days of public hearings involving the:
 - (a) attendance of the former Treasurer, the Honourable Jaclyn Symes MLC;
 - (b) attendance of the former ministers for the Suburban Rail Loop;
 - (c) voluntary attendance of the Premier, the Honourable Ben Carroll MP;
 - (d) voluntary attendance of the Deputy Premier, the Honourable Gabrielle Williams MP;
 - (e) attendance of other witnesses the committee believes are appropriate; and
- (8) the committee should investigate all other matters relevant to this reference, including matters that arise from the Auditor-General's report.

This motion seeks to establish a select committee of six members to be appointed to inquire into, consider and report within 30 days of the house agreeing to this resolution on the Auditor-General's report titled *Delivering the Suburban Rail Loop*, tabled in Parliament on 26 August. The committee will consist of two members from the government, opposition and crossbench, and substitute members may be appointed. It will require the lodgement of names with the President. The Chair will be a non-government member, and the Deputy Chair will be a government member. The first meeting of the committee will be held within a week of the members' names being lodged. The committee should, according to the terms of reference I propose, conduct at least one or two full days of public hearings involving the attendance of the former Treasurer and the former ministers for the Suburban Rail Loop and seek the voluntary attendance of the Premier Ben Carroll and the Deputy Premier Gabrielle

Williams and the attendance of other witnesses the committee believes are appropriate. The committee can investigate matters that are incidental and relevant to the reference.

This is an important reference. This bombshell report *Delivering the Suburban Rail Loop* of August 2026 was a report that pointed to the time delays, the cost overruns and all of the problems with the Suburban Rail Loop and the government's management of major projects. But what we did not understand at the time is that there would be a bombshell deep in the middle of this report that related to the project's funding, and the project's funding was not just the value capture that people were aware of – some of the government's attempts to crank up collection of money in and around the Suburban Rail Loop – not even state government funding that the community was aware of and not even the partial federal funding that the community was aware of. It also included a significant amount of money that it did not publicly announce in the budget papers. It did not disclose those points.

I would take the chamber to page 15, where it talks about lack of public transparency on the largest value capture revenue measure. This is important, and I am going to quote some sections of this because I think it is important to get the Auditor's actual words on record here. It states:

The timing and content of announcements about government decisions on the package of value capture measures intended to fund one-third of the SRL East project cost lack transparency.

DTF and DPC advised the government that it needed to announce the project's value capture measures before the end of 2024 ...

so impacted parties could plan and to ease concerns from the community. I am paraphrasing here. It continues:

The government announced the value capture package in December 2025. In this announcement it said it will use 5 value capture measures ...

- existing land tax revenue in SRL East precincts
- existing windfall gains ...
- infrastructure contributions from property developers
- a car parking levy ...
- revenue from state-initiated property development.

The Auditor then said:

However, it did not announce its decision to introduce a new levy on public transport fares from 1 January 2025 as part of the annual Consumer Price Index (CPI) fare increase. The levy involves an annual 1 per cent increase to all public transport fares in metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria, on top of existing annual CPI adjustments.

This is still in place.

The government plans to allocate 60 per cent of the revenue it collects through the levy, estimated at \$4.8 billion in net present value (NPV) terms to 2062, to fund SRL East.

This levy will be the project's largest source of value capture revenue.

Yet the government saw fit not to announce this.

The government first approved the levy in August 2021.

Guess who, by the way, was the public transport minister at the time. It was Ben Carroll.

It also confirmed it in December 2023 and November 2024 when it made further decisions on the project's value capture revenue package.

In November 2024 the government confirmed it needed the levy to service its borrowings for the project.

The government and Transport Victoria did not acknowledge the levy in their public communications about the 2025 and 2026 annual fare increases.

I mean, this is just extraordinary. I do not believe we have seen this in my time in public life or in the last 50 years, where a government has introduced a new tax, a broad-based tax, and not told the

community about that tax. That 'tax' word is a word that chills many Victorians, and I understand why the government was reluctant. But you cannot introduce a new tax – what happened to the idea of parliamentary sovereignty? What happened to the idea that Parliament would make decisions about new taxes – King Charles and all of that? People remember that the House of Commons and later the analogous house here, the Legislative Assembly, would in that mode be able to check the introduction of new taxes and new arrangements, but this is not what has happened here. The government secretly introduced it at a budget and finance committee of the cabinet in 2021.

It has been further confirmed at other committees. Ben Carroll says he did not know when it came in. I must say, if these committees were making these decisions, either he must have known or he is so highly incompetent that he does not deserve to be in the position he is in. If he did not check the minutes of cabinet matters, there is a problem. If he did not check the cabinet subcommittee minutes as they went to the cabinet, that is a big problem for his competence. But frankly –

Ryan Batchelor: On a point of order, Acting President, Mr Davis has a motion before us proposing the establishment of a select committee. He appears to be straying quite significantly from that. Maybe he could be brought back to the motion.

David DAVIS: On the point of order, Acting President, I have just quoted page 15 of the Auditor's report, and that is directly mentioned in my motion. The Auditor's report lays out exactly the dates I am referring to: August 2021, December 2023 and November 2024. These are cabinet subcommittee meetings when these decisions were affirmed or reaffirmed. That is precisely what I am referring to.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): As first speakers do have wide leeway, I will rule out the point of order.

David DAVIS: The purpose of this reference, the purpose of this committee is to get to the bottom of the sequence that occurred here – to actually hold the hearings and to understand what has happened. That transparency is very important. Public transport is important in this state. Slapping it with a 1 per cent levy every year – and an increasing levy; it goes 1 per cent more every year, going all the way to 2062 – would collect \$4.8 billion from those who would travel on public transport: people who get on the train at Wodonga and come to the football in the city and those who come from the country elsewhere, down in the east or the south. In Ms Bath's electorate they come from Sale or Bairnsdale into the city to do some shopping, and they are slapped with a levy – a secret levy – on their ticket. It is just incomprehensible that the government thought that they could get away with not telling the community. It had to come out at some time, and I think we should pay tribute to the Auditor for the very extraordinary work he has done in ferreting out this secret and nasty tax. It is a tax on public transport, with 60 per cent of it going overwhelmingly to support the Suburban Rail Loop. One of the reasons we want this inquiry and we believe it is important is because what it will do is it will actually get to the bottom of some of these points. It will actually work its way down deep to understand them.

I pay tribute today to the work of Marlo Baragwanath, the Ombudsman in Victoria, and her article in the *Australian Financial Review*: 'Secret SRL levy a sign of Victoria decade-long integrity problem'. She makes I think a number of serious points, and I would commend this article to members of the chamber and the community. She said:

It's the job of integrity agencies like mine to hold the public service, the parliament and the government up to the light for all to see.

...

A secret levy might not attract attention on the day-to-day, but, bit by bit, it fogs the glass of government. And so it destroys trust in government on the one side, and engenders a culture of paternalistic secrecy on the other.

This matters because when trust breaks down, the system breaks down. We've seen that across the pond in the US ...

And she talked about that. She continued:

In doing so, we seek to balance the inherent imbalance between individuals and the state. But I don't think we should be patting ourselves on the back just yet. Because as things stand, integrity doesn't matter to the community.

Not because people don't care, but because there's a wide gap between the ideal of democratic integrity and the reality of government and its agencies in Victoria today.

She said:

We need to bridge this gap.

And I think we do.

We must strip away the jargon, dismantle the lofty abstractions ... we cannot expect our community to live it deeply, nor to expect the government to model it.

This is about restoration and healing ...

She intends, apparently, to make this point today at the Australian Public Sector Anti-Corruption Conference in Canberra, singling out the levy in Victoria as something that is corrosive of trust. She said:

I'm referring, of course, to the auditor-general's report revealing an unannounced levy across all public transport fares – in effect, a secret tax. Whether that money is earmarked for the Suburban Rail Loop, as the report indicates, or whether the government's claim that it was intended for public transport more generally, is irrelevant to the key issue.

What matters is that Victorians have been subjected to an extra levy that was deliberately implemented simultaneously with the ordinary fare increases for inflation. And because of this – and because of the deliberate choice not to announce this levy – none of us knew about it.

It's a pillar of liberal democracies that the process of taxation be clear, transparent in its implementation, and fair. The very fact of its secrecy makes this levy none of those things.

We can't trust a government whose decision-making is like an underground stream – we know it's there because of the outcome, but damned if we know its course.

This inquiry has the capacity, through hearings, to understand exactly how this tax arose, to actually hold the government to account and to ferret out the start of this tax: who thought of it, why, and why was it kept secret.

Ben Carroll has not been clear about when he knew. He refuses to answer that question directly, and he should be asked. He should actually come clean on when he knew and, if he knew back in 2021 or 2023 or 2024, why he did not act, why he did not speak up. He says now that integrity is critical. He says integrity cannot be compromised, and yet in government, as Deputy Premier, he did compromise integrity. He did not come clean on this, and he should have. He should have been honest, and I think the community will judge him harshly for that.

This motion is straightforward. I note the intention is that this be tabled out of session, and we will suggest an amendment, with advice from the clerks, to put that beyond any question. I think it is implicit in the terms of reference to inquire into, consider and report within 30 days of the house agreeing to this resolution, hopefully today. But let us be quite clear that it can be tabled out of session in case the chamber is not sitting. In that circumstance I ask the chamber for support on this motion.

Ryan Batchelor: On a point of order, Acting President, is there an amendment to this motion that is being moved?

David DAVIS: Yes, Mr Welch will move the amendment. I cannot move it. It will be circulated when he speaks on the motion.

Ryan Batchelor: I will get to that in my substantive contribution, but that is useful to clarify.

Members interjecting.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): There is no point of order. But for the *Hansard* record, Mr Davis, you are telling the chamber that Mr Welch will be moving the amendment?

David DAVIS: He will formally move it, but I have foreshadowed it.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (10:58): I think the last exchange we just had should tell you everything you need to know about the motion that is before us. Mr Davis, in a contribution that barely touched on the substance of the written page and the motion before us, glanced over, fleetingly referenced the question of the motion, which is: should there be a select committee? Instead he went on an extended contribution, shall I say, to be generous, about the Auditor-General's report and the substantive question. It tells you everything you need to know about what they are proposing. Then at the end of the contribution he said, 'We've got to move an amendment to it.' Yet he had not, using the provisions in the standing orders that we know exist whereby motions can be amended prior to them being debated on the notice paper, done any of the work to get the motion in a fit state to be debated here. He got up at the end and just dropped in that he has got to move an amendment, but he is asking other members of the chamber to make a contribution without seeing what that amendment is. I think that should tell you everything you need to know about the lack of seriousness with which the Liberal Party takes the substantive question before us today. I think it should give all members pause for thought about what it actually demonstrates in the mind of the opposition, in the mind of Mr Davis, because what we did not hear in his contribution was any detailed substance about the process or the merits of a select committee.

What I want to do is go to some of those issues. I think what the motion before us today, in its terms, demonstrates is further evidence of a worrying trend that we see from the Liberal Party when it comes to the establishment of things like committee inquiries or other sorts of inquiries, because the terms of the motion do not just seek to put terms of reference to a select committee but also seek to dictate to that committee how an inquiry should be conducted. They do not want to empower the committee to investigate. They do not want to empower the committee to make decisions based on evidence before it about how it should conduct an inquiry, which is the normal process that we would go through: we would set policy-based terms of reference and we would identify matters that the committee should inquire and report into. What the motion before us today does in its very terms is it seeks to tell the committee what it has got to do, and that is just one step away from predetermining the outcome that the committee would seek to address. On its very terms Mr Davis is yet again seeking to dictate what the parliamentary committee might choose to do, and I think that tactic again from the Liberal Party demonstrates that they are not serious about having a genuine inquiry into the topic. What they are actually interested in is embarking upon a political exercise.

What they are seeking to do with the terms of this motion is put their thumbs on the scale yet again. We absolutely saw it recently when the government set out quite clear and highly regarded terms of reference for a royal commission. The immediate response of the Liberal Party was to try and put their thumb on the scale of justice and tell an independent royal commissioner what they needed to do. They do not want genuine inquiries in the state of Victoria. What the Liberal Party are interested in are predetermined outcomes and telling independent processes exactly what they should be doing, because they do not want a transparent process, they do not want an independent process; they want a process where the outcomes are predetermined. This motion on its face tries to tell a parliamentary committee how many days it has got to sit for and who it should call as witnesses.

Why doesn't Mr Davis just put the recommendations in the motion up-front? That would be more transparent. Instead what we have got is Mr Davis, yet again, and the Liberal Party, yet again, trying to tell an independent process what it should be finding. They are doing it here, he has done it before in other motions that he has raised and they did it recently with the royal commission. They could not handle the fact that the government had set up an independent royal commission with broad and expansive terms of reference, led by an eminent and independent jurist. What they wanted to do by releasing the names of people who must be called and by saying they were going to fiddle with the terms of reference and put their thumbs on the scale of justice are exactly the sorts of things that

Mr Davis is doing here today by predetermining, for an independent parliamentary committee, how many days they should sit for and who they should hear evidence from. I do not think we can take their exhortations seriously when the face of this motion seeks to predetermine the outcomes of the process that they apparently are wanting to set up to get to the heart of these matters.

To top it off, we then have Mr Davis realising that the motion itself is so inadequate that one of his colleagues has to move an amendment to it, and he cannot even talk about what it is. I am sorry, but if we are expected to take this motion seriously, then we expect that the process that leads up to it is also taken seriously. Yet again we see from the Liberal Party a disinterest in –

Nick McGowan interjected.

Ryan BATCHELOR: On a point of order, Acting President, Mr McGowan just used some unparliamentary language, and I ask him to withdraw.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): Mr McGowan, I ask you to withdraw.

Nick McGowan: I withdraw ‘hypocrite’.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Michael Galea): Mr McGowan, please stand up and withdraw without repeating the remark.

Nick McGowan: My apologies for saying that word. I withdraw.

Ryan BATCHELOR: What should give you every indication about the lack of seriousness with which the Liberal Party take these issues is the sideshow that we see from their front bench.

There has been, by the Auditor-General, a very substantial and thorough investigation of these issues, a 171-page report undertaken by an independent officer of the Parliament going to all of these issues in depth, with expansive powers. The report is detailed. The report is candid. It demonstrates there was a lack of transparency about the application of the rail improvement charge, and that charge is gone. The Premier has been clear there was not sufficient transparency in that charge’s creation and implementation. The Premier himself made it very clear that that was not acceptable, and it has gone. We have had a 171-page substantial independent inquiry into all of these matters.

What we have seen today from the substance of their motion and by their behaviour in the debate is that the Liberal Party do not take these issues seriously. This motion, yet again, seeks to predetermine what an independent process seeks to do. It seeks to tell an independent process how long it should take, how many days of hearings it should have and who it should call as witnesses. It is going to be amended, and those amendments have not even been circulated. We cannot take this motion seriously in any way.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:08): I rise to speak on Mr Davis’s motion, and without delay I will circulate my amendment to the motion, if I may, which is a little bit of housekeeping to provide for the fact that the report may be tabled on a non-sitting day – no more, no less. I move:

After paragraph (7), insert the following new paragraph:

“(8) after the report is adopted by the committee, the chair may give the report to the Clerk and request that it be tabled when the house is not sitting and the provisions outlined in standing orders 23.22(2) to (4) will apply; and”.

We heard in Mr Batchelor’s contribution that the Victorian Auditor-General’s Office (VAGO) report was detailed and was candid and that it was clear that the secret tax levied was wrong. We had the Premier apologise and undertake to immediately withdraw it and say it was wrong, so as a point of fact there is clear agreement that there was something very problematic about what occurred, and it should be dealt with as a matter of seriousness, because it is not trivial; there are a whole number of

reasons that it is not trivial. How this could occur over a number of years is a really serious question for this chamber, for this Parliament and for the Victorian people as well.

I think if we were not so close to the election, there would be more to do and more to say about it. But in the circumstances, I think very much like the Victorian people were demanding a royal commission into corruption on the Big Build, the Victorian people are absolutely entitled to get some further clarity about how this actually happened in practice. I think it is no different, really, for all intents and purposes. The Victorian people are entitled to know what happened. How did this occur? How did it occur over multiple years? How was there a cover-up of this? And actually, for once in this government's life, have some accountability around that, because this constant refrain of 'Oh, I can't prosecute the past.' Well, this is not the past. It is like a burglar robbing a home yesterday and saying, 'Well, that was yesterday; we can't prosecute yesterday when I committed the crime, because today is today.'

This is not a matter of yesterday, because when it comes to the Suburban Rail Loop (SRL), the debt is now and the debt is going to be into the future for our children. The debt is contributing towards \$10 billion a year being paid in interest in our state. The issue is 20 per cent of our infrastructure budget going to this project. If this is not relevant now, I do not know what is. Whilst we still have the apparatus of government here and the people who are accountable can answer, now is the right time to investigate this. We are not proposing a royal commission, we are proposing a brief inquiry to get to the bottom of it. It will have representation from all sides of the chamber. It is completely appropriate.

If the government is sincere about 'Integrity is no longer optional', I can think of no better place to start than the SRL, and I can think of no better way to start than on this matter. This speaks to the finances of the SRL. The SRL has always defied gravity in terms of the logic of its finances. We know that it was a proposal that never had a solid, genuine business case, never went to Infrastructure Australia, never had their approval. It was never costed properly, and the business case relied on the building of the northern segment of the SRL, with all its benefits, to justify the cost of the eastern side. But it did not incorporate the costs of the northern segment. So the benefits of the northern segment were in the business case but not the costs, and that somehow justified the eastern segment of the project.

There were all the models where it said \$11 billion would come from state, \$11 billion would come from federal and \$11 billion would come from value capture. It was the value capture part that was always incredibly puzzling, because the government knew it would never stack up. You could not extract \$11 billion in value capture tax from that corridor, no matter which way you cooked it. No matter what commercial properties you built there and no matter what residential properties you built there, it was never going to be enough to extract \$11 billion of value out of it to provide that figure. The figure was much more like \$3.5 billion. The government has as much as conceded that, because it had to go into these levies on car parks, it had to impose a \$35,000 levy on every new residence built and it had to factor in windfall gains tax. Now we know that it knew this. How do we know? Because 40 per cent of that value capture of \$11 billion was in this tax that was never revealed, never disclosed. So they knew it did not add up either. They knew they had to go to external sources, other taxes, to make up that shortfall.

What I find particularly puzzling in this is that in the VAGO briefing when this report was handed down, the question was asked: was this tax revealed to Infrastructure Australia when they made their assessment, when the updated figures were provided? You will remember there was this long period when Infrastructure Australia would not sign off on this project, which forestalled any federal funding, and then the government, with great fanfare, provided updated figures and updated data to Infrastructure Australia, and suddenly Infrastructure Australia supported it. What VAGO confirmed is that this tax, this source of funding, was not included in those updated figures. It was not included in these updated figures. And what I think that points to is that that had to have been a conscious decision not to disclose. It had to be, because if you knew that was 40 per cent of the vital figure, it had to be a figure that you would have had to have disclosed. That then raises another really interesting

question, because obviously the ratings agencies have been looking at this project with great concern repeatedly. So were the ratings agencies informed of a tax that the Victorian people were not? I think that would be a question that would need to be asked as well, because when you think about the ramifications of this cover-up, it actually goes wider and wider and wider in terms of how deliberate and considered and repeated it was, how many people got rolled into it, and how many other bodies got rolled into it – every other body except the Victorian people. If you look at the marketing material of the SRL, never once was this disclosed.

If we are talking about returning integrity to Victoria, this is a very good place to start. It is not the past, it is absolutely the present and the future. There are so many unanswered questions. It is not just about saying, ‘Oh, whoops. Sorry, we slipped up.’ No, that is just so incredibly trivialising of what has happened. This is a matter of great seriousness. And if the standard you walk by is the standard you accept, this Parliament cannot accept governments operating this way in Victoria. We will not have it. I urge the chamber to support this motion and this inquiry.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (11:17): I rise to support the motion moved by Mr Davis to establish a select committee to inquire into the Auditor-General’s report on the delivery of the Suburban Rail Loop. The Suburban Rail Loop is one of the largest and most expensive infrastructure projects ever undertaken in Victoria. With a project of this scale, Victorians have every right to know how decisions were made, how their money is being spent and who is ultimately accountable.

What makes this report particularly concerning is the revelation of what has effectively been described as a secret levy associated with the project. If Victorians are being asked to shoulder additional costs to fund the Suburban Rail Loop, they deserve to know about those costs. There should be no hidden taxes, hidden levies or financial arrangements kept from public scrutiny. This is precisely why the Auditor-General’s findings cannot simply be acknowledged and put aside. The proposed select committee would provide an opportunity to properly examine these matters, hear directly from the former Treasurer and former ministers responsible for the Suburban Rail Loop and give the Premier and Deputy Premier an opportunity to explain their understanding of the decisions that were made.

This motion is not about prejudging the findings or targeting individuals, it is about transparency, accountability and protecting Victorian taxpayers. Billions of dollars are involved in this project, and the financial consequences will be felt by Victorians for decades. If a levy or additional financial burden was created without adequate public disclosure, Victorians deserve a clear explanation of what it was, why it was introduced, who approved it and how much it will ultimately cost them. A select committee with public hearings and a 30-day reporting timeframe is a reasonable and proportionate response. Victorians deserve to know where their money is going. They deserve transparency around the Suburban Rail Loop, and they deserve accountability from those who made the decisions. For those reasons, I support the motion and commend it to the house.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:19): It is a pleasure to rise to speak to the motion today of Mr Davis. Once again, as my colleague Mr Batchelor was saying, it is a bit of a haphazard job. We have had to see Mr Davis have his errors fixed by his colleague. I appreciate you circulating that amendment, Mr Welch, to clarify the intent of Mr Davis’s motion. Once again, his sloppy and slapdash behaviour has seen some hasty changes made at the last minute. But it is a good topic to be talking about, and indeed in many ways I can continue my remarks from earlier this morning when we were debating the ins and outs of the rail improvement charge and the comments that I made earlier today in which it was very much made clear that whilst there is inherently nothing wrong with using public transport fares to invest in public transport – it is in fact something that we should be doing – it is a completely different story to do that in a way that is not open, honest and transparent with the Victorian public. That is exactly why Premier Ben Carroll took the decisive action to axe it upon the publication and airing of this information in the Victorian Auditor-General’s Office (VAGO) report.

Like other members, I do appreciate the role that VAGO have and the important role that they play. Certainly Mr Welch would be aware, and Mr Puglielli too, through time spent on the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee (PAEC), of the very important work that the Auditor-General's office does in the checks and balances, performance engagements and other performance reviews that they undertake on behalf of the Parliament and indirectly on behalf of the state as a whole. It is an important document and a valuable one to read. Certainly I have had the opportunity to read through it, as I believe some members opposite have as well.

Coming to the select committee now, Mr Davis curiously was relatively absent from speaking about the details of this in his contribution. I can see why, because to look at this with any more than a cursory glance, you would see that this is a very poorly constructed select committee for the very simple reason that you have set out a timeframe of 30 days, Mr Davis. When you have five days to appoint members and then a few days to have a meeting after that, there certainly appears to be no time to open and close submissions and very little time to have any hearings, let alone time for the report to be drafted and for members to meet and deliberate and move amendments and do a minority report and then have the report be printed. You have been here a long time, Mr Davis. In fact you should probably be well aware that a 30-day turnaround is simply not going to produce any report of substantial value. Indeed, as Mr Batchelor said, it is clear that you have your own views on what this report should say anyway through the stipulations in the terms of reference.

David Davis interjected.

Michael GALEA: No, the WorkCover inquiry was done over a couple of months, Mr Davis. That was not a 30-day inquiry. Indeed we had a very rushed committee just last year on the Victoria Planning Provisions – 278 and two other ones as well – and indeed that was still a very brief report and very rushed. But as Ms Watt knows, as she was on that committee with me as well, it was a lot more than 30 days. For a 30-day report, really, you may as well just come into this place not just with your recommendations but with the minority report that you are going to write. You may as well just seek to table that. You may even have it already, Mr Davis, in which case I would encourage you just to table that and we can be done with it, because that is exactly what this is all about.

With a very limited, very incapacitated sort of length of time in order to conduct an inquiry, this will not be able to do anything like the sort of work that the Auditor-General has done over many, many months with detailed preparation. Indeed we have the report of the Auditor-General, and what neither Liberal speaker so far has actually been able to say is what exactly this committee will be able to show that is not already shown in the Auditor-General's report. I would welcome it if Dr Heath has something that she can say to furnish that. But quite simply, no opposition speaker has actually said why this is needed.

Renee Heath: I'll tell you why it's needed.

Michael GALEA: Well, please do, Dr Heath, because there is nothing that this select committee could find that is not already outlined in the Auditor-General's report. Indeed we know that this is just a political sideshow that Mr Davis is seeking to inflict. With such broad and confused terms of reference listing former roles, which is not generally accepted convention in terms of how you would set up a committee, but also the curious inclusion of outlining voluntary attendance of the Premier, the Deputy Premier and other witnesses, it sort of underscores that Mr Davis himself knows that these are flawed terms of reference. If you were seeking to do this properly, you would actually refer it to a joint committee that could compel people from both houses. That is indeed why, Mr Davis, when you did table this and outline and give your notice of intention to move this motion in the last sitting week, you also moved a parallel motion which would have referred this to PAEC, which as a joint committee does have those powers to compel the attendance of members and ministers from both chambers.

It is very curious that you have decided not to do that. I appreciate that you have had discussions across the chamber, but in your remarks to the house today you have not put on the record what the reason is

that you want to apparently have this great big inquiry but do not want to compel any of the Assembly ministers to appear. I would be very open to further contributions from Liberal speakers to outline the reason behind that and why you have chosen this particular path that you have, because, again, it seems to be very vague, and again, as the Liberal Party is wont to do, it is setting out terms of reference in a way designed to specifically achieve its own short-term political aims, but not even doing that to the fullest extent because, as you well know and as we have been through before in other inquiries in this Parliament, you cannot compel members of the Legislative Assembly to appear before a Legislative Council committee. Mr Davis, your own weasel words in this motion confirm that by talking about voluntary attendance in your stated list of aims.

Let us get back to what this is really about. This is, again, a Liberal Party that is determined to undermine a project that is city shaping, that is going to be changing the way our city and our state move around for generations, in much the same way that the city loop did a few generations ago and in much the same way we are seeing the Metro Tunnel start to do as well. We know that the Liberals have said that they will 'pause work' on the Suburban Rail Loop. We know what that means. It means a cut, and it means effectively the project will be neutered, because there is no way to pause a tunnel-boring machine. They are already out there. They are already building the tunnels as we speak. I am not sure if Mr Davis has spoken to any engineering experts or anyone else who could tell him this, but if you literally stop a tunnel-boring machine, if you so-called pause it, you cannot just then go back in a few days later or a few months later, find the keys and switch it back on again. Pausing a tunnel-boring machine, because they are such heavy pieces of equipment, it will start to literally sink into the ground and it will be a lost asset forever. What a 'pause' means, then, is that you either renege on the contracts and then you cost the taxpayers billions of dollars with absolutely zero benefit for the people of Victoria, or you increase the cost of continuing and finishing the project just so you could have your political moment in the sun, pause the project and have a big press conference, and then actually dramatically increase the cost of the project by the costs related to the very pause that you have just done for a political point.

On the other side of the chamber here what we have is a government that is committed to spending taxpayers money as wisely and as carefully as possible, and that is exactly why this government has gone through in fine detail the contracts, discovered these savings and presented them as a way to ensure that we can continue to deliver this important, vital, state-shaping project in a way that is more cost effective and more responsive to the needs of Victorians so that we can continue to invest in this and other crucially important areas of public spending. That is exactly what we will continue to do on this side of the chamber. We have had nine going on 19 going on 40 different positions now from the Liberal Party on the Suburban Rail Loop. But when you have a gaping chasm of \$40 billion worth of cuts that they need to find in their budget, you know that it is not just one rail project that they will be after. It is the local hospital, it is the schools, it is the services and it is the free kinder that they openly attack each and every week in this chamber. Free kinder service? Completely gone under a Liberal–One Nation coalition government.

Richard Welch: On a point of order, Acting President, I think in his enthusiasm Mr Galea has strayed from the topic of the motion.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jacinta Ermacora): There is no point of order.

Michael GALEA: To Mr Welch's credit, I probably had, but I will conclude my remarks there.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (11:29): I am going to start with exactly the question that Mr Galea asked me. He said, 'Nobody has explained why we need this, and nobody has outlined it,' which in fact is false because we had two coalition speakers that did. The reason we need this is because trust in our public institutions is at an all-time low, and there is a reason for that – because the hallmark of this government, particularly in the Carroll era, which has not been here for very long, is lack of transparency. Transparency is what builds public trust. A proven track record is what builds trust. Victorians do not want to see a politician standing there just trying to survive a press conference

while their life says something completely different to what their words do. Your words should mean something, and Premier Carroll has proven time and time again that his do not. I will explain this, because one of the things he said before he rolled Premier Jacinta Allan was: 'No, I'm not going to roll her, because I've got a little girl at home who needs to see a dad who backs a woman.' His next move was to do exactly the opposite and roll Premier Allan. He said we do not need a royal commission, and then his first act as Premier – I am not kidding you – was to call a royal commission. Not only did he say we do not need one and then slowly come back, he made it his hallmark, his primary policy. I tell you what, that is why we need it: because Victorians need to know that their public money, their hard-earned cash, is being used responsibly.

Before I get into the substance of this I want to reflect just very quickly on the bizarre rant from Mr Batchelor. Do you want to know what the rant was about when he was saying there is no integrity on this side and he was completely gaslighting and deflecting – at Olympic levels, by the way? What this amendment means is that this report can actually be tabled. So while he was saying that it is about a lack of transparency on our side, what it actually means is that the public will be able to access it and that it will be transparent. So no, we do not need to go through the motions of 'We're doing something about it.' We want to make sure that whatever this investigation finds will be accessible not only to people on this side of the house but to the public, so they know exactly what happened. That is what transparency is; that is what integrity is. For Mr Batchelor, rather than address this issue of public trust and integrity – I just think: what qualifies this government to say things like that? It is deflection at its best, because they have presided over the biggest corruption scandal in this state's history.

Let me just say, if you are in this place, you are not suffering a cost-of-living crisis. Mr Batchelor is coming in, so I will get this out before the points of order start rolling in. Nobody in this house is living with a cost-of-living crisis. There is not one. Everyone here is on at least five times the average wage of a Victorian. They do not know what it is like. That is why it is more important for Victorians to know what taxes they are being slugged with, what people knew, what they say and why what they say does not at all reflect what they do.

There is a track record, and it is the public's right to know exactly what is happening with their money. Victorians have lost their belief that their government is open, truthful and legal. We have seen many examples of this. There is a good quote by HG Wells:

As soon as a government departs from that standard it ceases to be anything more than 'the gang in possession,' and its days are numbered.

This is how these guys are acting: like a bunch of thugs – a gang that can hide whatever they want. This is why we need it: because we have got the Premier saying he did not know about it, then quickly scrapping it because it is politically convenient. He is also the former roads minister who has passed the blame to past premiers for the state of the roads while he presided over the cuts in roads. This is a Premier who is so out of touch. If there is one thing that is a real, visible reflection of a government that is functioning or not, it is potholes in roads. It is the physical manifestation of a government that is functional or one that is not. He is also the former education minister. I was so impressed when he took over and his first act as education minister was to say, 'We are going to mandate and we are going to bring in the science of learning and phonics,' because he admitted that one-third of children not being able to read and write properly is wrong.

Sheena Watt: On a point of order, President, just reflecting on the recent point of order by Mr Welch where he raised the relevance of the speaker to the motion before us, I too raise it. The position of the Premier on education policy may not be relevant to the motion before us. Can I ask you to consider that?

The PRESIDENT: It may not be, so I will ask the member if she can try to constrain herself to the motion.

Renee HEATH: The reason it is relevant is because after he made that announcement he then failed to follow through. There was not enough integrity to actually enforce it, to allow people in Victoria to trust that what he says is what he does.

Then there is the mess with the TAC, where we have seen that people in Victoria are being sluggish more and getting less and there is less transparency than in any other state. Here are some quotes that I will read to you about why this is important. I am simply answering the question that I was asked: why is it important? Why do we need this inquiry? Here are some words from the Ombudsman:

Instead, when one of our integrity agents tables a set of recommendations, all too often they're attacked personally ...

And haven't we seen that today? I will just come across for a minute. Rather than looking at the substance of this motion, we have seen members of this government personally attack my colleagues, personally attack Mr Davis and personally attack Mr Welch, rather than talk about this. I understand that is the reality of what is going on. Anyway, the Ombudsman said this:

Instead, when one of our integrity agents tables a set of recommendations, all too often they're attacked personally –

it is actually quiet for a minute; they are like, 'I don't know. I'm used to attacking them personally' – or their work is dismissed by the government of the day.

Isn't that what we get in every question time? Every question time when we ask something, the government, who have led us into more debt than New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania combined and has presided over more corruption, tell us all how stupid we are and how we just do not understand it, we just do not get it. I tell you what: they got us into this mess, so I would not expect them to know how to get us out of the mess or even have the concept to answer that question. The Ombudsman said:

This is a dangerous sign. Because maladministration, corruption and misuse of public funds – taxpayer dollars – breed resentment, disillusionment and, ultimately, distrust.

That is why we need this inquiry. I will go on to say some other things the Ombudsman said:

It's a pillar of liberal democracies that the process of taxation be clear, transparent in its implementation, and fair.

I will stop here and talk about fairness for a minute. Do you know 25 per cent of Victorians live in regional areas like those we represent, yet about 11 or 12 per cent of the money goes back into it? It is regional Victorians that have been sluggish for this money. They deserve to know where it is going, because what you are doing is not fair. Anyway, I will continue:

The very fact of its secrecy makes this levy none of those things.

We can't trust a government whose decision-making is like an underground stream – we know it's there because of the outcome, but damned if we know its course. That's just not good enough. We can't expect people to trust a government or a process that refuses to be brought into the light.

It is a pretty good explanation of why we need this inquiry. She said:

This matters because when trust breaks down, the system breaks down. We've seen that across the pond in the US, and we're seeing an earlier stage of the same process here in Australia.

I am sick of my region being promised things that are not delivered. I am sick of the Warragul hospital upgrades, the Wonthaggi Hospital upgrades, all of these things being promised and not delivered. Integrity matters. Your words should be reflected in your actions. That is a really basic thing. That is why we need this inquiry. I commend the motion to the house.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:39): I rise on behalf of Greens colleagues to contribute to this motion before us today, and it is picking up on the theme that particularly opposition speakers have raised for the need for further clarity on what has been a pretty damning report on the

government. This motion seeks to set up a select committee to consider and report on the Victorian Auditor-General's Office recently tabled report *Delivering the Suburban Rail Loop*. Audits and investigation of a project like this, a project of this size and the decisions around it, need serious consideration. SRL East is expected to cost up to \$34.5 billion. This is massive, and it is massive in my local community in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. On the report, VAGO found that:

The government's new revenue raising measures are intended to fund one-third of the project costs. These measures include a levy on all public transport fares in metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria. It has been using this levy to raise revenue since January 2025.

This was in effect a secret tax – I think it is not being political to say that it was shrouded in secrecy – on every public transport user over the last 18 months. This is another example of transparency lacking in the current Labor government. This is also in the context of full fares in Victoria for public transport already being the fourth highest in the world. Obviously they are currently half price until the election. Goodness knows if it will continue beyond that. But already the full fare itself is too high, so to think about a cruel surcharge being placed on top of that and people having to pay that in secrecy for 18 months is abhorrent. I will note on the record that Greens policy is that public transport should be frequent and it should be free. No hidden fees, no secret taxes, no ifs, no buts – that is it. Fundamentally, looking at what is before us today, this is a matter of decision-making. It is about who knew what and who knew what when. Evidently by the reporting on this and what has already been discussed, this is a massive can of worms. I do not say that to make it sound light. This is explosive stuff that we are considering before us, and it needs to be thoroughly investigated.

On that, given that it is a proposal for a select committee – and as I think Mr Welch mentioned, the context of this is important given the timing of where we are at in the term and the work that would need to go into looking at this properly – we have been seeking advice regarding the capacity of a select committee in what is genuinely expected and sought to be looked at in the motion that is before us. We are informed and it is our understanding that only one of the former ministers that is being sought to be brought before the committee could actually be compelled, which is a significant limitation on a committee like this doing the work that it needs to. Yes, we can read into whether, compulsion aside, a minister would choose to appear, but that compulsion power is important if you have an uncooperative government, and I would say this is a pretty uncooperative government most of the time. Just saying. Further to that, looking at the motion itself, we are looking realistically at one or two days of public hearings. So coupling that with the limitations on compulsion of ministers. and then even for that one minister that is compelled, I am also informed that I do not believe they would be compelled to respond to questions about previous portfolios –

David Davis interjected.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Perhaps there is conjecture on that point. That is okay. But there are significant limitations with respect to a select committee, and if there is a select committee and this does get up, chances are it is going to be me from the Greens team that is on it. I recognise the importance of select committees; however, there are significant limitations here for a matter that is of huge concern to many Victorians and members in this place and it needs to be investigated in the appropriate manner.

What has already been covered through the report reveals the imposition of an unannounced rail improvement charge that added 1 per cent per year to metropolitan and regional fares above inflation in what was expected to raise \$8 billion in net present value terms to 2062 – \$4.8 billion allocated to Suburban Rail East. At some point in time this government concluded that this charge was essential to generate new revenue to service the borrowings that have been undertaken for this project. Yet there was secrecy around approving a communications plan that excluded any reference to this charge, so commuters paid this charge unknowingly through 2025 and 2026 without it being disclosed in fare announcements. It was not in the value capture announcement from the government at the end of last year, and yet we have this Premier come out and say that integrity is not optional.

Deliberate concealment of charges and withholding of information not only from the community but also reportedly from members of the government by government ministers is damning stuff. On what is a matter of significant secrecy and really damaging perceptions towards this government, its decision-making and its being forthcoming with decisions and how taxes are charged upon the Victorian community, this goes a significant way further to eroding the trust that Victorians have in the way that the economy is being managed but also the way the management of this project is being undertaken.

I will refer to the article that several members, particularly opposition members, have made a note of regarding the Ombudsman's words. I particularly want to highlight two quotes, the first being:

This matters because when trust breaks down, the system breaks down. We've seen that across the pond in the US, and we're seeing an earlier stage of the same process here in Australia.

I also quote:

Integrity agencies are the tension in the system that pulls the opposing centripetal and centrifugal forces back to the centre, to the point of balanced harmony.

We are talking about a lot of documents, departments, the Suburban Rail Loop Authority, ministerial offices, all of the approval pathways and the potential for a significant amount of withholding of information between those bodies. We will see, when and where this is investigated, what does come out. But it is a significant matter, and I do not feel confident that one minister being compelled to one or two days of hearings of a select committee of the Parliament would be the avenue for doing this. Instead the Greens, once the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Amendment Bill 2026 passes this Parliament, hopefully very soon with refreshed IBAC powers, will be referring this matter to IBAC, and we will not be supporting the select committee motion today.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (11:47): I rise to respond to the contribution and the motion that is before us today. Certainly I do so because Victorians deserve a serious facts-based discussion about the long-term benefits of this generational infrastructure project. What we have heard in the chamber today, unfortunately, is not a substantive critique of city-shaping infrastructure. Instead we are seeing a constant resistance to the kind of long-term investment that our growing state fundamentally requires.

Let us look really plainly at what is being built. The Suburban Rail Loop is the single largest investment in public transport connectivity the state has ever seen. The opposition's continued resistance to this project highlights a stark contrast in priorities. It really is easy to oppose major projects from the sidelines, but true fiscal responsibility means investing in the infrastructure a city needs before it is completely paralysed by congestion. For years we saw a distinct lack of federal partnership under previous governments when it came to major rail projects in Victoria. Now we are seeing a concerted effort to undermine a project that is already underway, under the guise of fiscal prudence from a party that has historically underinvested in our public transport system. Can I also just note that we now have partners in Canberra who are willing to invest in public infrastructure and public transport, and can I acknowledge the commitments made by the Prime Minister in investing in the Suburban Rail Loop.

What we need to focus on is what the Suburban Rail Loop actually delivers for working Victorians. Suburban Rail Loop East alone is projected to take 600,000 cars off Melbourne's roads. It delivers six stations. A trip from Box Hill to Cheltenham will take about 22 minutes. It is a kind of connectivity that fundamentally changes how a city functions. It turns a stressful 2-hour-commute round trip in gridlock into a manageable journey that can be completed during a lunchbreak, frankly. It opens up immediate job opportunities and provides direct access to major educational precincts at Monash and Deakin universities for growing students. Also, for those that come from suburbs that have never had a direct rail link it means less time stuck in traffic, less money spent on petrol and more time spent at home with family or studying or in part-time jobs or volunteering. It is the baseline standard of public transport a global city like Melbourne needs to remain livable.

However, faster, better train services are only one part of the equation. This project is entirely inseparable from the housing our state desperately needs. The activity centres that are being planned around the Suburban Rail Loop will deliver tens of thousands of new homes in precisely the locations where existing infrastructure can support them. This is near transport hubs, near employment centres, near essential services and of course near our world-class universities and research institutes. When we talk about these activity centres we are talking about well-planned, sustainable urban design that includes diverse housing options, including affordable housing and accessible homes for downsizers who want to age in place within their own communities. We know that not every young person wants or can afford a detached home on the urban fringe. Many young Victorians simply want the opportunity to live in the established communities where they grew up, near their parents, near their support networks and maybe near their jobs too. They want to live in well-designed apartments and townhouses where they can walk to work, access local parks and easily catch a train or tram to enjoy our city's internationally renowned culture, nightlife and major events.

Renee Heath: On a point of order, President, I could be confused, but I think the member is talking about housing and ageing in place. I wonder if she is speaking to the wrong document, the wrong motion.

The PRESIDENT: No, I do not believe so. I will let the member continue.

Sheena WATT: Further to the point of order, President, I am speaking about housing near the proposed Suburban Rail Loop. You absolutely cannot acknowledge a housing crisis while simultaneously opposing the single biggest driver of well-located housing supply in the state. If you oppose the Suburban Rail Loop, you are effectively opposing the construction of homes in established suburbs for the next generation of Victorians. You cannot keep telling millennials and gen Zs that the only path –

Renee Heath: On a point of order, President, I would like you to bring it back to relevance. The government has said now that the Suburban Rail Loop is not a housing project – you have changed your position on that – and I think you should bring her back to –

The PRESIDENT: That is not a point of order.

Sheena WATT: Wonderful. I am happy to take up the point of order, just to say that you cannot continually be telling millennials and gen Zs that their only path to home ownership is to move further and further away from where the majority of jobs and services are located when you have an opportunity to build up as well as out, which the Suburban Rail Loop presents. You certainly cannot have it both ways.

The Carroll Labor government believes that transparency and accountability strengthen major projects; they do not weaken them. We do not dismiss legitimate scrutiny. We acknowledge that bodies like Infrastructure Australia have raised questions about elements of the funding model and that the Auditor-General has rightly identified in the original business case that required refinement. I am saying also that the Auditor-General provides independent assurance to this Parliament and the Victorian community. Their audits examine whether public resources are managed effectively and economically, and they make recommendations intended to strengthen project delivery. Respecting the Victorian Auditor-General's Office means engaging honestly with their reports and implementing their recommendations to make projects like the Suburban Rail Loop better. I made a contribution on the earlier documents motion about this. It does not mean weaponising their independent work to justify abandoning a project that many Victorians will rely on.

This is the largest transport infrastructure project in our history. It is entirely appropriate that it attracts rigorous independent scrutiny, and our government welcomes that oversight. However, there is a distinct difference between appropriate public scrutiny and political sabotage. Moving continuous motions like this before us, designed to generate quick headlines rather than genuinely improve the delivery of the project, does absolutely nothing for the commuters in Glen Waverley, in Clayton and

in Box Hill or the students that want to get to the world-class facilities located out at Monash University and eventually, I hope, those in the northern suburbs who are simply relying on the trains to get moving and the government to help make that happen.

We must be clear-eyed about the true cost of the opposition's approach. Cancelling a project of this scale halfway through its delivery is not an exercise in fiscal responsibility. Ripping up opportunities for thousands of active construction jobs and blocking the development of tens of thousands of homes is an exercise in profound economic waste. True economic management involves treating taxpayer dollars and contracts signed in the name of our state with respect and with certainty. It is also critically important for this chamber to note that this project is part of a much broader vision for the entire state, and this government is investing in communities across Melbourne and regional Victoria to ensure that growing suburbs have the access to the transport and services that they need. At its core this debate is about how we manage growth. Victoria is projected to reach the size of London by the 2050s. You do not meet that kind of population growth by standing still, and you certainly do not meet it by constantly attempting to delay or derail the very infrastructure designed to handle it. The public is rightfully tired of the games that seek to halt progress. They want a government that is prepared to make the long-term, generational investments required to keep this city moving, house its people and ensure sustainable growth.

We must recognise that this project is a structural response to the cost of living as well. We often talk about the cost of living purely in terms of immediate cash relief, but our government is proudly delivering this through initiatives like free public transport for under-18s and heavily discounted regional fares.

A member interjected.

Sheena WATT: That is what I said – for under-18s. But genuine long-term cost-of-living relief is also about the hours you get back in your week when you are not sitting bumper to bumper on the Eastern Freeway. It is the thousands of dollars saved every year when a household does not need to pay for registration, insurance, fuel and maintenance of a second car because a reliable train service goes to exactly where they need to go. It is the ability to find an affordable home near a station that gets you to wherever it is that you need to get to around our state. And rather than being pushed to the fringes of a city just to find a mortgage that can be serviced, there are so many benefits to improved options from a much more dynamic train line. This is what structural cost-of-living relief looks like – a permanent positive change to how a working family's time and money can be stretched every single day. This is exactly what the Suburban Rail Loop is designed to deliver, because the alternative on offer from those opposite is not an alternative at all, it is a simple no.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (11:57): I rise to speak on Mr Davis's excellent motion for a select committee into this government's shameful public transport tax, which they did not tell Victorians about. We know that the Victorian Treasury warned both Daniel Andrews and Jacinta Allan not last year, not in 2024 but in 2020 that the Suburban Rail Loop East would cost \$37 billion. The government itself has acknowledged that construction costs have gone up 20 per cent since then, which means this project, from Cheltenham to Box Hill, is going to cost \$50 billion. How does the government fill the hole? A secret tax on all Victorians that they did not tell Victorians about. They all knew in 2024. It was in their cabinet minutes, so these frontbenchers are either incompetent or they lied to all Victorians.

Sonja Terpstra: On a point of order, President, Mr Mulholland is aggressively pointing, and I ask that he not aggressively point.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! We are eating into Mr Mulholland's time. I actually was not looking at Mr Mulholland at the time, but I would advise members that Ms Terpstra is right that we should not be pointing at each other.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Did the state government tell Infrastructure Australia, when it was doing an assessment on value capture modelling and had to go back to the drawing board on the value capture, that it also included a secret tax? Last year when they announced all the publicly disclosed value capture mechanisms, it was not in there. Did this state government tell Infrastructure Australia and Minister King about this secret tax?

We know what Ben Carroll's best friends think about this project. Stephen Conroy called it a dog of a project. Bill Shorten, his old mate, called it a lemon on steroids. Now he has supposedly shaved \$2 billion off the SRL to go to different road projects. One billion dollars of that, the Victorian Auditor-General's Office acknowledged, was not actually funded in the first place. They have now made almost \$3 billion worth of road projects. Are they going to cut another billion from the Suburban Rail Loop? It is completely uneconomical, and the business case says it is uneconomical without the northern section. Look at the amount of interest we will be paying. Ms Symes has told this house that the value capture loan over 40 years does include interest, which means we are paying about \$28 billion –

The PRESIDENT: Sorry, I am going to need to interrupt business for question time and ministers statements.

Business interrupted pursuant to resolution of Council of 8 September.

The PRESIDENT: Before I call the first question, I am pleased to acknowledge in the gallery Tania Maxwell, a former member of this chamber.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Daniel Andrews

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:00): (1469) My question is for the Premier in the other place. It was announced recently that due to community expectations a statue of Victoria's 48th Premier will not be put up in Treasury Place. However, according to some reports, the statue of that man has already been made. It was also announced in the media release that the contract would not be cancelled. So my question to the Premier is: how much has this project already cost?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:01): Thank you, Mr Limbrick. I will pass the question on to the Premier.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:01): I thank the member for passing that on. My supplementary question is: will any money be saved by not installing the statue, and if so, how much?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:01): Thank you, Mr Limbrick. I will pass your supplementary question on, along with your first question.

Energy policy

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:01): (1470) My question is to the minister for energy. Minister, I refer to the Auditor-General's report entitled *Managing the Transition to Renewable Energy* of December 2025 and note that your department refused to provide key information to the Auditor. He said:

We requested that the department provide analysis of potential electricity supply issues during unusually prolonged dark and still periods in winter. The department did not provide this analysis.

I therefore ask: why did your department refuse to provide the Auditor-General with taxpayer-funded modelling pointing to the risks of blackouts in winter? And will you make this secret modelling public, releasing it for all Victorians to see?

The PRESIDENT: I took on your advice, Mr Davis, from yesterday, and I am just going to call the minister.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:02): Mr Davis, it is not possible for me to answer your question because I was not the minister at the time.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, part of my question was: will the minister provide that information and make it public?

Members interjecting.

David Davis: It is simply a point of order, President.

The PRESIDENT: If there are multiple questions, the minister can pick one.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:03): I simply ask the minister: will she make this information public?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:03): Mr Davis, I am not in a position to answer the question as you have put it, because you have made assertions which I do not believe are in line –

David Davis: I quoted the Auditor's report.

Jaclyn SYMES: Your interpretation of what you believe is in the possession of the department I cannot confirm. What I can confirm is that this government has a plan to keep the lights on, to keep bills down and to make sure that we transition to renewable energy, which is going to be cheaper and more reliable for all Victorians.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, it is a very simple and narrow question: will she make that material public? And the answer –

The PRESIDENT: Order! The minister was being relevant to the question.

Ministers statements: child protection

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:04): Last week I had the privilege of attending the Victorian Protecting Children Awards and Department of Families, Fairness and Housing child protection staff awards to celebrate the essential work undertaken each and every day by our children and families sector workforce. Can I take this opportunity to congratulate all nominees, finalists and winners across both events who have gone above and beyond for children in care.

I acknowledge Sanjai Kissun, the winner of this year's Minister's Award for Excellence in Protecting Children. Sanjai is a recognised trailblazer in child protection who does incredible work to support refugee and asylum seeker children in Victoria. Sanjai has undertaken significant work keeping children safe after they have fled from war, conflict and disaster. He was also one of the founding members of the cultural engagement program for multicultural children involved with child protection. Congratulations to Sanjai on this well-deserved award.

Importantly, this week is also National Child Protection Week, with the 2026 theme being 'Every conversation matters: shifting conversation to action'. In Victoria we are turning this theme into reality. With the support of this chamber, we have been able to pass the supporting stable and strong families scheme into law. Every conversation across government in relation to at-risk young people matters, and under the supporting stable and strong families scheme departments will turn that conversation into real action. I am delighted to advise the house that this week, National Child Protection Week, the first tranche of regulations for the supporting stable and strong families scheme has now been

prescribed. This ensures that as the government we will be reporting on benchmarks that we all agree are important to the wellbeing of children in care: are children in care enrolled in and attending school, are we helping care leavers transition to stable, independent living and are children in care receiving all of their key ages and stages visits, just to name a few? Can I thank stakeholders from across the children and families sector for participating in consultation on the first stage of the regulations, with the second tranche to follow early next year. I look forward to continuing to work with stakeholders as we evolve this scheme into the future.

Climate change

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:06): (1471) My question is for the Minister for Climate Action. Recommendation 6 of the 2024 Environment and Planning Committee inquiry into climate resilience called for the Victorian government to establish a climate adaptation fund to fund priority adaptation projects identified under the adaptation action plans and regional climate change adaptation strategies. A formatting error meant that this recommendation was not clearly highlighted in the original report tabled last year. However, a corrected report was tabled on 5 March this year. The government still has not responded to this key recommendation from the inquiry. With Victoria facing potentially the hottest and driest summer on record, will the government adopt this recommendation in full and establish a dedicated climate adaptation fund to help protect communities from the devastating impacts of accelerating climate change?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:07): I thank Dr Mansfield for her question and her continued advocacy in relation to climate adaptation. I think it is the first question I have had as the Minister for Climate Action. As you would appreciate, there is a whole-of-government approach to different departments and their requirements to meet goals in relation to emissions and climate targets. In relation to grants funding, there is some available in different portfolios, particularly in the agriculture portfolio. How about I get a collection of those and make sure that you have got that information and can see whether there are any gaps in the information that you are seeking?

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:07): I thank the minister for that response and appreciate that it is a new portfolio, but the question was very much focused on that very specific recommendation from the Environment and Planning Committee around establishing a dedicated climate adaptation fund. The science is very clear: big fossil fuel corporations are the main contributors to anthropogenic climate change. Will this government make them pay for the damage that they have caused, and continue to cause, by increasing levies on coal and gas company royalties to finance the establishment of a climate adaptation fund?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:08): As I responded to your substantive, Dr Mansfield, I will get you more information on the work the government is doing in relation to adaptation, including any funding streams.

Energy policy

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:08): (1472) My question is to the minister for energy. Minister, I refer to the AEMO reserve notice medium term PASA report dated 4 August and the reserve notice published on 1 September, which states that in July 2028 in Victoria ‘forecast demand will exceed supply under some circumstances’. Minister, to be clear, the AEMO note effectively points to the risk that the lights could go out from July 2028, with the MT PASA informing –

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Please, Mr Davis, continue.

David DAVIS: Minister, to be clear –

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Please! Mr Davis is going to ask his question without interruption, and then the minister is going to answer the question without interruption.

David DAVIS: President, I fear my time may be truncated.

The PRESIDENT: Do not worry about the time. Within limitations, do not worry about the time. You will get your question in.

David DAVIS: Minister, to be clear, the AEMO note effectively points to the risk the lights could go out from July 2028, with the MT PASA informing the market of potential reliability issues. Why, Minister, after 12 years in government, has Labor left Victoria in a position where the lights may go out from July 2028?

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Mr McIntosh, go and have an early shower for half an hour, please.

Tom McIntosh withdrew from chamber.

Renee Heath: On a point of order, President, Mr McIntosh should put that in a substantive motion. But I think you have acquitted the point of order.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:11): Mr Davis, perhaps we are reading a different report. AEMO in their ESOO say that Victoria will have sufficient supply following the closure of Yallourn. AEMO's 10-year reliability forecast shows that Victoria is prepared for the closure of Yallourn power station in 2028. We on this side of the chamber have implemented a clear path to transition to cheaper, more renewable energy, with strong targets and streamlined planning approvals to get critical renewable energy infrastructure built on time. Your assertion that our plan does not keep the lights on actually should be reflected back on your plan.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:11): It might come as a surprise to the minister, but you have been in government for 12 years. I therefore ask a very simple question: Minister, have you been briefed regarding the medium-term PASA? If so, will you make those briefings available to the house, and if not, why not?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:12): Mr Davis, I will continue to provide information to this house that demonstrates that on this side of the chamber we have a plan to bring on new renewable –

David Davis: On a point of order, President, it was a very specific question about the medium-term PASA reports. Has she been briefed on those reports or not?

The PRESIDENT: Mr Davis, the minister was on her feet for 8 seconds.

David Davis: Yes, and she is heading on a different tack.

The PRESIDENT: None of us in here have a crystal ball. The minister was 8 seconds in, and the minister will continue.

Jaclyn SYMES: As I was saying, I will continue to bring the evidence, the information and the material that demonstrates that you have to have a plan in relation to –

David Davis interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, I will continue to bring information to this chamber to back up the plan that we have to ensure that we keep the lights on and keep power prices down, and it will demonstrate that your plan is a fantasy.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, this was a very specific question about a specific document, the MT PASA. The minister did not mention that and did not respond on that in any way whatsoever. She ignored the name of the document. I do not think she knows what it is.

The PRESIDENT: It does not make any difference if you use all of your fingers. I will give you that one – very clever; good for you. But it is still very much why Mr McIntosh got booted. I would ask you to please refrain from that. You can call a point of order at the end of question time if you believe the minister has not responded to the question and I have made a decision that she has.

Ministers statements: illicit tobacco

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Finance, Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Government Services) (12:14): The doors are closing on Victoria's illicit tobacco trade, with Labor's tough new closure powers having received royal assent. From today it will be harder to sell, harder to profit from and easier to shut down this illicit tobacco trade. Inspectors will be out in force from today, targeting businesses and taking action against those that break the law. For those that ignore a closure power there will be even tougher consequences. The Magistrates' Court can also issue longer term closure powers, and landlords will be able to terminate leases because of these orders. Businesses that ignore the closure orders face fines of up to \$2.5 million and 20 years in jail.

Illicit tobacco fuels organised crime, undercuts legitimate businesses and puts Victorians at risk. That is why Tobacco Licensing Victoria is continuing to work closely with law enforcement partners to target illicit tobacco across our state. We know that there are multiple factors for the growth of the illicit tobacco market, including the significant price differential caused by Commonwealth tax settings as well as the significant volumes of tobacco entering our country. This is a national problem that requires a national approach. In Victoria our Labor government is cracking down from every angle possible, with tougher powers, more inspectors and serious consequences for those who refuse to play by the rules. Tobacco Licensing Victoria will use the full force of these powers to bring bad actors to justice and disrupt the illicit tobacco trade, continuing its risk-based, intelligence-led approach. Inspectors have already seized more than \$10 million of illicit products this year and issued more than 100 infringement notices. This year's budget also invests a further \$13 million to triple the number of inspectors, putting more boots on the ground to target these dodgy operators. The crackdown is here, the powers are in place and anyone dealing in illicit tobacco is on notice.

Gender identity

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (12:16): (1473) My question is to the Minister for Mental Health. This government identifies gender issues as affecting children's mental health, including increased risks of anxiety, depression and suicide. My FOI to the Royal Children's Hospital sought documents concerning the legality of affirming a minor's gender identity and providing puberty blockers, oestrogen and testosterone to those minors. It obtained the gender service's own internal training on Gillick competence: whether a child is considered mature enough to consent to their own treatment. The training states that even when a child is considered able to consent, if a parent disputes the child's capacity, diagnosis or proposed treatment, application to the court is mandatory. It also warns that proceeding without parental consent or court approval can expose practitioners to criminal or civil liability claims. If the child has already been considered mature enough to consent for themselves, why does the parents' consent still matter before medical gender treatment can proceed?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:17): I thank Mrs Deeming for her question, and I think that it probably straddles both the mental health and health portfolios. But I do want to

make one thing very clear: we are, as a government, very committed to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of all Victorians, including those gender-diverse members of our community. We know that the mental health, self-harm and suicide rates of people in that community are significantly higher than those of the general population and that they are disproportionately impacted by mental health challenges and indeed suicide. It is not a statistic that we will ignore. It is an issue that we have to be very careful that we do not politicise. We will continue to take the expert clinical advice when it comes to the care that we provide to gender-diverse Victorians. I must say, the Royal Children's Hospital are an exemplar of providing that care to young Victorians. In terms of the very specific question that the member asks, I am going to take that on notice and get some very careful advice back from my department, because it is important that these things are considered carefully. But I will reiterate that equality is not negotiable in Victoria, and we will continue to support those specialist services, particularly at the Royal Children's Hospital, that continue to provide expert clinical care to young Victorians.

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (12:19): Thank you for that answer. Minister, my previous FOIs to the Department of Education found a very different approach to mental health when a child wants to socially transition at school. Schools can decide that a child is mature enough to consent for themselves and allow gender affirmation at school without parental consent and knowing that parents would dissent. My FOIs found that there were no records kept either: no dedicated assessment form, no capacity checklist, no requirement for written reasons, no central register of these decisions and no accountability for whichever adult on school grounds decided that they were a mature minor to socially transition at school. This matters because research following children who have socially transitioned at an average age of about seven found that 86 per cent later commenced puberty blockers and 68 per cent later commenced cross-sex hormones. Minister, if parental consent matters before a child can medically transition, why does the government allow that same parental consent to be bypassed and completely transgressed when the child socially transitions at school, particularly when social transition is so strongly associated with later medical and criminal risks?

The PRESIDENT: At the risk of inserting myself, I am concerned that might be a question better directed to the Minister for Education, but I will call the minister.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:21): Mrs Deeming is asking me questions related to the education portfolio and its policies, and I am simply not in a position to be able to respond to that.

Health system

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:21): (1474) My question is to the Minister for Health. It was reported last Friday that you joined other state and territory health ministers in expressing deep concern about the federal government's decision to scrap the higher private health insurance rebate currently available to people aged 65 and over. You were quoted as having said:

... "any change that would leave older Victorians worse off" and put additional pressure on the states's public hospitals was "unacceptable" ...

The same ABC article refers to New South Wales health minister Ryan Park. He said that New South Wales health department modelling estimates that public hospitals in New South Wales could pick up more than 23,000 additional surgeries a year. Minister, what modelling has the Victorian health department done on the number of additional surgeries in the Victorian public system as a result of tens of thousands of people downgrading or dropping private cover?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:22): I thank Ms Crozier for her question. As is publicly on the record, the Victorian government is concerned about the changes that the Commonwealth has proposed to private health insurance rebates. We are concerned that it would leave

many older Victorians worse off and put additional pressure on Victoria's public hospitals if these changes were passed by the Commonwealth Parliament and if indeed we saw a rise in the number of older Victorians dropping out of private health insurance. We also know that people over 65 are more likely to need hospital care, and any changes that make private health insurance less affordable risk shifting the demand onto the public health system.

It was a good and robust conversation at the health ministers meeting in Sydney last week, and other states and territories share the concerns of Victoria. There is modelling out there in the public domain from the health insurance industry but also from the Commonwealth, and that modelling is very different in terms of the Treasury modelling versus the health insurance modelling. But we have made our position very clear to the Commonwealth, as have other state and territory health ministers, that we are concerned about any change that would shift –

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, President, I understand the minister – she has reiterated that she is concerned about the federal Labor cuts – but my question was very specific around the number of additional surgeries as a result of people having to drop their private health cover. She has referred to the modelling. It has been done. What are the additional numbers of surgeries that will be added to the waitlist?

The PRESIDENT: I believe the minister was being relevant to the question.

Ingrid STITT: As I was in the process of explaining to the house, the Commonwealth has, in response to some of the concerns raised by states and territories, said that its modelling shows that there will not be a material impact.

Georgie Crozier interjected.

Ingrid STITT: Obviously, the member does not want to listen to my answer, President.

The PRESIDENT: Ms Crozier, please. Mr Davis was very keen on asking a question without any noise, and I think the minister should be given the same respect that Mr Davis was given.

Ingrid STITT: We have made it clear to the Commonwealth that we want to understand that modelling and what these changes mean.

The PRESIDENT: Ms Crozier on a point of order.

A member: Seriously?

Georgie Crozier: Yes, to whoever interrupted – seriously. On a point of order, President, I have been listening to the minister. My question was around the Victorian Department of Health's modelling and what number of Victorians will be impacted due to the additional surgeries that will be required in the Victorian public health system. It has been 2½ minutes, and we have got 30 seconds left. I would ask the minister to come back to the specific question that I asked and answer the question, not keep deflecting to the federal government's modelling.

The PRESIDENT: I believe the minister was relevant to the question.

Ingrid STITT: What I was in the process of saying is that we have put the Commonwealth on notice that we want to understand what the impacts of the modelling would be on Victoria and on Victoria's public hospital system. Until we are satisfied that there will not be a material impact and a shift of demand onto the public health system, we will continue to raise our concerns with the Commonwealth.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:26): That was an extraordinary answer, given the minister has clearly not done any modelling in the Victorian department but has in her answer said that there is going to be an impact. Of course there is going to be an impact, as the various modelling has said. I will try again: has the Victorian government done modelling on the additional cost to the

health budget when thousands of older Victorians drop or downgrade their private cover due to federal Labor's rebate cut?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:27): I thank Ms Crozier for her supplementary. What we are talking about here is legislation that has been mooted in the federal Parliament. It has not passed the federal Parliament and will be, as I understand it, subject to a Senate inquiry. Ms Crozier can come in here and badger me and get angry and raise points of order, but I do not need her to advise me about how to stick up for Victorian patients.

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, President – has the minister finished?

Members interjecting.

Georgie Crozier: I was raising a point of order. Question time is not an opportunity to attack the opposition; it is a time for questions. My question was very specific. I was going to ask you to bring her back to addressing the question, but I think she has finished. Has she finished?

The PRESIDENT: I believe so. What is your point of order?

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:28): If the minister has finished answering the question – well, not answering – I move:

That the minister's answers be taken into consideration on the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Ministers statements: eating disorders

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:28): What I would like to talk about today is that this week is Body Image and Eating Disorder Awareness Week. We know that eating disorders are a serious mental health condition. We also know that people respond best when mental health support is provided early, giving people the support they need to recover, and that is why we have developed our *Victorian Eating Disorders Strategy 2024–2031* to guide our investments and supports that Victorians battling eating disorders and their families, carers and supporters rely on. On Monday Eating Disorders Victoria released their *Eating Disorder Trends in Victoria 2026* report. I welcome the release of this report and its contribution to strengthening our understanding of eating disorders and the trends and experiences across Victoria. The report highlights the importance of continuing to improve access to timely and coordinated eating disorder treatment and support. It also reinforces the need for a statewide approach across prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery.

Bev McArthur: Are you providing it in prison?

Ingrid STITT: That is an extraordinary interjection, Mrs McArthur. The findings also underscore the importance of reforms and investments underway through the eating disorder strategy. The Carroll Labor government invested \$31 million over three years in the Victorian budget to deliver vital, tailored eating disorder services, early intervention care and treatment options. The investment is making sure Victorians can get the care they need close to home, including a new day program at Barwon Health, the first of its kind in regional Victoria; new in-home, intensive early engagement and treatment programs at the Alfred and the Austin; 10 dedicated early intervention professionals through area mental health and wellbeing services; and, importantly, funding for Eating Disorders Victoria to continue their vital support of consumers and their families.

Drug harm reduction

David ETTERSHPANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:30): (1475) My question is for the Minister for Health. Last month the Victorian coroner released a report on a 33-year-old Geelong woman whose death was caused by a toxic combination of drugs, including heroin. There have been a hundred

heroin-related deaths in Greater Geelong over the last decade, far more than any other regional local government area. In noting that the Greater Geelong area does not have a medically supervised injecting centre, the coroner stated:

I have been unable to identify any public health grounds to justify limiting Victoria to one medically supervised injecting centre at a time.

Given the amount of emergency legislation passed in this year alone in this chamber, what is preventing the government from urgently acting to establish a second MSIR in Geelong?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:31): I thank Mr Ettershank for his question. I think it is actually in my mental health portfolio, but I am obviously very keen to answer the question. I do want to acknowledge that any overdose and life lost is a tragedy, and I want to extend my condolences to that individual's family, loved ones and indeed community. Of course we do know that drug harms are increasing, and our government has invested in a range of initiatives that are about trying to reduce that drug harm. Since coming to government we have, for example, doubled the number of residential rehabilitation beds and detox beds across the state, and we have also been working hard to implement our statewide action plan to reduce drug harm. When we announced that plan, we made it very clear that the medically supervised injecting room at North Richmond is a very important part of our drug response as a state. That service will continue, and the government will continue to support its life-saving work. But we did make it very clear that we would not be rolling out any additional medically supervised injecting rooms, and I note that the member will not agree with that position.

I do want to point out some of the other initiatives that we are taking in order to reduce lives lost to overdose, including, importantly, rolling out our naloxone vending machines across the state. We have rolled out that program in the Geelong area. We have also extended the take-home naloxone program so that naloxone is available far more widely across the state. We are also of course proud of the fact that we have opened a fixed drug-testing site, which is being used by Victorians, many of whom have never really had a health-led conversation about their drug use, and that fixed site is an important part of our harm reduction strategy. We are also in the process of setting up a Never Use Alone helpline, which will be something that users of drugs can call to have a peer support worker talk them through how to reduce the risks of taking drugs, particularly if they are alone. So there are a range of important initiatives that our government has pursued.

Of course I acknowledge that the illicit drug market and indeed those individuals who have tragically lost their lives through the misuse of prescription drugs are challenges that we have to keep continuing to meet, and that is why I pay very close attention to the work of the chief addiction officer, which is a position our government created in the department, and the AOD ministerial advisory committee in continuing to advise the government on these important issues.

David ETTERSANK (Western Metropolitan) (12:35): Thank you, Minister. I appreciate that response. Maybe I will just pick up on some of the points you raised there. Following multiple coroners' recommendations and sustained pressure from the progressive crossbench, Victoria now has, as you said, the fixed drug-checking site and pill testing at Victorian festivals. The pill-testing trial at festivals has facilitated thousands of drug checks as well as thousands of harm reduction conversations with young people, and that is to be applauded. The New South Wales government has announced that drug checking will become a permanent fixture at festivals in New South Wales following its proven effectiveness in reducing overall harm and particularly hospital presentations. So I ask: will the government provide funding to enable a drug-checking service to have longer operating hours, which have been identified as a problem amongst users, initiate a mobile service and, following the New South Wales example, make drug checking a permanent feature at Victorian festivals?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ambulance Services, Special Minister of State) (12:36): Thank you for the supplementary

question, Mr Ettershank. The good news is we already have indicated that pill testing is a permanent arrangement under a Carroll Labor government. I think we actually made that announcement before New South Wales – not that I am being competitive. We are very proud of the fact that the successful trial of pill testing, both out at festivals and at the fixed site, has meant that we were very confident to confirm that this is going to be an ongoing service, and it is backed in by \$9.6 million over two years in this year's budget to support the vital work of the pill-testing service. I also add that we have already, on occasions of peak demand, increased the hours of operation for the fixed site, and we will continue to look at ways in which we can maximise the number of festivals we attend over the summer period.

Latrobe Magnesium

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:37): (1476) My question is to the Minister for Energy and Resources. Latrobe Magnesium was established as a demonstration plant in the Latrobe Valley and is seeking to develop a commercial-scale magnesium production facility. Concerningly, an unintended consequence of the Mineral Resources (Sustainable Development) Amendment (Financial Assurance) Act 2026 is such that it has created a trailing liabilities issue that is preventing access to the land and, importantly, the fly-ash needed to manufacture the magnesium. The company's operations in Victoria are not viable unless a solution is found. Sadly, this has the potential to derail millions of dollars to the local economy and hundreds of jobs. Minister, what actions can you take or are you taking to resolve the issue and enable Latrobe Magnesium to access the resource it needs?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:38): I thank Ms Bath for her question and her advocacy in relation to this matter – and also that of the local member. Given your interest and some of the inquiries that have come into my office, I have had the opportunity to have an initial briefing with Resources Victoria. I understand the issue. I have gone through the map and the declaration zone, and some of the potential solutions are being explored. The advice this morning was that Latrobe Magnesium have had to provide some additional information, and that came through this morning. The deputy secretary will be taking me through the possible solutions that will go back to the company. Whether that is regulation changes, legislative changes or some other solutions, it is something that we are very happy to explore. I cannot pre-empt any of those outcomes, obviously, but I am very keen to get an outcome and I have no issue with sharing live updates with you.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:39): I thank the minister for her fulsome response. This is a really important industry and opportunity, and you would hate to see this fall over due to unintended consequences. My next question is: would you be able to keep not only me but my colleague Martin Cameron up to date – and also the community in Latrobe Valley – as it turns?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:40): Thank you, Ms Bath. I think among the many things that you and I agree on in this place are opportunities for regional employment and jobs and industry support, so I am very happy to work with you and Mr Cameron in relation to this matter.

Ministers statements: electricity infrastructure

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Minister for Energy and Resources, Minister for Environment, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for the State Electricity Commission) (12:40): Today I wish to speak to the Carroll Labor government's plan to deliver the energy transition, keeping Victoria's lights on and the power bills down. It can be as simple as that. But I do want to talk to the risks of not delivering our plan –

Members interjecting.

CONSTITUENCY QUESTIONS

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Legislative Council

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Jaclyn SYMES: Yes, I do, because it is really important information and I want to refer to important information. Mr Davis asked me about the provision of information for the chamber, and I can confirm that I am very happy to make available to the chamber today –

Nick McGowan: On a point of order, President, the minister appears to be holding a prop. We have all got plans, but as soon as we start holding one, then others will do the same.

The PRESIDENT: I would prefer it if members do not hold up documents, because it never ends, especially at this time of the term.

Jaclyn SYMES: On the point of order, President, in relation to the information in the document I am referring to, it is a report. If it would be of assistance, I am happy to table the report for you, Mr McGowan, because it is a very important report. As I have said, I have committed to providing information to the chamber and the Victorian public in relation to risks and plans so that people know exactly what choices they have, particularly come November.

Today energy experts Nexa Advisory published this report showing that delaying or cancelling VNI West and the Western Renewables Link would cause skyrocketing power bills. For Victorian households we are talking more than \$470 over five years, for small businesses almost \$5000 and for large businesses almost \$12,000. The numbers tell a very compelling story. Victorians cannot risk a reckless plan, a plan that would delay or cancel transmission projects like WRL and VNI West. Cancelling them would cost hundreds –

Michael Galea: On a point of order, President, I would ask that Ms Crozier also not wave a document around the chamber as a prop.

The PRESIDENT: I uphold the point of order.

Jaclyn SYMES: Cancelling them will cost hundreds of dollars for households. It will cost our state tens of billions of dollars in lost investment, and without them we will not be able to bring renewables online and keep the lights on. Extending coal is not an alternative to renewables in Victoria. This report and the operators of the coal plants themselves have made this very point. They have said they need to close. Gas is not an alternative to renewables in Victoria. It is dwindling, it is expensive and it needs to be reserved for industry that cannot electrify. It of course plays an important role in backing up renewables, but it cannot replace them. Those opposite do not have a plan for our energy system, just reckless commitments that will have a disastrous impact on Victorians, with more outages and higher prices. It is merely a sop to a One Nation campaign that they are terrified of in their seats. Only our government – *(Time expired)*

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:43): I move, by leave:

That the minister's statement be taken into consideration on the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to.

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (12:43): I thank Minister Symes who will seek responses to Mr Limbrick's questions from the Premier, within the standing orders.

Constituency questions

Southern Metropolitan Region

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (12:44): (2595) My constituency question today is to the Minister for Health. How is the Carroll Labor government making sure that women in the Southern Metropolitan Region are getting the health care that they need? For too long Victorian women have experienced barriers and delays in obtaining support during menopause, for example, or for conditions like endometriosis. That is why Labor is investing a landmark \$153 million in a

women's health package that will deliver the health care Victorian women deserve and that is free, accessible and close to home. Last week at the Sandringham Hospital with the Parliamentary Secretary for Health we opened the menopause connecting care clinic, providing specialist care for those experiencing menopause, perimenopause and other conditions, in the spectacular and newly refurbished outpatient clinics that have been upgraded by the Labor government. We are delivering 20 multidisciplinary women's health clinics across Victoria, including in Prahran, so that women get the care and information on a range of conditions that they need. Only Labor is investing in the health care that women deserve.

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:45): (2596) My constituency question is for the Minister for Planning, and it is a question from my constituents because they are very concerned – and rightly so – that Bronhill Road reserve, a beautiful little park, faces the prospect of being sold by Maroondah council, I regret to say. It is the wrong decision, and I would ask that the planning minister intervene and provide an overlay, some kind of protection, that would serve to restrict the use of that parcel of land to being a park and a public park only and not allow its sale and use. It has been marketed as a partnership between council and the proposed purchaser of the property. Locals do not want this. I absolutely support the locals wholeheartedly in their defence of this public park. It is a beautiful public park which is used by our children, by our pets, by our families and by our local community, and I would ask the minister to take urgent action before the caretaker mode comes into place to put an overlay on that park to ensure that it is used for park purposes only.

Southern Metropolitan Region

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:46): (2597) My question is to the Minister for Artificial Intelligence and the Digital Economy. A constituent from my electorate has contacted me deeply concerned by the construction of a new \$2 billion hyperscale data centre in Port Melbourne and the rapid expansion of similar facilities across our state. They note the complete lack of meaningful public consultation around these data centres and the overwhelming impact they will have on local communities, including enormous water and energy consumption, pollution, noise and pressure on local infrastructure. They are also concerned about the broader impacts of artificial intelligence on jobs and the need for stronger safeguards to ensure communities and the environment are protected. Minister, will the government pause new AI data centre approvals and developments until we have strong safeguards for Victoria's water, jobs and environment?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:47): (2598) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. It is on behalf of a number of constituents who have raised issues with me about the condition of various major state roads, and it is why I welcome the significant announcements last week by the Minister for Roads and Road Safety and by the Premier of an additional amount of funding towards major road repairs and maintenance across Victoria, including the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region. Indeed it is also why I welcome the announcement of a number of road projects in the south-east, including upgrades to Hallam Road and Evans Road and the signalisation with lights of Governor and Boundary roads. Minister, on behalf of my constituents, what will this extra funding mean in terms of getting my constituents around more safely and easily with upgraded local roads?

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:48): (2599) My question is to the Minister for Energy and Resources. On 6 March 2026 Brookfield Infrastructure Income Fund filed a certified annual shareholder report with the US Securities and Exchange Commission. In its section on AusNet, the Brookfield-controlled company delivering the Western Renewables Link, it described the Western Renewables Link as an A\$4 billion project, saying AusNet had finalised its commercial framework

with the Victorian government and executed a binding construction contract. Yet on 27 May, responding to a parliamentary request for WRL's total estimated investment costs, the government gave only a \$1.53 billion construction estimate and a \$1.6 billion construction contract. Minister, what exactly does Brookfield's approximately \$4 billion figure comprise, why was that figure not disclosed to Parliament and what is the current cost of the WRL, which Victorian electricity consumers will ultimately pay?

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:49): (2600) My question today is to the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. There is a growing Burmese diaspora community in my electorate. The Centre for Multicultural Youth has undertaken consultation and found that young people from the Burmese diaspora are experiencing high levels of racism in schools, that there are high rates of disengagement and that there have been significant escalations of violence towards young people of this background. The Centre for Multicultural Youth would like to build on the experience and success of their Le Mana Pasifika and Jamma community support groups to develop a project to support young people from the Burmese community in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Activities would focus on strengthening cultural identity and community support to reduce criminal behaviour, break cycles of recidivism and strengthen family and community resilience. Minister, will you provide funding to the Centre for Multicultural Youth to develop locally accessible and culturally safe programs to help young people from the Burmese diaspora in the eastern suburbs stay connected, build confidence and take part in safe, positive activities in their communities?

Western Victoria Region

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (12:50): (2601) My question is for the Minister for Energy and Resources, Jaclyn Symes. Minister, how many jobs would be lost in the Western Victoria Region if the coalition were to enact its promise to cancel VNI West and pause the Western Renewables Link and what would the impact be on the economy of Western Victoria region?

Northern Victoria Region

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (12:50): (2602) My question is for the Minister for Corrections. Minister, the Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre has been the subject of significant investment, including millions of dollars spent on upgrading and maintaining the facility before it was closed in December 2023. Yet the facility was reopened in April this year, and I have been advised that there may be around 60 staff employed to oversee just a handful of people in custody. I have previously raised concerns in Parliament about the impact of its closure on the local community and the need for greater transparency around the future of the site. According to ABC reports, an initial 30 beds and 114 staff were planned to be recruited, with the operation of the centre to cost \$141 million over five years. I would appreciate an update from the minister. How much has the Victorian government spent on the Malmsbury youth justice precinct and its ongoing staffing and operating costs since its closure? How many staff are currently employed there? How many contractors have been engaged? And how many young people are currently in detention at the facility?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:51): (2603) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. I have heard from multiple constituents from Keysborough Gardens Primary School. For the last three years they have been pleading for another pedestrian crossing at their school on Homeleigh Road. Keysborough Gardens Primary School sits on the corner of Chapel Road and Homeleigh Road. While there is a crossing guard on Chapel Road, most students access the school from Homeleigh Road, where there is no dedicated crossing and multiple safety hazards. Heavy traffic congestion makes school pick-ups and drop-offs unsafe. Parked cars create blind spots, and there are nearly daily instances of reckless driving and near misses. Greater Dandenong Council has told the school they do not meet requirements for another crossing, but parents

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say their school run has become a game of sheer luck and additional safety measures are urgently needed before tragedy strikes. The school has 500 students and is projected to grow to 650 within a few years. My question is: will you commit to a review of the crossing requirements on Homeleigh Road to ensure that we are doing all we can to protect the safety of Keysborough Gardens Primary School students?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (12:53): (2604) My constituency question today is directed to the Minister for Equality. Last week I joined the minister and Gabe Steger, Labor's candidate for Brunswick, to visit Affirmation Station, Transgender Victoria's community hub. Having visited Affirmation Station when it originally launched at its former site, it was fantastic to see this vibrant new location, which offers wonderful, wonderful resources. As I noted yesterday during the tabling of the anti-LGBTI hate crimes inquiry report, inclusive community hubs like this are so important at such a polarising time. They provide a genuine place of safety, dignity and belonging for trans and gender-diverse locals and some not so locals, including some folks that have travelled interstate to see Affirmation Station. But on behalf of the locals, my question is: what other supports and investment is our Labor government delivering across the Northern Metropolitan Region to support our LGBTIQ+ communities, with a particular focus on the trans community?

Eastern Victoria Region

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:54): (2605) My question is to the Minister for Health. My Cowes constituent is travelling daily over to Latrobe Regional Health's Cancer Care Centre for vital breast cancer treatment, and she speaks very highly and deeply values both the Wonthaggi and the Latrobe staff. But what is letting her down is the Victorian patient transport assistance scheme, or VPTAS. Over 30 days of treatment she faced 240 kilometres of round trips and the cost of accommodation if she stayed away for her treatment. Patients pay up-front, as we know, in accommodation before seeking reimbursements through VPTAS. All documentation for this was submitted in April, five months ago, and there is still no reimbursement. Why is the government failing to provide prompt and timely reimbursement to my constituent on this very vital issue?

Northern Victoria Region

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:55): (2606) My constituency question today is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and my constituents ask: why has the Department of Transport and Planning handed over all contracts for the maintenance of electrical assets to two big companies and cancelled all existing contracts? A constituent recently contacted my office with huge concerns around the cancellation of contracts between the department and smaller contractors in the Northern Victoria Region. This constituent has been working in the industry for decades and knows the equipment inside and out. The contracts have instead been given to Ventia and Service Stream. He also raised concerns about the downgrading of safety signage due to the government not being able to pay for repairs and maintenance. These smaller companies are now on the brink of collapse. Is this yet another case of Labor jobs for their mates? This type of contract has been tried in many other states and has failed. Why remove the contracts from those who know what they are doing and give them to two citycentric companies? It is like this Labor government does not care at all for the small businesses in northern Victoria.

Northern Metropolitan Region

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:56): (2607) My constituency question is for the Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation regarding the underlying cause of firebombings in our electorate in Richmond and Glenroy. Last week the Premier rejected calls to cut tobacco excise and to increase enforcement powers to tackle organised crime, suggesting that this

policy is reckless and will drive up smoking rates and that they side with public health. However, as minister you said of the federal tobacco excise last year:

It's clearly led to the creation of this illegal market.

You went on to say that we need a national approach to tackle the problem and argued the underlying cause is the price of legal tobacco being driven by federal excise policies. Minister, this is something the Premier now rejects. Who is right, you or the Premier?

Northern Metropolitan Region

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (12:57): (2608) My constituency question is for the Minister for Local Government. Brunswick Library is a vital service in my electorate of Northern Metro Region. It provides community access to books, technology, community programs and welcoming spaces for people of all ages and backgrounds. The Australian Services Union has been campaigning for secure jobs, fair wages and decent conditions for the workers who make these services possible, but councils need adequate funding to provide quality library services and properly value the workers who deliver them. Minister, will you commit to increasing funding to local governments, in particular additional funding for public libraries like Brunswick Library, so that they can maintain high-quality services and library workers can receive fair pay and secure conditions?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:58): (2609) My constituency question is to the Attorney-General. While the Labor government boasts of its 'adult time for violent crime' laws, the Liberals and Nationals have rightly predicted that this is nothing more than another form of promotional hype about laws that are failing Victorians. An early test case of these laws proves, to no-one's surprise, that the coalition was correct. In February a 16-year-old girl held a taxidriver at knifepoint at Dandenong station. She stole his car and sped along Princes Highway at 180 kilometres an hour. It is a miracle no-one was physically hurt. Now the taxidriver is traumatised and fearful every time he takes a passenger. But recently this teenager walked free from court without spending a single day in jail, despite pleading guilty. Attorney-General, when will you implement real consequences for offences that match community expectations to curb the out-of-control youth crime in this state?

Sitting suspended 12:59 pm until 2:01 pm.

Committees

Select committee

Establishment

Debate resumed.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (14:01): As I was saying earlier, this is a secret tax that no-one knew about except for the entire cabinet. We had members like Minister Dimopoulos saying that the first he had ever heard of it was in the Auditor-General's report. Well, he is clearly not reading his cabinet minutes.

David Davis interjected.

Evan MULHOLLAND: It is a huge worry. This is a corrupt government that corruptly levied a secret tax on all Victorians. When Infrastructure Australia and the federal government were saying its value capture assumptions did not make sense and needed further work, they clearly never told the federal government that it already had a plan to pay for it by secretly charging every metropolitan and regional transport user without telling them. Buses, trams, trains – every public transport user was being secretly charged a tax for two years for a project that does not make sense.

As I was mentioning earlier before I was rudely interrupted by question time, the then Treasurer admitted in the committee for the budget papers that the 40-year loan off the back of the value capture

mechanisms – the \$11.5 billion loan over 40 years – is modelled to include interest. Well, if you take a 40-year loan of \$11.5 billion up-front – the Treasury Corporation of Victoria yield for anything over \$10 billion is about 6.25 per cent – it means you are paying around \$28 billion over 40 years without even paying the \$11.5 billion. So it is clear that SRL North is never going to be built, because despite what successive ministers for the Suburban Rail Loop have said, you cannot have a positive cost-benefit ratio without SRL North adding into that as well, which is longer and will cost more. The Parliamentary Budget Office says over 50 years it will cost \$216 billion for the first two stages. That is more than our entire state debt. This government has no plans to build a second stage, so it knows by its own admission that the Cheltenham to Box Hill line does not stack up.

You have got several more worthwhile projects: the Upfield line duplication, the electrification to Wallan and the electrification to Melton and Wyndham Vale that they have promised at two elections. I can tell you that would be done now if the government did not go off on a vanity project that no expert body or secretary recommended with the Suburban Rail Loop. That would be done. Several projects in the south-east of Melbourne – Clyde rail, road duplications – would have been done. I am sure Mr Galea would have preferred a lot of infrastructure investment into the growth areas of Melbourne instead of the Suburban Rail Loop. Instead not only are they charging a secret tax, but Mr Galea and his mates have commissioned \$600,000 –

Michael Galea interjected.

Renee Heath: On a point of order, President, it is an offence to standing orders to interject when you are not in your place.

The PRESIDENT: I uphold the standing order, and Mr Galea is on notice.

Evan MULHOLLAND: As I was saying, not only have Mr Galea and his mates charged a secret tax on all Victorians, but they have also commissioned over \$600,000 of taxpayer money on research to find out how we can charge growth area communities more – another secret tax. They were also briefed on and Ben Carroll and others are pondering a \$110 tax on all of metropolitan Melbourne. \$110 per household they have looked at to fund the Suburban Rail Loop. It is no wonder Mr Galea is up and about right now, because he is ashamed. He is ashamed of the secret tax they are levying on households.

Michael Galea: On a point of order, President, it is worth the chamber knowing that Mr Davis joined the Kennett government, which closed the train line to Clyde back in the 1990s.

The PRESIDENT: It is not a point of order, but if you would like to –

David Davis: On the point of order, President, I was elected in 1996, that is true, in the Kennett government, but actually the Cain and Kirner government closed far more lines than the Kennett government ever did.

The PRESIDENT: That is not a point of order either.

Evan MULHOLLAND: I am going to continue. To quote the Premier, the way that this tax was come up with was ‘not transparent’, and it was unfair of Andrews, Allan, Pallas and Merlino to come up with it in this way. Now, Mr Merlino serves at the confidence of the Premier as chair of what body – the Suburban Rail Loop Authority. So if he thinks the way that Mr Merlino came up with this tax was not transparent, does he still have confidence in Mr Merlino as chair of the Suburban Rail Loop Authority, and did Mr Merlino’s appointment have anything to do with the fact that he co-invented and was concealing a secret revenue source for the very authority he was appointed to?

This is a corrupt government that has dreamed up this project on the back of an envelope, and every single Victorian is paying the price. With everything I went through, the only thing to do and what the Liberals and Nationals commit to doing in the financial interest of all Victorians is pausing and

reviewing this project. We need to get to the bottom of this secret tax, which is why I thoroughly and wholeheartedly support this select committee motion by Mr Davis.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (14:09): This motion does not identify any gap in the Victorian Auditor-General's Office's work. It does not put forward any new evidence that VAGO has not considered. Members should consider whether establishing a parliamentary committee to duplicate an independent audit represents the best use of Parliament's time and taxpayers money. The irony of it is that the opposition say that this exercise is about protecting public money while they propose a committee that duplicates the audit. We already have 171 pages of findings, analysis, recommendations and agency responses that have been conducted by an independent expert body whose job it is to do just that. Can I emphasise the independence of the Auditor-General and perhaps point out the extent of political bias and pointscoreing contained in the opposition's motion.

The government has nothing to hide. A properly conducted inquiry is not something this government is concerned about, as you can see from the Premier's response to the VAGO report. The Premier acknowledged there was not sufficient transparency around the creation and implementation of the charge. He did not defend it simply because it was policy; he abolished it. The rail improvement charge is gone, and that is what Ben Carroll's new direction looks like: greater accountability, greater transparency and a willingness to fix what is not right. The Premier's position is straightforward. He will not spend his time relitigating the past when there is work to do for Victorians right now.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (14:11): It has been a long debate but a worthwhile debate. I am disappointed that a number of parties will not support this motion, despite earlier indications in a positive direction. That is disappointing, and I genuinely put on record that I would have preferred a different outcome there. A number of members have said, 'What will this add?' I will tell you what it will add: we will actually get to question some of the key ministers, and the Auditor-General clearly has not questioned the ministers directly. That is what needs to happen.

These ministers made the decision. It was obviously Andrews, and it was obviously Jacinta Allan – and very likely Ben Carroll. But he has been untruthful and not honest and not clear about his involvement in these matters. He was clearly the public transport minister at the time, in 2021, of the first decision to levy this new tax, and yet he has not been prepared to be honest here. We know that the cabinet minutes went to cabinet at some point, maybe up to eight months later. But let me just say, if you were the transport minister and matters in a cabinet subcommittee decision-making process related to transport, you would read it and your department would make sure that you did. So I, for one, do not believe Ben Carroll on this. I believe he knew from quite early on in 2021 that a new tax was being applied. I do not believe he has been honest with Victorians in this recent period. In 2023 and 2024 further decisions were made. The decision to impose the tax was reaffirmed, and then it began on 1 January 2025. Did Ben Carroll not think that it was important for people to know? Did Gabby Williams not think it was important for people to know this tax was being put on people?

Ms Ermacora spoke just now, but people coming from Warrnambool in her area got on the train and paid the tax. They have been paying the tax every time they got on the train. Every time they get on the train, they pay the tax – the nasty new tax. Why were they not honest about this tax? Why they were not honest about this tax from the start is very unclear, other than that they wanted to deceive Victorians. They did not want to be up-front. They did not want to tell the truth about the costs. The idea that you would put an additional 1 per cent over and above the CPI year after year after year until 2060 or beyond – that is an enormous amount of money to be collecting out of the system: \$8.4 billion. I think Victorians are entitled to know whose idea this tax was, why it was implemented in the way it was and why they were not transparent with Victorians. Why did they seek to hide this in that way? What was it that the government wanted to cover up? I think we know what they wanted to cover up. They were deeply embarrassed about this public transport tax. I think the community are entitled to know whose idea it was. I think if Ben Carroll wants to be Premier after the next election, Victorians are entitled to know the truth about his involvement in conceiving this tax. It is my view that he knew from the start that he was up to his neck in this, that he knew exactly what was going on there, but the

inquiry would be the way to do it. The inquiry would be the way to actually establish definitively whether Mr Carroll knew, when he knew, the nature of his deep involvement in this process and why he thought he could hoodwink Victorians.

Amendment agreed to.

Council divided on amended motion:

Ayes (15): Melina Bath, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Evan Mulholland, Georgie Purcell, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

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

Amended motion negatived.

Motions

Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (14:23): I move:

That this house:

- (1) acknowledges that Shooters, Fishers and Farmers members were first elected in Victoria in 2014;
- (2) recognises that the achievements of the party since then include:
 - (a) participating in the Select Committee on Victoria's Recreational Native Bird Hunting Arrangements, which resulted in the continuation of a sustainable duck season;
 - (b) unlocking public land access to Snake Island for hunting hog deer after nearly a century;
 - (c) increasing the breeds of hounds for hunting to include bluetick and tan coonhounds;
 - (d) securing \$2.1 million to seal Gifkins Road, Little River;
 - (e) securing \$3 million to meet Environment Protection Authority expectations for the North Wangaratta sports precinct;
 - (f) securing \$1.2 million for a new Southern Peninsula Rescue Squad boat;
 - (g) playing a pivotal role in the creation of a new authority, Fishing, Hunting and Outdoor Victoria;
- (3) notes that the threat to law-abiding firearm users is growing through the deliberate misunderstanding of shooting, hunting and firearms, and the continuing scare campaign run by those who simply cannot allow any recreation that they do not personally like;
- (4) recognises that countries like New Zealand, England and many other European countries have a more mature understanding of firearm usage and hunting on public land, including the compulsory use of suppressors, compared to those who oppose the same standards and usage here in Victoria; and
- (5) further notes that the re-election of the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party is the only way to ensure the future of firearm ownership in Victoria.

I am going to put on record that this is a fig jam motion, not a valedictory speech. With the recent changes to the electoral laws, the fight to stay here is going to be as difficult as it has ever been. I am not giving up. I am not going away. But now is as good a time as any to put some stuff on the record. I was first elected in 2014 to the 58th Parliament, and initially there were two Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party (SFFP) members elected. It was the first time a party devoted to this type of issue had been elected in this state, despite many trying. It may have been a perfect storm, but it was the right time.

Here is a list of some of the things that the SFFP have managed to achieve over the last 12 years. The shooting sports facilities grants: we urged the government to use funding set aside by the previous government for one location to upgrade many locations. This has been huge for shooting clubs large

and small, with important upgrades like disabled and female toilets and general upgrades to many tired facilities. These upgrades have ensured that everyone that wants to participate is able to.

Snake Island: for more than half a century hunting organisations have been trying to get public hunting allowed on Snake Island, but they failed at every turn, even when the coalition was in power. Now there is a ballot system and properly controlled and regulated hunting takes place every year. It gives a unique opportunity on a totally fair basis. Overseas, opportunities like this usually only go to the wealthy, but Snake Island gives a world-class opportunity to ordinary people.

The Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia Springvale range: we worked with the government to have the lease of the SSAA Springvale range transferred to land ownership for the organisation. We worked with external stakeholders such as the cemeteries trust to make this happen. A small part of the land was held by the cemeteries trust, which is why it was a bit of a strange thing, but we got there. It is the busiest shooting facility in the state and an important hub for training for community groups, disabled shooters, Scouts and so on. It is also the place where I met my now wife in 1997. It is not much of a story, but it is a story.

Securing \$3 million for the EPA remediation of the North Wangaratta sports precinct was a local footy club issue that became a gun club issue when the gun club was looking at being forced to shut unless it found a way to afford to clean up the EPA problem. Three million dollars is way too much for a community club to find, but we worked with the government, who stepped in to help. The club is still going. This is about keeping local community groups alive and strong.

We legalised the advertising of firearms for sale online in Victoria. Victoria was the only jurisdiction in Australia that was not allowing the sale of legally held firearms online, subject to standards, and we negotiated with the government to have this legislation passed, despite departmental pushbacks with predictions of blood on the streets. We are about making sure that where you live does not determine your access to a fair market. The internet is the great equaliser.

We tried to pass a private members bill to have firearm silencers – suppressors, whatever you want to call them – legalised in 2018. Both the government and the opposition opposed it. Hiram Maxim invented many things, some of them not so good, like machine guns. But he also invented silencers for rifles and something that most people would not think about: mufflers for cars. They do exactly the same thing; they take a sound and they quieten it. Anyhow, what we tried to do was bring Victoria into line with the rest of the world and improve safety in animal welfare. I could go on for hours about that, but this is a fairly short motion.

Hunters for the Hungry – we are trying to get wasted protein into food for charities. This is hardly a new idea, but we are still going along now, many years down the track, despite passing a motion through this place. Hungry people and food going to waste does not make sense. It is a win-win for the state that only needs political leadership to say, yes, we are not going to waste this resource.

We have had expansion of deer-hunting areas. Along with Snake Island there has been an increase of areas available for recreational hunting, despite ideological opposition. It involves the removal of deer from the environment for free – go figure. It is also back to just giving everyone a fair go. We have a culture of public land hunting that is unequalled in the world, and we need to protect that.

Everyone's favourite subject – duck hunting. I know it is not everyone's favourite recreational pastime or whatever you want to call it, but we have advocated tirelessly and constantly for keeping a recreational duck-hunting season and, as such, participated in the inquiry into the season. Despite claims to the contrary, the report was not ignored. Seven of the eight recommendations were supported by the government. It is about meaningful change that puts conservation and sustainability at the centre, not ideology.

Hound hunting – an ancient way of hunting that is tightly controlled here. Since the early 2000s there has been a set number of specific hounds allowed for hound hunting. The hounds need to be of a

temperament where they will not just attack the deer, which of course is cruel, but just bail them up. The SFFP managed to get bluetick and black and tan coonhounds added to the list – not a massive change but the first change in decades. After half a century of kicks, this was the first gain for hound hunting in generations.

The Sporting Shooters Association of Australia Victoria owns and operates a rifle range out near Little River called the SSAA Eagle Park Range. This range hosts between 30,000 and 40,000 trips up and down a dirt access road annually. The range is used by recreational shooters of all disciplines and federal and state law enforcement, as well as the occasional private rental by other concerns. It is the pre-eminent range in size and quality in Victoria, if not Australia. The dirt road is an ongoing problem, and the SFFP have managed to secure over \$2 million in funding to have that road sealed. This is about ensuring there is safe access to help grow responsible shooting.

What remains clear is that SFFP Victoria are the only party taking action, not just saying one thing and voting another way. If you value your shooting, then you must support us at the next election. Having said that, we are not just about shooting. In 2019 we tried to pass another private members bill to strengthen trespass laws in Victoria after high-profile animal activist invasions of farms with the theft of livestock. The bill was voted down, but the issue remains live. Farmers need actions, not talk.

The puppy farm inquiry – we got a committee referral into the 2016 so-called puppy farm bill. The inquiry demonstrated how legitimate breeders were being thrown under the bus as illegal breeders were not going to comply – it kind of sounds familiar. The inquiry was not about diminishing animal welfare, it was about ensuring a fair go. The final bill did have some changes that took less bark off the legitimate breeders, but it was far from ideal.

A small one, but important to me, is the Olivia's Place marquee. At Farm World one year Nicole took Becky to the Olivia's Place marquee for some privacy to feed Bec, and the marquee was showing some severe signs of age. I successfully advocated for the replacement of the marquee. It was small, but as I said, it was important to me, helping mums in my electorate give their kids the best start.

Another one was the Southern Peninsula Rescue Squad (SPRS). They are based in Blairgowrie doing volunteer –

Tom McIntosh: Hear, hear!

Jeff BOURMAN: Thank you, Mr McIntosh. You helped me with that one. They are doing volunteer marine rescue. The SPRS are an all-weather rescue service and as such need a suitable vessel for their actions. After 15 years the vessels must be inspected and they must meet a certain standard, and if the standard is not met for whatever reason, the boat is decommissioned immediately until it is fixed or another boat is procured. The SFFP secured – with Mr McIntosh's help – \$1.2 million for a new vessel. Our waterways are enjoyed by so many Victorians. This will help to make sure that they come home.

Now on to the more general stuff. When I started in 2014, I was naive and thought I would be able to fix what I thought was wrong with the current firearms laws. For those who want to make hysterical accusations, I do not want a free-for-all, but what we have is not logical and is overburdensome. Anyway, it became very clear very quickly that this was an exercise in not losing what we had, as we were always under attack from those wilfully ignorant about what shooting is about. Sure, you may not like hunting, but not all shooting is hunting, and not all hunting is shooting. But if we are obeying laws, then leave us alone. As a group we are checked, vetted and have our safe storage inspected, and as a group we have an extremely low rate of miscreants, far lower than car drivers. Yet none of the antis want to ban cars for the actions of a very few problem drivers. It is an ideological and personal dislike that has been forced upon those that just want to be left alone.

I have been shooting since I was 12. I have been a member of Victoria Police. I have been an IT nerd and I have been a member of this Parliament – and am still a member of this Parliament – but most

significantly, I have become a husband and a father, all whilst owning and using legal firearms, and I am not unique, other than the Parliament bit. We are normal, hardworking members of society, and we create so little drag, yet we bear the brunt of governmental failures and activists. Look at the Bondi tragedy, a complete failure of the government, yet the antis dove in. All we want is to be left alone.

Other countries, such as New Zealand and the United Kingdom, have a very different approach to these things despite being from the same Commonwealth. New Zealand has very strict firearm laws, yet silencers or suppressors are deregulated totally. The UK mandates their use in some places and is making moves to deregulate them too. Why? Because despite the name, they do not silence a hunting rifle; they suppress the noise. As mentioned, I did try and pass a private member's bill in 2018, but the government and the opposition, the coalition, opposed it. Talk is cheap in this place. Several times I watched a party member say one thing on an issue and vote another way. Recent events around the Firearms Amendment Bill 2026 illustrate that perfectly.

Of course, life happens around us whilst we do this role. Whilst I have been in here my personal life has seen some serious lows followed by some serious highs. The lows include the loss of Matthew, my little boy who was stillborn, now nine years ago, and the loss of my mother-in-law Sima this year. But the high would have to be the arrival of Rebecca on 24 December 2019 and her presentation in this chamber in February 2020.

So after about 160 questions without notice and 128 members statements so far – there is still a week to go – not to mention numerous contributions on various bills, here we are. If this were a valedictory, which it is not, I would thank my staff and notable people. So I am not thanking Norm Dunn, who has been working for me on and off since 2015. As two ex-cops it feels like we are working the van together, and it makes the experience a lot more bearable. Norm has been a friend and a sounding board for the stuff that we deal with here, and whilst I am always right, he occasionally gets one past me and is right too. I am also not thanking Donna Anketell, Thomas Doolin-Birthisel, Michelle and my past team, such as Cath Leask and Mark Oliver. I am not thanking those few friends that I have made here that have made my time more bearable. I am not thanking the staff, such as the Clerk, Deputy Clerk, table office, Hansard, IT – go IT – catering, attendants, security, PSOs and everyone else that makes this place work. I am not thanking my team from the SFFP Victoria, our supporters, volunteers and so on. I am also not thanking Glenn Druery for working his magic in getting me here in the face of serious opposition.

Going back in time, I will also not need to thank Robert Borsak Snr, Robert Brown, Tim Horan, the volunteers we get from New South Wales like Nudge, the Bowlers, Jess Hurley and, more recently, Robert Borsak Jr. I have missed some people, most likely, but I would also not like to thank you for your help. I will also not single out and thank Barry Howlett, now of the Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia Vic. Barry has been a friend, adviser and mentor through this entire journey. Between Barry and Norm, I have always had friendship, backup and an ongoing reality check, and I have always been the recipient of what I hoped was good-natured banter. And of course, I am not thanking Nicole and Becky for putting up with me, which has not been easy. Nicole, I promise next time I have a brain fart like this and want to get into politics or whatever, I am going to go have a lie down and get over it.

I will thank the Victorian shooting community for their support and contributions along the way. My time here has not been easy for me, as I am not a public kind of person. So, in a way, should my time here end in November this year, I will be content going back to being a PFC, and I will explain that when it will not be in *Hansard*. I will, however, continue to advocate for my community in a different way. And if I do Bradbury my way back into the 61st Parliament, I want this entire speech expunged.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (14:37): I move:

That debate on this motion be adjourned until later this day.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned until later this day.

Forest management

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (14:40): I move:

That this house:

(1) notes that:

- (a) despite native forest logging ending, Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV) continues to fell trees and remove timber from forests and national parks using the same contractors, machinery and methods previously used in the logging industry;
- (b) unlike commercial logging, these works are not subject to a binding code of practice or oversight by the Office of the Conservation Regulator;
- (c) large, old hollow-bearing trees providing irreplaceable habitats for endangered wildlife, including the greater glider and Leadbeater's possum, are being felled based on desktop assessments, with no requirement to publicly record which trees are removed, why, or what wildlife may have been affected;
- (d) community groups and scientists raising concerns have been met with non-engagement and forced to pursue costly court action as the only available accountability mechanism;
- (e) Victoria is required to demonstrate these operations comply with the new National Environmental Standard for Matters of National Environmental Significance set by the Commonwealth government;

(2) calls on the government to:

- (a) commit to genuine transparency over FFMV tree-felling and timber removal operations on public land;
- (b) extend mandatory on-the-ground threatened species surveys to all non-emergency tree-felling operations on public land;
- (c) establish an independent mechanism for community concerns regarding forest management to be properly investigated;
- (d) recognise and support the rights and aspirations of traditional owners over country, including through meaningful joint management of Victoria's forests; and
- (e) ensure that Victoria's forests and the wildlife that depend on them are genuinely protected.

Victoria is home to some of the most unique and magnificent forests in the world, from the temperate rainforests in the lowlands of East Gippsland to the mountain ash forests of the Central Highlands. They are the lands which Victoria's First Peoples have cared for and been custodians over for more than 65,000 years. It is exactly why many have fought for so long to end native forest logging in this state. Traditional owners, community groups, scientists, environmental lawyers and many of us here in this chamber today celebrated the official end of native forest logging in 2024. It has been 2½ years since we said goodbye and good riddance to VicForests. Now we have to reflect on what has changed and what has not.

When this place passed the Sustainable Forests (Timber) Repeal Bill 2024, I, alongside many others, warned that the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action was starting to look more and more like VicForests 2.0. At the time I said that it is difficult to envisage how native forest management can be improved substantially without corresponding reforms to DEECA's fire management activities. I think it is important to be very clear and very specific about the operations I am referring to because, frankly, there seems to be very poor understanding of what is going on in our forests, even from some of those within the government. Forest Fire Management Victoria undertakes a range of operations that involve the felling of trees and the removal of timber. These include the treatment of what it calls hazardous trees, strategic fuel breaks and the so-called treatment of debris from weather events. They may all have different purposes, but these terms are used to cover up the reality that they all involve the felling of trees or removal of timber from forests – the destruction of habitat. For the local communities who fought so hard to end commercial native logging, witnessing these operations now being conducted by their own government is devastating. These destructive

practices, commonly referred to in the community as loophole logging, are happening right now across the state.

David Attenborough once said:

No one will protect what they don't care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced.

This rings true for these people in my community who have lived, breathed and loved these natural spaces. You cannot expect someone to understand the value of a forest by simply looking at a map, reading a report or hearing about hectares of land being cleared. You have to experience it. You have to walk beneath the trees, see the sunlight filtering through the leaves and listen to the birdsong around you. I know for a fact many northern Victorians listening to this speech are tired of waking up to learn of the destruction of the natural spaces surrounding their homes. These are the places where people have grown up, explored, walked, camped, visited with families and made memories. They are places that people have come to know and love. When we destroy our natural space, we are not just losing it physically, we are also losing the opportunity for generations to experience it and therefore care about it and ultimately protect it.

I want to make another thing abundantly clear. The purpose of this motion is not to question the need for these operations or the quality of the assessments conducted by the department. What this motion principally calls for is for the government to require genuine transparency and oversight, because the current situation where the department is charged with delivering, assessing and assuring operations with really significant repercussions for wildlife and habitat is clearly unacceptable. What are these repercussions? Over 2000 plant and animal species are at risk of extinction across the country, with one of the leading causes of this decline being habitat destruction.

As report after report has shown us, the situation in Victoria, Australia's most cleared state, is particularly dire. In April of this year the federal government officially listed alpine ash forests as an endangered ecosystem. Many are warning that mountain ash risks the same fate. Not only are these the world's tallest flowering trees, but they are also some of the most carbon-dense in the world, storing up to 10,000 tonnes of carbon per hectare. Research from 2025 found half of remaining habitat for Australian species at risk of extinction is outside of protected areas. Native forest logging operations have a part to play in this. As forests and grasslands are bulldozed, vital ecosystems are lost and many species are left with nowhere to go.

Researchers from Griffith University and the University of Queensland found that the last remaining habitat for 305 of Australia's critically endangered species could be cleared if nothing is done to protect it. What the department classifies as debris are homes. What it marks for removal as hazardous are, in many cases, the most irreplaceable structures in the entire forest ecosystem. Fallen and standing dead trees are important habitat in forests for animals to shelter and to breed in, and over 300 species of wildlife – gliders, possums, owls, bats, parrots and more – depend on tree hollows that can take centuries to form. As WWF conservation scientist Dr Kita Ashman said, a tree planted right now will not have a usable greater glider hollow in our lifetime. As well as being habitat for wildlife, forests are vital for our water security and for carbon storage, and they are of great cultural significance to First Nations people.

Decisions to fell these trees must face scrutiny. In May of 2024 a greater glider was found dead next to an area logged to create fuel breaks along the Yarra Ranges National Park. It should be obvious to everyone in this place that I would find the death of an endangered greater glider tragic, but the details surrounding the situation really exemplify my concerns with forest management. It is also the situation which prompted Warburton Environment to begin litigation against DEECA. FFMV, the DEECA secretary and federal and state ministers' offices were all warned about sightings of greater gliders and Leadbeater's possums in trees identified for removal, and yet they removed them anyway. This happened as part of FFMV's large-scale hazardous tree removal operations in areas of high conservation value across 2024–25 in the Central Highlands. Field surveys and on-ground verification documented more than a thousand hollow-bearing trees that were either destroyed or marked for

removal across a relatively small defined area of the Yarra forest. Again, detailed written warnings were provided to the Victorian government prior to and during the early stages of operations, documenting hollow-bearing trees occupied by greater gliders and records of Leadbeater's possum within and adjacent to areas affected.

It is obviously up to the court to make its own judgement on whether the department's actions breached the federal Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, but what has been revealed raises significant concerns. FFMV's chief fire officer acknowledged under cross-examination that decisions to remove habitat trees relied on desktop assessment, not ground survey, and that they frequently ignored advice from DEECA and the community.

In 2022 the Australian government promised zero new extinctions. On Monday it was National Threatened Species Day, but what we need are not awareness days or commitments on paper. Our forests and animals cannot wait for that. We need to understand what is happening in these places to ensure their survival. But right now felling operations conducted by the government are shrouded in secrecy, with no transparency requirements or independent oversight when it comes to their ecological impact. Commercial logging was subject to the binding Code of Practice for Timber Production 2014 and oversight by the Office of the Conservation Regulator. Although this regulatory framework was far from perfect, it at least existed.

Through section 62 of the Forests Act 1958 the department is given broad powers and requirements to carry out proper and sufficient work for both the immediate prevention and suppression of fire and the planned prevention of fire. There are no legislative requirements on these powers. Unlike the Code of Practice for Timber Production, which regulated the commercial industry, the Code of Practice for Bushfire Management on Public Land 2025 is yet another non-binding departmental guideline. This is despite FFMV using many of the same contractors, methods and machinery that VicForests once did. The recent introduction of the forest by-products framework, allowing FFMV to sell the so-called by-products extracted from our forests, has made the situation even more concerning.

This is particularly relevant for the storm clean-up operation that has recently concluded in the Wombat forest, in my own electorate, five years after the storm first hit. Wombat Forestcare was granted a 2023 injunction to stop logging by VicForests. The court found that the evidence did not support the state's claim that logging was necessary to reduce fire hazard. VicForests was then disbanded and the responsibility handed over to FFMV, leaving Wombat Forestcare with no avenues to fight logging due to the department's broad powers. More than 50,000 cubic metres of timber has been removed from Wombat State Forest from 2021 to June this year.

Putting it plainly, we have the same people doing many of the same things in the same ways to forests, which now includes selling the timber as well. The difference, as articulated by the government, is the scale and the purpose – that FFMV are not felling nearly as many trees as the commercial industry once did. It is difficult to accept this claim when they do not actually volunteer the information to prove it. As I have said, in this motion I am not contesting the purpose; there are plenty of other people who will do that. The department does need, though, to conduct works of some kind to address bushfire risk, but when the process and outcome do not change, the scrutiny should not either.

This is not an abstract discussion about governance and regulatory best practice. It is clear that the system is failing. It has forced the community to act, whether that be our small, hardworking local forest groups or our state's environmental organisations. They are the closest thing we have to checks and balances on this system. There are far too many organisations and individuals to name them all, but there are some in particular that I want to recognise in this motion: Sue McKinnon and the Kinglake Friends of the Forest; Nic Fox and Warburton Environment; Matt, Ben and Jordy from the Victorian National Parks Association; the Wilderness Society; Wildlife of the Central Highlands; Sarah Rees; Kath Wilson; and so many others who are doing this work. They are some of the hardest working activists I have had the privilege of working alongside. On understanding this issue, which is incredibly hidden, incredibly deceptive – and I believe at times intentionally so, considering the very limited

volunteer transparency the department engage in – they are truly the only reason we know as much as we know today, through freedom-of-information requests, litigation, or broader activism and advocacy. That is not accountability from the government; that is a community subsidising the oversight of a government agency with its own time and own money while that agency actively resists scrutiny. The inspector-general for emergency management provides independent oversight for bushfire response and prevention for people and our homes. That role is important. But why do we not have the same for animals and their homes?

I have tried to be very particular about the language that I am using here today. I have really tried to focus on what I and many others view as a governance and a regulatory failure, because this seems to be yet another issue that has somehow descended into a culture war, which is exactly what I expect to happen after I have spoken in this debate today. The government will tell us that FFMV follow a rigorous planning and approvals process with extensive reporting and that these operations are necessary to prevent and fight fires. The Nationals, perhaps, will tell us that forests need active management and that these measures would be unworkable and risk limiting the state's ability to prevent fires. The system, as it stands, raises enormous questions no matter what side of the debate we are on. The fact is that Victorians have concerns, and many within the community attempting to raise those concerns have, frankly, been treated with contempt.

The tone of the debate and where I expect it to go today is not the debate I am seeking to have. It is a debate about transparency. It is a debate about regulation. It is a debate about oversight. No matter what side of the table we sit on when having this conversation, that is something we all support because if people believe these things are necessary and there is the evidence to back it up and to prove that, then why cannot the public see that? That would not only be a wonderful thing for the activists who care about our forests and the people who live in my community, who live among this destruction, it would be a good thing for the people who believe that this is required. Instead of having this constant argument about the destruction of our forests and whether or not it is required and the government and the department saying 'Hey, it is. Why don't you just trust us?' all we are asking is to see that evidence. If what they say is true, and if what they are adamant about is correct, that evidence would already exist. They claim to conduct flora and fauna surveys, but they do not release them. They claim to undertake environmental impact assessments, but we have never seen them. When attempts are made to receive them, they have fought it every which way.

I believe that this is not an issue that people do not care about; it is just an issue that is very easy to be confused by. When the justification is community safety, it is really easy to accept it from there. I am not seeking to have a discussion about safety or whether or not measures are required for that. There are plenty of people who are already out there having that debate. I am just asking for some transparency, some regulation, some oversight and decision-making clarity about when these operations are undertaken, because our forests are far too precious and the wildlife who call them home cannot be brought back once they are sent to extinction. The Premier has said that he is taking our state in a new direction. He is on the record since becoming the Premier that he supports national parks and that under his leadership integrity is not optional. Well, if this government truly does want to reset its relationship with environmental advocates in this state – and let me tell you that is not going to be any easy task after the last four years – this at least is a pretty low ask and it is a pretty wonderful place to start. In saying that, I commend the motion to the house.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (14:57): I am pleased to rise to speak on Ms Purcell's motion regarding tree felling and timber removal by Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic) in various state forests. I think it is important to say at the outset in the context of the debate that we are having, whilst not expressly in the terms of Ms Purcell's contribution, that there is a view expressed by some in the wider public debate that effectively there is still native timber harvesting, native timber logging in Victoria. I think that is a misleading claim to make. It is very clear on the facts and on the actions of both the government and the Parliament that commercial native timber harvesting

ended in Victoria in 2024 and that that was a very significant moment for environmental protection, particularly the preservation of large swathes of the native forests here in the state of Victoria.

As a consequence of the government's decision to end commercial native timber harvesting, we have abolished VicForests, who was responsible for timber harvesting on all public land; we have repealed the Sustainable Forests (Timber) Act 2004, which provided the legislative framework for timber harvesting on public land; and we have terminated Victoria's regional forest agreements, which provided the authorisation for commercial timber harvesting on public land under federal law. The facts matter in this debate, and at the outset it is important to be very, very clear that commercial timber harvesting on public land does not happen in Victoria, under laws this Parliament passed two years ago. Of course different provisions apply on private land, and there are different guidelines and planning provisions that are in place there and other regulatory frameworks. But the purpose of this motion is to critique the actions on government land. That is the point of what the law says and what the regulatory framework is, which is important to be clear about because there may be some contributions in the broader public debate that seek to muddy that and certainly question that.

Then we can also look at the scale of activity, and Ms Purcell in her motion said she wanted some transparency and wanted there to be some facts on the table. From commercial native timber harvesting on public land in Victoria over the last 10 years, so the last decade, up to the cessation of the activity, VicForests sold an average of 1.2 million tonnes of timber per year to sawmills. VicForests, when commercial timber harvesting was allowed on public land, sold 1.2 million tonnes of timber per year to sawmills. The issue that Ms Purcell's motion is dealing with is what Forest Fire Management Victoria does by way of by-product removal on public land. In 2022–23 Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) by-products totalled around 13,000 tonnes. In the 10 years prior to the cessation of native timber harvesting on public land VicForests sold 1.2 million tonnes of timber a year. The by-product in 2022–23 was 13,000 tonnes. 1.2 million tonnes to 13,000 tonnes: that is the scale of change that we are talking about in a short period of time. In 2024–25 there were no by-products sold. The mover of the motion wanted facts inserted into the debate, so we have done that by looking at what the law says and by looking at what is actually happening in terms of the amount of by-products that are being sold.

We understand that, yes, even in the activities that DEECA does, when we remove the by-products of fire protection work or remove trees that were felled by storms, there is activity that goes on. Another one of the critiques is that it is the same people doing the same things with the same machines. I think in response to that you can clearly say that there is obviously some of the same machinery or similar machinery that is used to do work on the removal of trees, but it is done for a fundamentally different purpose at a fundamentally different scale. To not acknowledge that important distinction I think discredits the validity of the rest of the arguments that are trying to be made.

The purpose of the activity that DEECA is undertaking in these forests and that Forest Fire Management is doing is to ensure that, for example, there are adequate firebreaks in place across large swathes of public land. We know that we have had instances as recently as January when we have had some of the largest forest fires on public land burning in the state of Victoria ever. Hundreds of thousands of hectares in the Walwa fire in January were burning on public land. There is an absolute need to do fire management on public land, and that is what DEECA is doing. We heard evidence at the Environment and Planning Committee's inquiry into the 2026 summer fires from the chief fire officer of DEECA, who said that they did not think they were going to hold the Walwa fire and that the Walwa fire had the potential, given the scale and intensity of the burning it was doing, to go from where it started up in Walwa all the way through the Great Dividing Range and down into Gippsland, and that would have been one of the most significant and catastrophic fires that Victoria has seen in those circumstances. But they managed to hold it through the really significant firefighting efforts of the forest fire management crews in January.

I want to put on the record the outstanding job that those FFMVic firefighters did in containing that blaze. It still burnt over hundreds of thousands of hectares across the north-east of the state, but it could

have been a lot worse. The work and the efforts that the FFMVic crews do to maintain access roads into forests and to ensure that the firefighting that can be done there is done safely are really important to contain what is a constant and significant threat to the state of Victoria, and that is from bushfires. We are one of the most bushfire-prone areas in the world. I will leave the storm recovery stuff to one side; I do not have time to go through it now.

I think in the context of this debate I will come back to where I started. The regulatory framework is very clear: there is no commercial timber harvesting – that is, timber harvesting on public land – and the scale of the by-product that is removed is so vastly different to that which was occurring when commercial timber harvesting did occur. With 1.2 million tonnes harvested when native timber harvesting existed versus 13,000 tonnes today, you can see the scale of difference from the numbers themselves.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (15:07): In the early days of January 2020 I took a load of kangaroo fodder up that was donated by volunteers. I took it up on the back of a trailer. I got through a checkpoint, and I took it up to a wildlife volunteer who was living up past Bruthen. We stopped and we swapped over the fodder pellets and the like, and she told me, because she had been right on the edge of the fire, about the Black Summer fire. She explained how kangaroos had hopped burnt out of the bush and how in and around homes that there were shrivelled up and fried animals – possums and the like. She told me how she witnessed birds flying over the smoke and the like and just falling out of the sky due to the intense heat of the bushfires.

The Arthur Rylah Institute assessed that fire event. They assessed that roughly 1.5 million hectares were burnt in that bushfire and that 444 species lost 50 per cent of their habitat. We are not talking about one possum. We are not talking about one sad koala. We are talking about thousands upon thousands of our native animals, birds, insects and the like – 444 species lost 50 per cent of their habitat. When we look at this debate – and I thank the member for bringing it – at first glance it appears to be about transparency. It appears to be about the betterment and survival of native species and about accountability, and these are objects and discussions that everyone in this house would support and could support. But I can only go on what the motion says in front of me. This motion makes a series of assumptions that I as a Nationals member for Eastern Victoria do not accept, and I am assuming I have the support of my Liberal and National colleagues. It is about active forest management being inherently suspect.

Looking at this motion, the first part makes the point that despite the end of native logging the same contractors, machinery and methods used in logging are now used by Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic). Well, I do not accept the premise or the imputation that we should be fearful of that – that it is a bad thing, that these people are not good people or do not conduct themselves in a lawful manner. I know and I could list a whole lot of names of people down in East Gippsland. When the fires were coming to Cann River, Bruthen, Buchan, Wingan River and the like, there were people who jumped on their machines and tried to save homes and communities and forests and put containment lines and dirt lines in to help not only people but communities and the bush survive. They did not ask whether the person in Orbost happened to be a greenie or a non-greenie; they just went to the home and did it. I respect them enormously and am forever indebted for the work that they have done in this space. So I reject the premise that because you worked for VicForests, somehow you are a lesser person. That is not acceptable in any regime.

Let me go on and have a look into this motion. In relation to stewardship, I will not step away from the fact that we do need active management of our forest systems. They are living systems. They are often under threat from out-of-control catastrophic bushfires – there is no doubt about it, 1.5 million hectares – and also drought and storms and diseases. If we had time, I could talk for an hour on invasive species and pests. They are real threats to our native species. Hazardous trees must be removed. They should be removed; they need to be removed. They needed to be removed back in that period of time due to the fact that we had to get people and machinery into Mallacoota to save lives.

Again, I will only go on what I am reading here. Let us look at part (2) of what the motion calls for. The motion calls on the government to extend mandatory on-the-ground threatened species surveys to all significant tree-felling operations on public land. That is about our Forest Fire Management people, who I again extend my thanks to. Some of the VicForests contractors have moved over, but there have been for many, many years civil contractors that have answered the call and put their name down with the department and done, again, exemplary work to protect people, communities and the forest. The motion states:

extend mandatory on-the-ground threatened species surveys...

What this is in fact asking is for – and I will use the term – ‘very well-meaning citizens’ to go out and do these mandatory on-the-ground threatened species surveys. That is how I read this. It does not say for the department to do it. It does not say ‘someone in Forest Fire Management’. It says ‘mandatory on-the-ground’ for all significant tree-felling operations. I read that this could mean mandatory for every significant tree. Well, depending on who you are, every single tree could be significant. That means they are asking the government department to go and have ‘citizen science’ go out there and assess every single tree. Do you know how dangerous this could be, not only to the citizens but to those people who are employed through FFMV?

Here is just one document, which happens to be the Code of Practice for Bushfire Management on Public Land 2025. It is an updated version because they closed the timber industry. We know that the Nationals opposed the closure of the timber industry, and I will leave that there for the moment; my record stands on that particular topic. But what this motion is saying could put a halt to basically every tree being removed. Every single tree would have to be assessed by somebody. These are dynamic situations. We can be in a fire situation on a fireground, and this motion asks people to go in and make an extended mandatory assessment. Otherwise, are they asking to outsource it? If they are outsourcing it, that is what the department already does – that is what FFMV does. Trained professionals go in and assess if those trees are dangerous. Sometimes out there they call them killer trees, because if they are on the side of the road, they could be burning from inside. They might look all right from outside to the untrained eye, but they could fall over the road and kill somebody – a family with kids in the car. So I do not think we should take these things lightly.

The other point I would put on the record is that this code of conduct is not, as this motion states, binding. The word ‘binding’ is very interesting, but this particular code looks at and adheres to the Forests Act 1958 and the Conservation, Forests and Lands Act 1987. There is a part in the motion about traditional owner obligations. I will just pick up the point – and I am speaking about people I have spoken to – that not every traditional owner out there in Wombat forest was happy to leave that timber on the ground for five years. Many of them wanted to take it and use it. It was the greenie element that said, ‘No, no. We want you to do what you feel you need to do, unless it’s opposed to our ideology.’ Well, that just does not make sense. This also gives rise to the traditional owner obligations, the environmental obligations, the emergency management obligations, the fire prevention and suppression obligations and occupational health and safety. I do not want to stand up here and endorse actions that will either see good citizens, who may be misguided, standing under a tree as it falls or put the life of people employed to do this work at risk.

The other thing in the motion is: at the end of the day, is this just code for ‘We want to be enabled to litigate, to stop this work as a whole’? The mover might come back and say she is not saying that, but this is what the motion actually adheres to. We know that the greatest threat to species is out-of-control, catastrophic bushfires. We need active management. We need people who know it on the ground, and we need to respect those people working on the ground, just like we respect all sorts of conservationists who plant trees. I wonder how many Wilderness Society people actually have a program to plant trees. I oppose this motion entirely.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (15:18): I rise to speak on this important motion, and the Greens will be strongly supporting it and thank Ms Purcell for moving it. I really just want to put on

the record that we agree with everything she has raised regarding the ecological and oversight issues we are seeing right now, because what we are talking about at Forest Fire Management Victoria, or FFMV – the destruction of ancient trees, the reliance on desktop assessments, the lack of any proper oversight or transparency with these operations – all threatens Victoria's precious collapsing ecosystems. What is more, it threatens the safety of Victorians. I appreciate there have been different views expressed here, but bad science, wanton destruction of forests and lack of accountability do not make Victorians safer; they actually put us at risk.

There is one very simple but obvious example I want to use to illustrate this point. Some giant trees in rainforests have evolved to withstand fires. They create a natural buffer that can at least slow down roaring bushfires. If you destroy that part of a rainforest, those giant trees can be replaced by grasses and shrubs and other low-lying vegetation. That kind of low-level vegetation is much, much more flammable typically than the tree you have just destroyed. When that happens, you are not only destroying irreplaceable natural wonders in and of themselves, releasing tonnes of trapped carbon dioxide into the air and risking endangered species like the greater glider and Leadbeater's possum; you are actually increasing the risk of bushfires.

These are not just hypotheticals. Right now the government is planning strategic firebreaks across the Central Highlands which will total 225 kilometres in length. Parts of those firebreaks – 21 kilometres – will cut through protected parts of the Maroondah water catchment in the Yarra Ranges National Park. That means FFMV is set to destroy rainforests as well as old-growth habitat for greater gliders and Leadbeater's possums. We saw them do this in 2024, and we saw the results: a dead greater glider. This shows that FFMV is not surveying properly and not listening to warnings from independent scientists and lacks effective oversight, because it was not FFMV that reported the death of that greater glider. It was left to citizen scientists, including members of Wildlife of the Central Highlands, or WOTCH, and Victorian National Parks Association, or VNPA. And it was up to lawyers from Environmental Justice Australia to send the allegations to the federal and state environment ministers that FFMV's operations contravened the federal Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, or EPBC act, which requires referral, assessment and approval of all operations likely to have significant impacts on listed threatened species. Critically, the dead greater glider was discovered after WOTCH and VNPA had already sent warnings to everyone they could – FFMV, state and federal environment ministers, all regulators – that the destruction of old hollow-bearing trees along 250 kilometres for fuel breaks within the Yarra Ranges National Park in 2024 was destroying critical habitat for threatened wildlife like gliders, Leadbeater's possums, gang-gang cockatoos and swift parrots.

Now we are seeing the exact same kind of warnings as FFMV prepares for even more fuel breaks within the Yarra Ranges National Park. Looking at the next round of firebreaks, I want to read from a new report into those firebreaks by Chris Taylor and Professor David Lindenmayer from the Fenner School of Environment and Society at ANU. Mr Taylor and Professor Lindenmayer call for the government to abandon plans to establish a strategic firebreak in the Maroondah catchment as well as other forests in the Central Highlands on environmental grounds, because once again FFMV is set to destroy large old hollow-bearing trees that provide critical greater glider habitat. It is set to destroy endangered old-growth alpine ash forests. Victoria has already lost 77 per cent of its old growth in the last 25 years, and now these works will threaten the remaining estimated 0.47 per cent of alpine ash forests left in the Central Highlands region. The strategic firebreak is even set to destroy cool temperate rainforests between Mount Donna Buang and Mount Boobyalla, a rare Gondwana relic ecosystem in Victoria. These are the kinds of forests that specifically protect Victorians from bushfires and are replaced with the kinds of shrubs and grasses that increase the risk of bushfires. To quote directly Taylor and Lindenmayer:

To the best of our collective knowledge, there is currently no credible evidence that strategic firebreaks are effective in limiting the spread of wildfires in tall, wet eucalypt forests or Gondwanic rainforests. Conversely, wet, shaded environments like Gondwanic rainforests are likely to act as an ecological control ... on spatial contagion in wildfire. The likely limited effectiveness of strategic firebreaks – typically 40 m wide – is

consistent with the much longer mean spotting distance of wildfires in south-eastern Australia ... If the aim of strategic firebreaks is to conduct backburns, the risks associated with such activities are considerable, given the levels of biomass in tall, wet eucalypt forests and the probability of them instigating crown fires. The efficacy of establishing firebreaks through tall wet forests and Gondwanic rainforests appears questionable, and unlikely to be either ecologically effective or cost-effective.

We have no confidence FFMV is incorporating any of this new science or even that they are getting these warnings at all, because, as the motion notes, these activities are often knocked up on a desktop in a concrete jungle far from the forest, and results and modelling are not actively published so they are not subject to any kind of oversight, regulation or even fact-checking, unless you count the valiant citizen scientists who are checking for dead gliders.

I should add that none of this is to suggest that FFMV staff are acting maliciously or that we need a wholesale ban on fire management operations, but there are serious structural problems at FFMV – and I think that is what Ms Purcell has highlighted clearly – which threaten both our communities and shrinking natural ecosystems. Even VicForests answered to the Office of the Conservation Regulator. But right now no-one is regulating FFMV or checking if the trees destroyed by their fuel breaks are not just going straight to timber mills. Instead of fixing this loophole, Labor seem more interested in expanding or even formalising it with their state forest by-product framework this year.

What would the required structural reform actually look like? Back in 2024, when the government formally repealed VicForests, the Greens created a sensible road map to prevent the exact issues we are seeing right now under FFMV. Our amendments to that repeal act would have, one, mandated ecological reporting ahead of fire prevention and recovery works, including specific reference to the action statements for threatened and endangered species, and empowered both the Office of the Conservation Regulator and the EPA to investigate ecological impacts from FFMV's fire management works. We also sought to ban the commercial sale of timber collected under fire prevention and recovery works. Sadly, Labor voted down those amendments from the Greens. Since then we have seen FFMV destroy irreplaceable native forests, the death of a greater glider from a fuel break, as I have mentioned, and research suggesting that some of these operations are actually more likely to increase bushfires, as I have stated.

There is no time like the present, and if the government wants to create a smarter, safer fire management system, then we have got a road map. We have got a Greens private members bill to close the logging loopholes. Our bill, the Forest Legislation Amendment (Closing Logging Loopholes) Bill 2026, would tackle the four key loopholes that we are seeing in Victoria, reforming forest fire management processes and preventing them from being exploited by logging companies, making it illegal for mills in Victoria to process native forest timber from anywhere in Australia, including those old forests that are now being destroyed in Tasmania, banning the logging of native forests on private land and futureproofing Victoria's ban on commercial logging by repealing those laws that would enable future governments to bring back native logging on public land.

The sad fact is all of those logging loopholes still exist right now in Victoria. We are seeing precious old-growth forests destroyed and harvested in the name of fire management, we are seeing the logging of native forests on private land – a responsibility that the state government passes on to local councils – and we have seen logging companies exploit taxpayer funding which, instead of transitioning workers into sustainable jobs like they were supposed to, has gone on to prop up native forest logging in states like Tasmania and ship that timber back to be processed at Victorian mills. For some reason Labor refuse to cement their ban on commercial-scale native logging, and there are still two laws in place that mean future governments could bring it back with the stroke of a pen: the Forests (Wood Pulp Agreement) Act 1996 and parts of the Forests Act 1958, which allow the kinds of forest produce licences enabling logging and selling native timber. Labor say native forest logging is over, but clearly they have left loopholes everywhere. Victorians deserve genuine protections for their precious, dwindling native forests. It is time we reformed FFMV, created some genuine oversight and

finally closed the native logging loopholes. Labor say native forest logging is over, but they have left loopholes everywhere.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (15:28): I am just going to be really honest from the front here: I have been trying to get my head around all of this for about four years now, and I do not have all the answers. I am going to say that straight up. What I do know is we have got a warming climate. We are probably going to hit 1.6 degrees above pre-industrial levels this year. We are probably going to hit 2, and we are going into the twos in coming decades. Things are going to get drier and we are going to get more severe weather events, and somehow we have all got to figure out a way to get on and get some sustainable solutions to how we manage our public assets and our public land. We have got communities to think about that have had severe firestorm events, and there is a lot of trauma within them. We have got people who are really passionate about looking after our spaces, our bush, our various rainforest types at different altitudes and temperatures and different animals right across Victoria.

The one thing we can be sure of is that this challenge is not going away and this challenge is not going to get easier. We have had a massive change, with 1.8 million hectares in the public estate where native forestry has ended, and that has been really difficult for communities that have historically worked in that space. It is a piece of work that is still ongoing to support other industries and other activity in their local economies and make sure that those towns survive. I think we can all agree that right across Victoria we need towns – smaller towns and further-out towns – to be strong and to survive for the good of our state. I think we all agree on that and that is really important. We want to make sure that we are not having threatened species become extinct. There is one group I have been really proud of. Across the chamber we got the Parliamentary Friends of Landcare established this term. All parties are involved. It is 40 years since Landcare was first established. It was first established here in Victoria. We celebrate that here. Whether it is ‘friends of’ groups in metro areas, whether it is farmers or whether it is country towns, everyone is working together to improve their local environments.

The other really important part of that is educating our kids. I remember when I was growing up we were doing so much work around the salinity of creeks and all that sort of thing that had happened through trees being taken out on farms. That education piece is really important, but I think we need to somehow get to a point where we can acknowledge that we do need to manage our forests, particularly around towns. We need to acknowledge that we have got to use the best evolving science and the best science that meets the challenges with the temperatures and the climate that we have. I think we have to accept that no-one is going to find purity in their policy. No-one is going to find absolute perfection from one end of the state to the other. But we have got to try to get the best sustainable outcome we can.

For me personally I look at Mirboo North after the windstorm came through. I was actually there three days before. I went back in about 36 hours afterwards and the town was like a war zone. There were trees absolutely everywhere. I am sure no-one is saying this, but to think that we cannot get in and get that timber up and off the ground – and that took a long, long time because of the trauma for that town to get around what it needed to do. To think that we cannot get on and get a town back on its feet – I would hope that no-one’s saying that. Out of that work that went on there there was mulch that was donated to community, there was firewood donated to community, there were logs for community projects and there were 70 root-ball trees that were used by the East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority. I was with the CMA just out of Bairnsdale looking at the work they are doing on getting the willows out and getting the biodiversity happening for about 30 or 40 k on the river up north of Bairnsdale, as has been done on the Snowy and as has been done on other rivers. There was also commercial sale of sawlog, which was donated back to the Mirboo North and District Community Foundation, which is a deeply respected and loved foundation.

Whether you are looking at an event like that, whether you are looking at a roadside where fires are going to come through or whether you are looking at putting in lines of protection for towns like Mallacoota, where it is a long, long way between them and the next firebreak or the next town, I think

you need to be realistic about what needs to happen. My colleague Mr Batchelor talked about 1.2 million tonnes of timber per year going to sawmills, and now we are down to 13,000 tonnes in 2023–24 and nothing in 2024–25. I think we have got to keep all that in mind and really just keep in mind the communities that are still finding their way through all those changes.

I also want to talk about plantations. I think plantations play a really important role. We need timber for our building industry. We need timber for so much of everything we depend on, and we do need to find sustainable options. We should be sourcing materials here within our own state. We heard contributions from others talking about the problems of bringing in material from other states. So let us do it here. Let us have the jobs here, let us have the material here and let us make it sustainable. Let us make sure it is in a system that we are happy is environmentally sustainable and economically sustainable. Because I always come back to the point that you cannot find economic sustainability without environmental sustainability. That is why I am so passionate on climate, because if we do not get our climate right and we do not get our local environments right, we cannot get the economics right, and we all depend on the economics to ensure that our communities can be sustainable.

The other side of this, which I am really passionate about, is tourism. I am really passionate about environmental tourism. It was 7 hours to get up to Errinundra National Park. That was fantastic. There are trees that are 400 years old. Out of Orbost, we went up a couple of hours on the bus, and we saw businesses who would previously have been connected to the timber industry. We had all the emerging small businesses that are starting to really thrive in the tourism space, and they all want the same thing. They all want to look at the bush tracks that have been up in the bush from the native timber industry and how we make sure we keep those open, not only from a fire perspective and making sure we are ready in those sorts of scenarios, but also for getting tourists up to see some of the incredible natural assets that we have.

If we are asking Victorians to pay taxes and to have that money go into supporting parks and rangers and go into various things that ensure that our natural environments are staying intact and species are not going extinct, then people need to have the opportunity to explore them. As Melbourne becomes a bigger and bigger city, it is such a great opportunity for people to get 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 hours out of out of Melbourne. My preference is in an EV. We will get the EV charging, and you have all heard me talk about that, particularly those that were on the inquiry. But let us get that really sustainable tourism industry in our state. Let us keep our money in our state. Let us make sure our environments are sustainable. I think there are ways that together we can find a way through. When we are using the best science but when we are being respectful of each other and when we are being respectful of people's different points of view, we can find something that can last decades and hopefully see so much of our precious bush get back to a state that is sustainable and goes into the next century.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (15:38): The reality is that in 2024 Labor blindsided communities in my electorate by bringing forward and fast-tracking the closure of the native timber industry by six years. Now, 2½ years on, we have seen that the talk of a transition for the native timber industry has proved to be as empty as it was for the Latrobe Valley power industry. That is how people in my communities feel. That is how I feel. The motion here, I believe, speaks to one side of the story. I really appreciated Mr McIntosh's contribution. It really did in so many ways sum up what I believe is the truth here. It cannot be all or nothing; it cannot be one or the other. There has to be a pathway through the middle where we acknowledge the science and we realise that things can be done better. The demonisation of the native timber industry is not okay. And I know: I championed this industry for two years before it was shut in this place and before that. But the reality is it was an industry that needed to improve, not an industry that needed to end. There has got to be an acknowledgement that we can improve, but there does need to be balance.

I will go through some facts about what the native timber industry was. I worked during the 2020–21 bushfires in Gippsland, and I believe that we need to acknowledge that there is not this view up in the country that people hate the forest, that they are there destroying it – no. When there are fires there, these are the same people that have cared for the forests, that have opened up tracks for fire trucks to

get in, that have rescued animals. The linear and binary view of these issues is, quite frankly, wrong. There is a way that we can balance love and care of wildlife, local economies, local communities, human life, animal life, the management of forests and fire protection.

The mover of the motion spoke about facts, and there are some regarding what was the native timber industry that I want to go through right now. One is that 94 per cent of public native forest estate was locked up in parks, reserves and water catchments prior to the closure. There was no widespread destruction of forests; there was not this environmental vandalism. Of that, 6 per cent was available for timber production, and around 0.03 per cent of that area was harvested each year. That is the truth; it is a fact. Our native resource is renewable. All areas harvested were replanted, and this replanting had huge environmental benefits. Do you know why? Because as timber grows and is renewed, it captures carbon. That is the reality of it. Once it is grown it stops doing that. It is when it is replanted, and that is extremely important for our atmosphere. It is an important piece of the puzzle. Our native forest industry was environmentally and ecologically sustainable. Prior to harvesting there would be intense surveys taking place, and these preharvesting surveys would identify the presence or otherwise of threatened species, flora and fauna, and this is important, because it is not something that we are getting with the narratives. The facts tell something different. There was not one species of animal that had become extinct because of the native timber industry, so to claim otherwise is quite frankly false. Old growth was set aside from harvesting for many years, and in 2021, five years ago, it was the regrowth from the 1939 bushfires that was being harvested. Did you know that? You do not get these facts when you hear this emotional narrative.

I probably do not have time for all this. I will not go through the other facts, but I will say that there is a continued use of native hardwood, yet now we do not have a readily available supply from sustainable and ethical sources. I do not understand why the people that champion this narrative have not gone on about the connections to modern slavery with some of the hardwood timber harvesting. I do not understand why they have not gone on and spoken about the connection to terrorism in these countries that have got native timber harvesting that have become a source since we have shut ours down. That is important.

It is no secret that the closure of the native timber industry has been felt most by regional communities that are already struggling to provide employment in the area, especially in Gippsland, which is still recovering from the closure of Hazelwood and Carter Holt. And there is going to be the transition away from coal. There has not been a proper transition. The closure of the Victorian native timber industry has been absolutely devastating for regional communities. In this place – I said it so many times in the lead-up, because there were stories and people reaching out to me before this – I kept urging the government to recognise that when you destroy an industry, you destroy the community that relies upon that industry, and that is exactly what we have seen. The industries that powered this state, built this state, have been demonised, and those who work in them have been treated like environmental vandals, and it is wrong. The reality is, if you have succeeded in the state of Victoria, it is because of them. The reason that Victoria used to be the jewel in the crown was because of our cheap and accessible power. That is the reality. Every single one of us is benefiting because of them, and I hate the demonisation of these good people.

Not only that, the workers of the native timber industry would take their machinery and would clear tracks for fire trucks and would get rid of the undergrowth so we would not have these huge burning fires. That is the reality. Is it all or nothing? No. Should we do better? Yes. That is the reality of it, and I hate the fact that these good people that care for and rescue animals, that care for and rescue human life and that care for the native environment are demonised and just pigeonholed into this one little, narrow trope. It is wrong. These are the people that have kept the undergrowth managed, that have turned out and that have fought the fires. A member of the government spoke about the intense fires in January. It was those same people that turned out and helped in those situations. I remember being at the rescue centre. What is it called?

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

Renee HEATH: Thank you, Mr Batchelor. I was at the relief centre in Sale during probably about February or March in 2021. Everyone was there giving what they could. I and many others would clear rooms in our house and set up bunk beds for people we had never met – people escaping from these fires who worked in the native timber industry and who looked after this land. Then we had a rescue centre. I was doing chiropractic. There were other people there helping animals. It is not the narrow view that there are either environmental villains or warriors. It is wrong. I just want to acknowledge that. For years workers have been shamed and demonised and the facts about the sustainability of the environment and about the industry and about ethical management have been overlooked.

Victoria's native timber industry was subject to the most rigorous and strictest regulations. I mentioned before about 94 per cent of it being locked up. To explain this and to put it into context, of the remaining 6 per cent for timber production, 0.03 per cent of the area was harvested. Do you want to know how many trees that was per 10,000 trees? Have a guess, just in your minds. It was four trees per 10,000. The consequences of this ban have been devastating. I have run out of time, but I will say that there has to be a better way forward, and I will not be voting for this motion.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:48): I rise to make a contribution on behalf of Legalise Cannabis Victoria about the ongoing destruction of Victoria's native forests and the serious gaps that remain in our laws. At the outset I would like to thank Ms Purcell for bringing this motion before the house, acknowledge the work that she has done in this space and say that we will be supporting this motion. Victoria ended commercial native forest logging on 1 January 2024, and it was meant to be a landmark moment in Victoria. However, we must recognise that regulations are only as effective as their enforcement, and the reality is that there are significant gaps that remain.

One of the gaps that still exists is how logging by Forest Fire Management Victoria is not subject to the Code of Practice for Timber Production 2014. They are not subject to the legal requirements that are intended to protect threatened species, and the state conservation regulator has no power to intervene. This creates inconsistency in the regulatory framework, as timber harvesting activities conducted by FFMVic may not be subjected to the same standards and oversight mechanisms. This gap also has serious implications for environmental management and consistency of sustainable forest management practices. The government must ensure that the end of commercial native forest logging is not undermined by regulatory gaps or loopholes that allow native timber to continue to enter commercial supply chains. It raises a really simple question: what is the point of banning native forest logging in state forests if loopholes allow similar destruction to continue elsewhere? Our native forests are not simply sources of timber; they provide habitat for threatened species, protect waterways, store carbon and support ecosystems that cannot simply be replaced by planting a few more trees.

The Carroll government has a responsibility to address and close these regulatory gaps, strengthen oversight and ensure that environmental protections apply on private land as well as public land. The Victorian government has increasingly moved away from using the clear and well understood term 'commercial logging', instead relying on vaguely descriptive terms such as 'forest management', 'timber recovery' and what communities are now calling 'loophole logging'. This change in language matters. Ending an industry on paper does not mean the practice has disappeared.

Native timber can still be removed from forests under different regulatory pathways, including private land harvesting, limited forest produce licences and timber removal as part of fire safety or other fire management activities. The government continues to claim that forest and fire management works are not conducted for commercial purpose and therefore are not logging, but for communities who continue to see mature native forests being felled, removed and potentially entering commercial supply chains, changing the terminology does not change what is happening on the ground. Calling it something other than commercial logging does not answer the fundamental question of whether Victoria's ban on native forest logging is being upheld. The community deserves more than this.

A ban is only meaningful if there are clear rules, strong oversight, transparency and effective enforcement behind it. Communities should not be left to decipher whether the removal of mature native trees is genuinely permitted, whether it is being carried out for a legitimate purpose or whether commercial interests are finding ways to continue practices that the ban was intended to end. They deserve clear, enforceable protections that prevent native timber from being harvested under a different label and then finding its way into the commercial markets.

Where threatened species, mature native forests and sensitive ecosystems are at stake we cannot rely on a system where the regulator is effectively marking its own homework. There must be independent scrutiny, transparent reporting and enforceable environmental protections, otherwise we risk replacing one form of regulated logging with a system where environmental destruction can occur under a different label without the same level of accountability. Without effective oversight, traceability and enforcement, a ban is only as strong as the loopholes that remain around it. Victorians were promised an end to native logging in Victoria. They should not now have to navigate a maze of new terminology to determine whether that commitment is being honoured in practice. The government must demonstrate that the ban is more than a change in policy language and that it is a genuine, enforceable protection for Victoria's remaining native forests.

We know the government spends billions supporting the transition away from native forest logging. Victorians were entitled to expect that this transition would deliver a genuine end to commercial native forest logging, not a system where the same forests can continue to be exploited through alternative pathways. If the government is serious about ending native forest logging, it should not be playing a game of semantics.

I have raised in this chamber on several occasions the opportunities for Victoria to really support its hemp industry. Hemp is a viable alternative to timber when it comes to paper milling, when it comes to building materials and the like. It grows quickly, and we have a real opportunity here to build on that industry. A tree does not know whether it is felled under a heading of commercial logging or forest management or by-product removal or salvage. The government should be transparent about the scale of timber being removed, the legal basis for its removal, the environmental assessments undertaken and whether any of that timber is entering the commercial markets. It is a very simple question of accountability.

There was a time when commercial native forest logging operated under a regulatory framework that included prescribed standards, environmental requirements, reporting obligations and external oversight. Whatever criticisms may have been levelled at that system, there were at least mechanisms through which the public could understand what was being authorised, what environmental assessments had been undertaken and what obligations operators must operate under. Victorians were promised an end to commercial native forest logging, and they deserve confidence that this commitment is being upheld in practice with enforceable protections, transparency and, obviously, accountability.

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:55): I am pleased to rise to speak on this motion today. I often find myself speaking on motions that are put forward in this place by Ms Purcell, and I often find myself agreeing with them. Today is not one of those days, although I do applaud once again her sublime sartorial sense in the outfit that she has to visually represent the issue.

I do want to acknowledge the contributions of both previous speakers on these benches, Mr Batchelor and Mr McIntosh, for the perspectives that they provided. I do think it is important to go back to the simple, basic facts of what we are talking about here. Under this government we did abolish native forest logging in public areas. That was a very significant change and a significant change that I know many colleagues, including Mr McIntosh and others, were involved in with support for communities such as, in particular, those in eastern Victoria, to make sure that the transition was as fair as possible on the people and the communities whose livelihoods relied on that particular part of the industry.

But we have come a long way. As Mr Batchelor highlighted towards the end of his remarks, it is simply not effective enough to come into this argument and gloss over the fact that over the preceding 10 years before that legislative change we had an average of 1.2 million tonnes of firewood being sold on a commercial basis from the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) and then went in the following year to have just 13,000 tonnes. That is a remarkable change. I think Mr Batchelor used the word 'fundamental'. It is an extraordinary variance – 13,000 compared to 1.2 million – all the more pronounced of course when you consider that in the following year, in 2024–25, that figure dropped to zero and has remained at low levels ever since. It is in fact a factor of 92 times difference, and it also reflects a fundamental change. This is not proactive commercial logging. It is reactive, and it is reactive under the state's forest fire products framework. It goes to some very, very important issues, such as fire preparedness.

We are, as other speakers have said, one of the most bushfire-prone regions of the world. It is something that is only continuing to accelerate as we see the effects of climate change. This government has done a great many things in addressing climate change, including the transition out of native timber harvesting, an expansive rollout of renewable energy, the SEC and other initiatives so that we are now seeing well over a third of our energy production come on a consistent basis from renewable sources, a feat once unimaginable in a state that was notorious for being the black coal capital of the nation. We are making these investments and changes, but we know that the effects of climate change are continuing unabated. There are causes of this of course that go far beyond our state boundaries and far beyond our national boundaries that we are not in a position to control at a state legislative level. We must do everything that we can to prevent climate change and to address emissions, but we must also do everything that we can to address resilience.

Indeed the Environment and Planning Committee has done a number of reports that are pertinent to this subject over the past parliamentary term, including a very expansive report on climate resilience and the need to adapt and prepare ourselves and our communities better for the increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters that befall our state. There is perhaps no better recent example of those disasters than the fires of 2026, on 26 January this year. I did have the privilege of being a member of the EPC for the latter part of that inquiry, and I note the comments of Mr Batchelor earlier in relation to the evidence given to the inquiry, which I had the benefit not of being in the room for but of reading later on – transcripts from Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic) and DEECA about the sheer scale of what they were faced with in Walwa.

I have said this a few times in the chamber since the tabling of the report, but I do think it bears repeating: when you look at the relatively remarkable success of having one life lost – of course one life is too many, and that does not take into account the extraordinary numbers of wildlife and livestock that were lost, let alone the emotional toll on countless communities across our state; none of that should be diminished – I think many people, especially in more metropolitan parts of our state, would consider that the 2026 summer fires were a relative success, certainly if you compare it to Black Saturday, when there were in the order of 180-odd. But that would be to omit a very important fact, and that is that the January 2026 fires burnt in more areas of this state's land than Black Saturday. This had a staggering impact right across our state, be it the Walwa complex, the Longwood complex, in Harcourt, in Natimuk, in the Otways or indeed in many of the other smaller fire complexes – I believe there were around 25 total – right across the state in those horrid few weeks.

This is where this issue becomes really pertinent, because no-one – well, I hope no-one – is saying that DEECA is out continuing to commercially log and is trying to find ways around it or loopholes, because that would certainly be disingenuous. There is a very, very big difference in responding to fallen trees after storms, such as in 2024, as Mr McIntosh was talking about, that affected Gippsland South, that affected the Dandenong Ranges and that affected peri-urban parts of Melbourne, or indeed doing the essential fire prevention work that is about making sure that when these fires do happen we, as best we can, contain and control them to prevent catastrophic losses – obviously catastrophic losses to people and catastrophic losses to property, but catastrophic losses to wildlife as well. We will never

know how much wildlife we lost in those fires of this year. Any estimate is simply eye-wateringly horrifying. So we must continue to support FFMVic to do what it needs to do to keep our state safe. That is so critical for regional communities and for some metropolitan communities too. When you consider the fact that more public land was burnt in these fires than in any other major fire in the state's history, that really does hammer the point home about the need for those firebreaks and containment measures so that we can continue to respond in an effective way and see future fatalities from such fire events kept as low as possible.

I do want to acknowledge some of the remarks in this motion as they relate to transparency, and I do note that we have seen a very strong demonstration of transparency on the part of the Minister for Environment and this government, perhaps no better articulated than by the release of the report on the state's abundant koala population earlier today.

Members interjecting.

Michael GALEA: It is not the same subject, I concede, but it is an important demonstration of the fact that the Minister for Environment is committed to that transparency, and whilst I do not have anything to commit on behalf of the minister today, I know that it is something that she is actively interested in, and it is perfectly appropriate, as with any government program or any other way of operating, that there be an appropriate social licence for it. Obviously disinformation and misinformation can be allowed to fester where there is that isolation of information, so I know that the minister is very invested in looking at ways in which we can be more transparent about this, and I know that she will continue to do that work. I am sure she will be eager to work with Ms Purcell on that point as well.

I do think it bears repeating too that there is a very big, stark difference between where we are now and where we were a few years ago. This is not DEECA or FFMVic going out and trying to find commercial opportunities. For example, I know it happened after the storm events up in Silvan Reservoir, not too far from my electorate and Dr Heath's electorate, and there was some local concern. That wood was harvested, and as with all of these uses now, none of that is being shipped or commercially exported. It is being sold mostly at very discounted rates to local community members and older members of the community who cannot get their own firewood. It is being provided through pick-up points at DEECA depots. That is where the majority of this product is going. On the question of transparency, I think there is some confluence of opinions that we could come to, and more work will be done in that space. But it would be disingenuous to say that the proactive approach in the past of 1.2 million tonnes is anywhere in the same league as the reactive approach now, where we have seen 13,000 tonnes in a year.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (16:05): That debate went exactly as I predicted: 90 minutes of justification, of saying this is required, of saying this is necessary, claims that we do not care about bushfires or wildlife burning unless we back this in. Whereas my request was to have a debate about transparency measures to prove that is true to us. I specifically said at the commencement of this that I know it will be the same conversation where the government will say, 'Just trust us,' and the opposition will say, 'This is required,' when the entire premise of this was to say we would just love to see some oversight, some transparency, some reporting. If the government backs this in so strongly and this is the right action for storm clean-up or fuel management or fire prevention, they must have the evidence to prove that that is the case. We have just been asking to see that evidence. If we want to stop disinformation or misinformation, as some members have claimed, then the way to do that is to back up your claims.

It is so deeply frustrating because it is clear that the government has been handed speaking notes directly from the very organisation doing this, and they are the ones we have been asking to be up-front about their activities. We specifically said we did not want to have a debate about whether or not this is required. That is not what this was about today. I am wearing a shirt that has a number of species on it made by a wonderful constituent of mine, and it is based on an article that is called 'Policy

decisions matter: Cessation of logging benefits 34 threatened species in Victoria, Australia'. This study assessed the spatial overlap between areas for approved logging and the habitats of nationally listed threatened species to estimate the potential impacts of continued logging and the likely benefits of its cessation. It found that 99 per cent of the areas approved for logging overlapped with the habitats of nationally threatened species. Now, it is a shame you cannot see the back of this shirt. In fact, this is the back. These animals will all disappear. It does not matter if the reasons their homes are being destroyed are community safety or public safety or bushfire prevention. The fact is that their homes are being destroyed. That is the conversation we wanted to have, because the government and the department say this is required and that they do impact assessments and surveys, but they have not only refused to share that with the public, they block every attempt at scrutiny or attempts to access this information.

We could have had a conversation today, not about whether or not it is required but about the fact that it is happening and that it is having impacts. That has implications for a number of different plants and animals and our biodiversity, which is in crisis whether we like it or not. We can do something about that: we can monitor it and we can assess it. But instead we have had the same conversation, which is the fox guarding the henhouse, accusations about workers in the industry, which nobody has said, particularly not me. There are no villains in this story. I am not claiming there are villains like some members have said. The story is that there is no transparency. If we wanted to actually stop this ongoing debate, this ongoing cycle, the people who believe this is required could front up and show us the evidence if it exists, like they claim it does, to back it up.

I want to thank the members that actually understand this for their contributions. I said in my first remarks that it is incredibly deceiving and it is incredibly confusing, and because this is no longer happening as part of a commercial industry, it is so much easier to justify. A lot of people let the conversation end there. Certainly most people in the chamber today did exactly that, instead of actually looking at the reality that we are in where it might not be commercial but logging continues to happen. It is not just for storm clean-ups, it is not just debris and it is not just fire management. There is also tree thinning. Again, we have no clarity on how that is determined. We are just simply asking for the evidence as to why.

As I have said, apparently all this information exists. The government and the department have just refused to make it public. There was an opportunity today to actually bring these communities together and have a conversation about that and put some oversight in place, just like there was when there was a commercial industry. I find it incredibly disappointing and incredibly disheartening that so many of the people in this place who celebrated the end of the commercial industry cannot see this for what it is – that we are not seeking to argue whether this is required, we are seeking transparency. Our forests deserve that. Soon they will be gone if we do not act quickly.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (8): Katherine Copsey, David Ettershank, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Sarah Mansfield, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Noes (28): Ryan Batchelor, Melina Bath, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, Michael Galea, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, Shaun Leane, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Tom McIntosh, Evan Mulholland, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Sheena Watt, Richard Welch

Motion negatived.

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

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (16:17): I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

*Statements on tabled papers and petitions***Department of Families, Fairness and Housing***Statutory Review of the Gender Equality Act 2020: Final Report*

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:18): Today I rise to speak on the final report of the independent four-year statutory review of the Gender Equality Act 2020, which was proudly tabled in this Parliament on 27 August 2026 by the Carroll Labor government. When Victoria enacted this legislation in 2020 we became the first jurisdiction in Australia to mandate that public service bodies, local councils and universities must actively measure, plan for and progress gender equality. Four years on the independent review provides us with a clear evidence-based health check on how this landmark legislation is transforming our state. The headline finding of the review is unmistakable: the act is working. It is effectively contributing to gender equality, and the public sector gender equality commissioner is successfully implementing the law exactly as Parliament intended.

Let us look at the stand-out improvements that have come from this act. Over the last four years we have seen a profound cultural shift across approximately 300 defined public entities in Victoria. The era of gender equality being a secondary HR box-ticking exercise is over. Because of this act, public sector employers are now legally required to run workplace gender audits and track critical metrics across seven key indicators, including the gender pay gap, leadership composition, flexible work access and the mitigation of workplace sexual harassment. Hundreds of agencies have successfully embedded four-year gender equality action plans, ensuring targeted, resourced actions to eliminate systemic barriers. Crucially, the positive impacts extend far beyond the office walls. Through mandatory gender impact assessments, local councils and departments are now actively evaluating how new policies, community programs and physical infrastructure, from local parks to public transport, serve all Victorians equitably. In short, the act has successfully laid down a robust structural platform that drives permanent, measurable change.

However, a robust review does not just celebrate success, it also highlights how we can continue to evolve. The report put forward five key recommendations aimed at sharpening our focus, streamlining compliance and ensuring that our regulatory framework matches the maturing needs of our public sector. The Victorian government has already formally published its response to the review, and I am pleased to highlight that the government has embraced the spirit of the review's findings, aiming to solidify the commissioner's regulatory capabilities while easing unnecessary administrative burdens on duty holders.

Moving forward, the government's focus is on ensuring a risk-based, outcomes-focused regulatory approach. This ensures that the commissioner's office can double down on areas that yield the highest impact for systemic improvement while removing red tape for smaller organisations. The response ensures that we will continue to look at data through an intersectional lens, ensuring that women of all backgrounds, including trans and gender-diverse Victorians, benefit from safe, equitable workplaces.

Gender equality is a known fundamental driver of broader social wellbeing and economic prosperity. When there are high rates of gender inequality, there are also high rates of gender-based violence. This four-year review proves that the path Victoria chose in 2020 was a step in the right direction. But of course there is always more to do. The framework is sound, the progress is real and the government's

response provides a clear road map to make the next four years even more impactful. I commend the report, the commissioner and the thousands of public sector workers across Victoria who are building a fairer state every single day. I commend the report to the house.

Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into Anti-LGBTIQA+ Hate Crimes in Victoria

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:22): I rise to speak on the report on the inquiry into anti-LGBTIQA+ hate crimes in Victoria. As a member of the committee, I had the privilege to sit in hearings and to read the submissions. Firstly, I note there was significant agreement in this inquiry that there was an absence of data on hate crimes, and I acknowledge that there are recommendations to improve data recording of hate crimes. I encourage the Parliament to investigate the causes of crime and violence and to collect the data and to do that objectively, be wide in scope and independent from biased parties. Accurate data will allow us to fully understand the extent and level of hate crimes in Victoria.

There were a lot of important topics raised in this inquiry. I was deeply affected by some of the submissions, and I am grateful for the opportunity to reflect on this report through the lens of our wider community. I represent a wonderfully diverse, multifaith community down in the south-east. One of the final contributions of the inquiry was to work with all communities to address abuse and violence in Victoria. I acknowledge the inquiry for giving a strong and supportive voice to people in the LGBTIQA+ community. However, through the reflections I offer today I hope to contribute to our democratic and collaborative discussions by sharing the voice of faith communities.

There are migrants in my region who are victims of horrendous international persecution and hate crimes because of their race and faith. They came to Australia because our nation upholds freedoms of religion and belief. For example, persecuted Christians who escaped ISIS now deeply fear that their faith, world view and beliefs are being undermined and that they may lose the right to raise their children within their Christian faith and values. This is their deepest concern. It is something that can cause ordinary people of a peaceful and loving faith to push back, not out of hate but out of fear and out of devotion to their faith.

Faith, family and freedom are important to Christians, and from speaking with communities and individuals in my region, I know that other communities of faith want to protect their traditional family values. The Australian Christian Lobby submission included a line, which is in the final report, saying that it raises serious concerns about legitimate religious expression. There are a handful of recommendations in the second chapter that I know will worry faith communities, making them feel like they are not allowed to hold their beliefs or raise their children according to those beliefs or that the government will become brutal and coercively try to control their homes, their children, their youth, their education or their freedom to worship, associate, think and preserve their way of life.

I also understand some recommendations are intended to support police to address hate crimes as early as possible, but serious violence occurs. Early intervention is critical, and as a former social worker I understand that better than most. However, in our mission to put a stop to violence we must ensure we are not silencing innocent voices. When implementing the recommendations of this inquiry policymakers need to keep this very real and to seriously consider the concern of all Victorian parents. To our faith communities I say this to you: in Victoria we still live in a democracy where we are free to follow our faith and teach it to our future generations. It is my understanding in this review that world views and religious beliefs should not be under scrutiny or threat unless they specifically incite violence and hate crimes.

We also made several findings and recommendations about improving support systems for victim-survivors of hate crimes and creating a crime prevention strategy, which I would urge the government to widen to include all Victorians. Being an inquiry specifically into our LGBTIQA+ community, these recommendations specify that people who identify as part of the LGBTIQA+ community need

to be involved in this decision-making process. When making any policy it is incredibly important to have people who can be unintentionally implicated because of conflicting lifestyle world views, with lived experience, at the decision-making table. I hope we hear equally from victim-survivors and communities that are vulnerable to hate crimes. It would be remiss of us when trying to support one group to accidentally sideline and further endanger other vulnerable Victorians such as the disabled, ethnic communities and communities of faith. I do not want any Victorian or anyone in the world to be a victim of violent hate crimes, including people in the LGBTIQ+ community. I acknowledge the inquiry as an important step towards combating discrimination and violence in Victoria. However, as always, more needs to be done to deliver meaningful change and ensure Victorians are free from hate and abuse.

Western Victoria Region train services

Petition

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (16:27): I rise to make a statement on tabled petition 830 on improving Western Crescent public transport links. This petition bears 193 signatures, and a paper petition of the same title bearing additional signatures was tabled today. This petition calls to the attention of the Legislative Council the critical need for improved public transport links between Geelong and Ballarat, Ballarat and Maryborough, and Maryborough and Castlemaine. Regional growing cities and the towns in between them need better connectivity. Many people may not realise that until 1978 there was actually a passenger rail service between Geelong and Ballarat. The rail line is still there, and it is active. There are trains that run along that line, but it is only used for freight. The only direct public transport option between Victoria's two biggest regional cities is a coach that runs just three times a day, and those times are pretty impractical, if you have a look at the timetable, for anyone who is trying to commute. It is a huge handbrake on access to employment and study opportunities, access to services like health care and the potential livability of these cities and the many towns in between them.

As Geelong and Ballarat continue to grow into more significant economic and educational centres in and of themselves, there will be more and more demand for people to be able to travel between the two. It might come as a shock to people, but not everyone wants to travel into Melbourne from regional areas. Regional Victorians have been largely forgotten when it comes to investment generally by this government but particularly when it comes to public transport. Too often transport investment decisions have been cooked up in secret to win marginal seats in metro Melbourne rather than being based on genuine community need. Metro projects are dominated by things like multibillion-dollar toll road projects. We have got the North East Link, that I am not sure anyone actually wanted, and we have got the West Gate Tunnel project, which is a lovely tunnel that sits empty most of the time because no-one is actually using it, costing taxpayers an absolute fortune while private toll companies rake in huge profits. Meanwhile regional public transport services received only \$481 million in the 2026–27 state budget, and that includes just \$318 million for infrastructure upgrades across the entire network. Some really basic things are just crying out for much more investment.

This petition does not exist in a silo. The City of Greater Geelong Council have actually backed up our call for this train line to open. They have expressed support for restoration of passenger trains between Geelong and Ballarat. They have been calling for governments to look beyond the next election when planning the region's transport network. They have also stated that the proposal would support anticipated population growth that is estimated to be at least another 100,000 people across Geelong's northern and western growth areas. This is turning Geelong into a very significant second city in Victoria, and that whole stretch of population needs better public transport services.

The petition is a clear and, I think, very reasonable ask: give regional Victorians the same consideration as metropolitan commuters. We think this is actually quite low-hanging fruit. As I said, there is existing rail infrastructure there. It is working. There are freight trains on there. We do not need a big, gold-plated passenger service with fancy stations. We just need a functional passenger service between the

two cities. Restoring passenger rail between Geelong and Ballarat and improving connections through to Maryborough and Castlemaine is not a nice-to-have. It is basic, necessary infrastructure to match the growth these communities are already experiencing. I thank the petitioners for their advocacy on this, and I really hope that the government heeds what they have been asking for.

Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into Anti-LGBTIQA+ Hate Crimes in Victoria

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:31): I rise to speak on the report of the Legal and Social Issues Committee's inquiry into anti-LGBTIQA+ hate crimes in Victoria. As I briefly touched on yesterday, this was a very valuable inquiry to be a part of. The impetus of this inquiry was, frankly, a global spate of gay bashings that we have seen, driven by what is most likely believed to be online-driven hate influencers targeting particularly vulnerable young men and radicalising them into committing these acts of hate. We have had a number of incidents in Victoria, a very concerning number of incidents, and we know that through the very hard and proactive work of Victoria Police we have one of the higher arrest rates for these types of crimes compared to other jurisdictions. But we know of course that the true figures are likely much, much higher because this is a crime that targets vulnerable people. It is one that targets particularly those such as newer migrant communities and men from those communities who feel like they are not safe to be who they are and so are more likely to not go and report these types of crimes.

I do want to acknowledge Mr Puglielli for initiating this inquiry as well – it was a pleasure to work together with him on the terms of reference – as well as our chair, who I mentioned yesterday, who very ably led our work. I did say it was disappointing that the Liberals did not support the motion in the house, but none of that should take away from the work of Mr McCracken.

We had a great deal of evidence in both written and in witness form, and I do want to acknowledge two organisations in particular, who were also essential to getting this inquiry off the ground. That is Thorne Harbour Health and Switchboard Victoria, and in particular I acknowledge Chad Hughes, Caleb Hawk, Jenna Tuke and Simon Ruth. These people have all been absolutely passionate advocates for community and for making sure that the voices of people who have been so under-represented in this space and unheard in this space can be shared. I really do want to acknowledge the work that they have done, as well as that of our LGBTIQA+ commissioner Joe Ball, who gave some very powerful testimony and has done a great deal of work in this space too, and Jeremy Oliver from Victoria Police, who was himself instrumental in us having that high arrest rate and in making those early connections that helped us to get ahead and make some of those earlier arrests. It would be an understatement to say that a great deal of that comparative success is due to the work of Jeremy Oliver and his team in Victoria Police.

We had some very powerful evidence shared with us from some of the victim-survivors themselves, including David Brown, who was assaulted just a few kilometres from here. Most of these attacks have happened in outer suburban communities like mine in the outer south-east, but they have also happened across the state. Mr Brown was attacked – lured in daylight and then assaulted in a most vicious and awful way, with very, very clear and explicit homophobic insults thrown at him throughout his ordeal, which made all too clear the purpose for the attack.

I do actually want to acknowledge as well that we did have both Match Group and Grindr engage with our inquiry. The latter in particular appearing before us at a hearing – from the United States – was very much appreciated because we can only really get to the bottom of these issues by working not just across a legislative framework but with the app facilitators as well, who certainly do not promote or endorse these types of attacks but on whose platforms these attacks are happening. To have that engagement from Grindr and to have some honest discussion about what they are doing, and also where we can be doing more, was really valuable. It was, though, disappointing that no other app outside of Grindr or Match Group decided to participate in the inquiry. I also note profound disappointment that the federal eSafety Commissioner declined to participate in the inquiry too, given

the exceptional importance of her work in this space too, and I certainly hope to see some further action from her office.

We had academics including Josh Roose and Geoffrey Steer, the latter of which gave us a very interesting breakdown into the offender profile. We do know that the majority of these are, as I said, young men who have been radicalised. There are different offender typologies that were broken down and various interesting things that we could go into. I did talk yesterday about thrillseeking, and whilst that is one of the predominant forms, the fact that it is thrillseeking should not take away from the fact that it is a hate crime, especially if you are being assaulted and having homophobic slurs. If the reason you are targeted is on the basis of your sexuality, it is still very clearly a hate crime.

On that note, though, I am running out of time. To acknowledge and to take action on this issue does not and should not mean that we are sidelining any other community. It is not a hate crime to have different views, but it is to take that out in the form of a vicious assault, and that is what this inquiry sought to highlight.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission

Report 2024–25

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (16:36): Today I rise to speak on the mental health and wellbeing commissioner's annual report, and one of their objectives is to promote the role, value and inclusion of families and of people living with mental illness or psychological distress. Every day in Australia nine people lose their lives to suicide. Two of those are in Victoria, and every one of them leaves behind a heartbreak that will never heal.

The heartbreak and the devastation caused by suicide is unspeakable, and today I am going to share a letter that was left by Aaron Davis before he took his own life in 2016. His mum Bobo asked me to read it today because tomorrow is suicide awareness day and she hopes that (a) it will help others and that (b) by reading it we honour his memory. It is extremely sensitive, and I want to let you know that it is not something that I take lightly. It was written on 13 April 2016. This is the letter:

Hi, my name is Aaron Davis.

I am a 22-year-old who unfortunately fell down the horrid path of ice addiction.

I have been an ice addict since the age of 15. There were 6 months of rehab, but it didn't work because well, I didn't want it to. There was also 12 months after getting busted that I stayed clean but again the devil pulled me back in.

My mum used to call it the devil, and I used to think: if only she knew how good it was and how it made you feel. But guess what? Like always, mum was right.

Yes, I met some amazing people along the way, but I also met some selfish backstabbing dogs.

Which is unfortunate, because deep down they actually are good people. They just have been taken over by this devil, and they will do whatever, say whatever and become whatever they have to just to get some.

This life gives you nothing but takes everything you ever loved, cared for, owned, the lot – it will literally hold you by your ankles and shake you while everything falls out.

To my family and friends, I'm sorry.

Sorry for never listening, for never asking for help or for accepting your help when you offered but I didn't know how I could help myself so I couldn't see how anyone else could.

I'll miss you all dearly and love you forever.

I'll always be there watching over everybody and if you ever need me, just think of me.

Love, Aaron Davis

Xoxo

After he wrote that he committed suicide. His life was over, and the life of every single person that loved him changed forever. So what went wrong? Aaron was kind and funny. He came from a good, hardworking family who loved him absolutely, and he was the father to beautiful twin girls. At the age

of 15, though, he started his first job, and at that job he was given drugs. He was a young, impressionable kid, yet somebody made the decision to exploit him. His letter, I believe, describes perfectly the hold that drugs can have on a life. And when you consider the whole context, it is so hard to fathom. That letter was exactly what was on his mind right before he took his own life, a life which in a sense was stolen by drugs long before he died. They changed everything. Drugs changed the entire trajectory of his life. Aaron's mum Bobo said:

... suicide for Aaron was his way out from addiction that he couldn't escape from and the pain that it caused.

From the age of 15 until he died Aaron's family gave him all the help, support and love that they possibly could. The message here is a clear one: drugs are not harmless. Some people may be able to stay in control; others lose the battle and completely become a slave to them.

Mental health and drugs can be very tough topics to broach, but tomorrow, on suicide awareness day, I encourage every single person to be brave and open up a conversation if you see somebody is struggling. You will never regret it.

Victorian Auditor-General's Office

Maintaining State Roads

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (16:41): I am pleased to be able to speak about the Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO) report *Maintaining State Roads*, which was tabled today. Whenever I speak to young people – I know we had Wangaratta High School visit Parliament this week – I talk about some of the basic services that government provides. Maintaining and building roads is one of those basic services that I talk about. This report actually goes into assessing and looking at how the government is doing when it comes to maintaining our state roads.

Some interesting facts: there are more than 23,000 kilometres of state roads in Victoria, state roads carry most of Victoria's traffic and freight vehicles and 82 per cent of state roads are in regional Victoria, with just 18 per cent in metropolitan Melbourne. What they concluded – and I think that this is very important to highlight – is that:

The overall condition of Victoria's state roads is deteriorating. In 2024, around 48 per cent of the network was in poor or very poor condition, compared to 39 per cent in 2021.

Victoria has a large and growing ... maintenance backlog, where the network is deteriorating faster than the pace of repairs. Rising costs, increasing traffic and ageing roads make the backlog more challenging to address.

The department has advised the government that funding is insufficient to maintain or improve the condition of state roads. This has meant it focuses more on reactive and safety-critical repairs rather than preventative works.

The report is interesting reading, and it is not very long if you want to check it out. It was interesting to look at the graph of total road asset management funding. There was a significant drop in years 2021–22, and I am pretty sure that is when Ben Carroll was the Victorian Minister for Roads and Road Safety. It really went backwards there.

One of their key findings is that the proportion of roads in poor or very poor condition is increasing. That just means that the people that I have been speaking to as I drive around Northern Victoria – I have been in Shepparton in the last week. I have been to the Raywood listening post again – roads brought up there; I went to Maldon again – roads brought up; I went to Bridgewater – guess what, roads were brought up. All I can say to you is 'Yep, what you've been talking about with your friends and family is spot-on because the roads are falling apart in Victoria.'

When I look at the map that is provided in this report, on page 14, it says 'Road condition varies between regions'. I was pretty concerned – and I know we cannot use props in the chamber, but when

I look at it, the dark shading means roads in very poor condition. Guess what, it is northern Victoria – the Loddon Mallee region and the Hume region – that has got the darkest colour. It says:

The proportion of roads rated poor and very poor was highest in the Loddon Mallee region.

So to all those people that I have been meeting with: you are spot-on – our roads are falling apart.

The report also found ‘a substantial and growing maintenance backlog’. It was interesting that the maintenance priorities for work with the department are not very clear. The department does not always clearly document why it prioritises sites for maintenance. The department does not make sure routine maintenance matches its priorities. It is clear from this investigation by VAGO that there are no clear targets or priorities for fixing our roads, yet we have known for such a long time that our roads are falling apart.

The Nationals in government will properly fund our roads through the fair share guarantee. We will establish Better Roads Victoria to rebuild the technical expertise that we need for road building and maintenance. We will allocate \$5 billion to repair and rebuild Victoria’s roads. We will fix roads properly the first time, enforce tough standards and hold construction companies accountable. And we will stop the waste and invest in safer roads across Victoria, because for too long regional Victorians have been paying the price for the failures of this Labor government.

Victorian Auditor-General’s Office

Maintaining State Roads

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (16:45): It is quite impressive that we are still discussing, even today, the Victorian Auditor-General’s Office’s last report, revealing the secret Suburban Rail Loop tax, and already the next one has arrived. That SRL report revealed a genuine cover-up, something that only a handful of Labor ministers knew about and conspired to keep secret. Today’s VAGO report is equally damning, but in a very different way. There is barely a person in Victoria who is not already painfully aware of the shocking state of our roads. There are essentially two findings repeated in different words throughout the entire report: Labor is not spending enough money to maintain our roads, and just as importantly, Labor cannot properly manage the money it is spending.

You barely need to read beyond the headings of this report. On page 1, under ‘What we concluded’, the Auditor-General said:

The overall condition of Victoria’s state roads is deteriorating.

He said 48 per cent of the network was in poor or very poor condition in 2024, up from 39 per cent just three years earlier. Then he said, ‘Victoria has a large and growing road maintenance backlog’. I mean, we all know this, but the Auditor-General has put it in writing. He said:

The department has advised the government that funding is insufficient to maintain or improve the condition of state roads.

You should be hanging your heads in shame across the aisle there. That is the government’s own department telling Labor they are not giving it enough money to maintain the roads. Turn to page 7, and the Auditor-General helpfully listed the three central findings:

The proportion of roads in poor or very poor condition is increasing.

The department’s approach to maintenance has some gaps.

The department can improve its oversight of contractors.

On page 8 the report says, ‘State roads continue to deteriorate’. The gap between defects recorded and defects repaired more than doubled between January 2025 and June this year. Then there is another heading: ‘There is a substantial and growing maintenance backlog’. Then another: ‘The department has advised the government that funding is not sufficient’. On page 11 the entire section is headed

‘Condition of state roads’, and its opening words are ‘The condition of the state road network continues to worsen’. The report says:

Renewal spending is not keeping pace with deterioration and defects are appearing faster than they are repaired.

On page 17 we get another extraordinary heading: ‘Key issue: The department does not have meaningful targets’. The Auditor-General said there are ‘no government-endorsed targets for the “acceptable” condition of the network’. So Labor cannot even tell Victorians what condition it thinks their roads should be in. Page 22 is headed ‘Deciding maintenance priorities’. He said ‘the department does not always clearly document why it prioritises some sites over others’. He went on:

Fragmented information and systems ... limit its ability to identify the most cost-effective maintenance ...

On page 27 the report says ‘poor data limits maintenance decision-making’, and on page 30 it says ‘The department has limited assurance over the quality of works’. It is unsurprising, when page 26 tells us only one of four Victorian road maintenance contract holders has even given the department its methodology for prioritising repairs.

I mean, this is disgraceful. But the Liberal–National parties have a solution. We are going to spend \$5 billion on the roads. I have just announced that every local, rural and regional council will get untied funding of \$1.5 million each year so they can fix their local roads, which of course make up 60 per cent of the road network. By and large, local governments repair roads much better than our state operation. But between our funding to make sure we build roads better and maintain roads better and our funding for local councils to fix their local roads, we have the solution on the roads issue. Some in this chamber have just come to grips with what a pothole is. We have been talking about potholes that are craters for years. You have had an epiphany and have come to the party very late, but we are going to solve the problem. You have had 12 years and have done nothing, and the Auditor-General says exactly that.

Petitions

Electricity infrastructure

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (16:51): I move:

That the petition be taken into consideration.

I rise today to speak on behalf of the 11,760 Victorians who have signed a petition calling on VicGrid and the Minister for Energy and Resources to remove the eastern section of the Central North renewable energy zone (REZ) from the *2025 Victorian Transmission Plan*, particularly the area between Shepparton and Goorambat. The petition was tabled on 11 August and the minister’s response was due on 27 August, but as yet the minister has not provided the petitioners with a response. To make that worse, the minister, Jaclyn Symes, who is in the house now, is a local member representing those communities.

The campaign has been driven by a tenacious group of Dookie residents who are passionate about conserving the area where they live and farm. Some of them are here in the gallery today and some of them are watching online. I want to acknowledge them and their efforts and recognise their deep love for the land and the place they call home. They are not against renewable energy, but they do understand that batteries and solar and wind facilities are industrial facilities that must be in the right location. It is clear that the new eastern section of the Central North REZ is not the right place for renewable energy projects. The government would have known that if they had taken the time to actually consult with local communities before creating the energy zone, but they did not.

I have repeated the history of the zone many times before, but let me state it again briefly. The original Central North renewable energy zone was a very large area between Bendigo and Shepparton. Farming communities and local government authorities in the zone were opposed to it, and VicGrid did listen to their complaints and responded by making the zone smaller. However, to compensate for

the area loss in the western section, the Labor minister for energy approved for inclusion in the final transmission plan a completely new eastern section of the zone, running from Pine Lodge near Shepparton through to Glenrowan. This was done without any warning at all and without any consultation. Locals had not seen the proposed boundaries and were given no opportunity to assess the implications for their properties, their farms, their businesses and their communities. This irresponsible decision has created immense stress and anxiety in the communities who live and work on the targeted land. Their homes and farming futures have been under a cloud for the past year as Labor drags its feet on a decision to abolish the zone, alter the zone or, worst of all, formally declare the zone as it is.

This issue is bigger than just Dookie. It will affect farmers, landowners and residents all along the zone through Pine Lodge, Cosgrove, Dookie, Broken Creek, Goorambat, Winton and Glenrowan. Parts of this area have, sadly, already been overwhelmed by thousands of solar panels that have carpeted the land with glass and steel and altered forever what was once a peaceful and natural landscape. Removing the eastern section of the Central North REZ will not turn back time and stop those projects going ahead, but abolishing this section would preserve what precious land remains, and that land is incredibly valuable.

Dookie and surrounding areas comprise some of the most productive agricultural land in Victoria, and it absolutely must be protected. Right now is the best time of year to see the remarkable fertility of the land from Dookie to Goorambat. If you drive through the area, you will be surrounded by a sea of gold with canola crops towering above the fence lines. Local farmers tell me the area is once again on track for an above-average harvest, and that is no surprise. The district's reliable rainfall, cooler climate, fertile soils and highly skilled farming community consistently allow it to outperform broader averages year on year. Data for grain production shows the productivity of dryland cropping is 67 per cent above the state average in the Dookie area. Dookie produces up to 8 tonnes of wheat per hectare and 3 tonnes of canola, making it one of Victoria's best performing regions. This is clearly not marginal land or neglected scrub; this is incredibly fertile prime agricultural land that our state relies upon as an essential source of food and fibre, not just for Victoria but for the country.

The signatories to this petition are asking Parliament to recognise the value of this agricultural land and the communities who live there, their landscapes and their future. It must be protected, and I commend the petition to the house. I also am very disappointed at the interjections from the opposite bench at the beginning of my contribution. It is totally disrespectful to the people of the communities in the renewable energy zone and to the people in the gallery today.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (16:56): I rise to respond on this petition concerning the proposed Central North renewable energy zone tabled by Ms Lovell, and I want to thank Ms Lovell for her advocacy on behalf of her constituents. But I can tell the house that this petition is in fact no longer necessary. The minister has today confirmed that the proposed Central North renewable energy zone will not proceed. This follows extensive community feedback and expert advice from VicGrid, which has now considered hundreds of pieces of feedback on this zone and provided advice on where our renewable energy zones can be amended without affecting the renewable generation and transmission capacity Victoria needs.

VicGrid's advice was clear that the Central North zone should not proceed. We have accepted this advice. Central North already hosts significant renewable generation with existing and planned projects using much of the capacity available to plug into the existing grid. Rather than pushing new transmission into an area that has already made a strong contribution to this state's network capacity, the next wave of investment can instead be focused where projects can connect efficiently and new transmission can genuinely unlock more renewable energy. It is about putting new wind, solar and storage where the grid can best support it, not where it is already stretched.

Our state's renewable energy transition is not being done to regional Victoria; it is a transition regional Victoria is being asked to lead – host benefit payments, land lease incomes, local jobs in construction

and maintenance and genuine investment flowing into towns that have too often been an afterthought in this state's economic story. That is what a well-run renewable energy zone delivers, and that is exactly why we created VicGrid in the first place: to minimise the impacts of renewable energy projects through well-planned development of transmission, generation and storage and to make sure that these projects balance the needs of the community with the need for generation in Victoria.

Renewables now provide over 45 per cent of Victoria's electricity, more than four times the share when this government came to office. That did not happen by accident. It happened because we built VicGrid with a clear obligation to listen to communities. Our renewable energy zones are a result of extensive community consultation and feedback drafted to protect our energy, food and water security together, not one at the expense of others. The decision on Central North is proof that that obligation is real and is not rhetoric. Our existing declared renewable energy zones remain a vital part of delivering this transmission. From mid-2027, when the Victorian access regime comes into effect, all new generation and storage projects will need an access authority before they can connect, allocated through a competitive tender process based on merit so that access to our grid goes to the best projects, not just whoever gets there first. We will continue to work closely with communities across the state as we develop the 2027 Victorian transmission plan. Only the Carroll Labor government has a sensible, pragmatic plan, developed alongside local communities, to keep our lights on and our bills down. While we make decisions based on grid capacity and take advice from experts, those opposite continue to take the lead from ideological One Nation scare campaigns.

Can I say this is an example of the minister listening – a minister from regional Victoria who very much understands the concerns of her community. Can I acknowledge your leadership in the short time you have held the portfolio, Minister, and can I also thank the petitioners for engaging with this Parliament. I thank Ms Lovell again for raising their concerns in this place. This government is always listening. VicGrid did its job and Central North will not proceed. This is what genuine engagement looks like.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (17:02): I rise to speak also on this petition. It is of course vital to have meaningful community consultation on these sorts of matters. They are important discussions, and the Greens support the noting of the petition by the chamber today. Our state's farms and regional communities have hosted wind and solar for decades and transmission lines for even longer. While there can be some restrictions, like height limits that need to be worked around on particular sites, they can successfully coexist with most agricultural operations. Indeed they are helping diversify operations and already delivering for regional communities. It is a misconception, simply, that renewables and transmission lines are incompatible with agriculture. It is simply not the case.

If you head out to regional Victoria to see the turbines and transmission corridors that are already in place, you will see many are situated in working farmland, cropping fields or grazing pastures. Sheep and cows are very happy to graze around the bottom of towers. In fact we have often seen on sunny days that they will cluster in the shadow of turbines if there is a lack of tree cover in their paddock. It has also been shown, as this infrastructure spreads in the state, that fields with solar panels can in fact have higher yields than those without them, with condensation forming on panels overnight, which then drips down onto crops or pasture and provides much-needed water in dry conditions. The mixture of sunshine and partial shade can be better than unrelenting sun, and the panels can be mounted on brackets that allow sheep or cattle to graze underneath them, with better grass meaning healthier animals and higher yields for farmers. This is without even mentioning the direct financial benefits that can flow to individuals and farmers from hosting renewable energy infrastructure, a steady and predictable income that can really take the stress out of the weather-dependent ups and downs of income from agriculture alone.

The shift to renewables is not only an opportunity to shift from polluting fossil fuels to a source of energy that will not run out and will not cook our planet, but it is an opportunity to give communities more ownership of our energy production and for more of the benefits to stay in our communities. It is a huge opportunity if we get it right. This of course depends on proponents working with landholders

and the community to make sure that they are sharing the benefits of investment in renewables. We have an excellent opportunity here to learn from the people who know best, and there are many folks and communities in the regions who are successfully, and in many cases proudly, hosting clean energy, who have already navigated benefit-sharing and are happy to share that experience of what has worked and what they have learned. VicGrid has, as has been said, been working to develop a model for ensuring the benefits of the transition are shared fairly, and this sort of experience is vital input. Armed with this feedback, this promising model should help communities grow confidence that when a project proponent comes to town, they will be able to get their fair share of the benefits.

This petition also mentions Aboriginal cultural heritage sites, and of course it is vital that these are protected. But renewables potential does not mean a free-for-all where projects can ignore Aboriginal cultural heritage. VicGrid and project proponents do need to work closely with traditional owners to ensure sites of cultural significance are protected. Project proponents are also required to engage with traditional owners and share the benefits of their projects.

As I close, I also just want to mention the elephant in the room here. Climate change is a huge part of the context, and we must build out more renewables and connecting infrastructure in order to transition away from polluting and emissions-intensive fossil fuels, coal and gas. If we do not do that, we will keep cooking our planet, and we know that regional communities are already bearing the brunt of the impacts of worsening climate disasters and more frequent disasters. In fact regional communities are coping some of the harshest effects of climate change. This is all happening in the context of the super El Niño that is predicted. Our regional communities are already on the front lines of harsher and more frequent droughts, which makes it harder and harder to know whether we are going to have dependable rainfall and harder and harder to know if there is dependable farming capacity. These regional communities are the ones already fighting harsher and more frequent bushfires and trying to recover over and over. Because climate change will cause extremes in both directions, as we have already seen, there is the potential for more flash flooding and torrential rain, washing away everything from valuable topsoil to people's homes. As we navigate this transition, let us never forget that it is actually regional communities that are on the front lines if we fail to make this transition successfully.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (17:07): I am pleased to rise and speak on this petition to remove the eastern section of the Central North renewable energy zone from the *2025 Victorian Transmission Plan*. I do want to thank all those that have taken the time to sign this petition. As Ms Lovell said, there are over 11,000 signatures all up from people who have added their voice to this issue, and these concerns have been presented to Parliament. I know we spoke on it last sitting and again today, and we do acknowledge the work and the advocacy that have been done by the local community that have achieved the outcome that we have heard today: that the Central North REZ will not proceed. That covers the Greater Shepparton area, Benalla and Bendigo.

It is timely that we are debating this issue in Parliament today, when Greater Shepparton have been showcasing their region in Queen's Hall at state Parliament, because they contribute so much to our state. It is certainly known as the food bowl. I was in Shepparton on Saturday and saw rows and rows of fruit trees in blossom, and they were absolutely stunning. It is such an important part of our state and produces around 25 per cent of the total value of Victoria's agricultural products. It is a major horticultural and food production area, growing stone fruit, pears and apples – we held some today. It grows kiwifruit – a huge amount; I think it is about 90 per cent of our kiwifruit market – and tomatoes as well, alongside significant dairy cattle, sheep and grain production. That agricultural base supports a strong food processing and manufacturing industry that creates jobs and adds value to produce for Australian and export markets. One of my favourite days in this role was visiting the SPC factory with Kim O'Keeffe, the member for Shepparton, and seeing the tinned apples and also the peaches being packed that I use at home.

Greater Shepparton's farms and food producers and manufacturers are critical to Victoria's economy and Australia's food supply. I remember travelling to Singapore once and entering a store and seeing fresh food, but it had signs for which countries it had been imported from. It was just something I had

always taken for granted, and it was a bit of a shock because I grew up on a farm. My family are in the Yarra Valley, and Dad and my grandparents and my great grandfather have always been involved, growing vegetables, fruit and flowers. I understand the significance of soils. My dad spent 40 years in the wholesale markets in Melbourne, travelling down to sell produce. It is certainly a flat-out place.

Different areas have different soils, different rainfall and different terrain. There are some areas that do exceptionally well, and Dookie is one of them. The Goulburn Valley is very special. The yields are so much higher, and a council-commissioned review found that the wheat and canola yields are much higher than the Victorian averages. We know that the original draft transmission plan that was released in May 2025 did not cover Dookie, but then later it did. That was a shock to the community, and it was certainly included without consultation at the time. Hundreds of people did attend community meetings, and they raised concerns about that. It has been good news that their advocacy on this issue has been heard today.

This petition highlights the community's interest in protecting prime agricultural land. I commend my colleague Emma Kealy, Shadow Minister for Agriculture, who introduced a private members bill into this state Parliament that is about protecting the state's most strategic agricultural land from being permanently lost to poorly considered development. It is about recognising the strategic asset that it is rather than treating it as just another land use in Victoria's planning system. Victoria produces about 28 per cent of Australia's gross value of agricultural production, with a farmgate value of roughly \$22 billion a year, generated by more than 21,300 farming businesses across the state. This bill, this approach, is about making sure that when decisions are made affecting agricultural land, they are made with agricultural expertise at the table.

If we win government in November, we have already said that we are committed to scrapping the emergency services tax, stopping VNI West, reviewing Victoria's entire transmission plan and repealing laws that remove a farmer's right to say no to entry on their land. We will cancel fines issued by VicGrid and tackle farm crime. I welcome Shane Sali, who is the Nationals candidate for Shepparton at the state election, to continue the fight and advocate for our region.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (17:12): I want to acknowledge anyone watching at home and acknowledge the consultation process that has concluded. The minister has been hitting the phones today letting people know. I want to pick up on Ms Lovell's point that there has not been consultation. This was a consultation process. A consultation process has been run, and this decision has been made. For those that leant in and contributed to that process: thank you. For those that are happy with this outcome: congratulations.

I want to come to Mrs Broad's point on agriculture – \$22 billion and 28 per cent of the nation's output. I too grew up on a farm. I too want to see farms handed down from generation to generation. But we have got to get really serious about the impacts on farms of hotter and hotter weather. It drives down productivity. If we are talking about 28 per cent of the nation, we want it to be as productive as possible, and energy is a big part of that. The Liberals and Nationals and One Nation are not bringing anything to the table about how we are going to generate energy. They are simply not bringing anything. If they have their way, all of our electricity bills are going to go up. They are not telling us where they are going to get their electricity from. They are just putting a line through everything. It has been a lot of decades since they built things in this state. Under Bolte they built roads, they built transmission lines and they built dams. The whole town of Yallourn was moved. Entire farms were taken out for pits. The Liberal–Nationals and One Nation are more like the Greens nowadays with petitions. They will not tell you what they will do; they will tell you what they are against. If they are going to use gas, it is 200 bucks a megawatt. So front up to Victorians and tell them how much it is going to cost on their electricity bills. If you are going to use gas, we have just had an inquiry into Bass Strait and the gas is just about gone, so where are you going to get your gas from?

Wendy Lovell: On a point of order, President, this is not a debate about gas. It is not a debate about coalition policy. This is a debate about a petition that was brought to this chamber by 11,760 Victorians who signed the petition –

The PRESIDENT: You are debating the point of order.

Wendy Lovell: because this government had created a renewable energy zone without consulting with those communities. I ask you to draw the member back to the petition.

The PRESIDENT: He was talking about renewable energy, I believe.

Tom McINTOSH: The state's generation of electricity is exactly what we are here to talk about, and don't you say there was not consultation when we have just had a whole consultation process.

Wendy Lovell: On a point of order, President, the member is not talking through the Chair; he is actually addressing me and pointing aggressively, and I feel intimidated. The member should be brought back to the petition and go through the Chair.

The PRESIDENT: Please do address your contribution through the Chair.

Tom McINTOSH: I am very happy to speak through the Chair, and I apologise if I pointed. Let us be very clear: the Liberals, One Nation and the Nationals have no plan for electricity generation in this state, and our entire state depends on electricity. They provide nothing. If it is going to be gas, where are they going to get the gas from? They have got to come clean. Is it going to be from farms, or are you going to import it? And if you import it, how much are we going to pay for it? You can laugh it off and you can say it is all a joke, but you are sitting here providing Victorians nothing about the cost of electricity, and the reality is we have to build –

Wendy Lovell: On a point of order, President, the member has again strayed from the subject of the petition. He is being disrespectful to the 11,760 Victorians who signed this petition. This is not a debate about gas.

The PRESIDENT: I think you are debating in the point of order.

Wendy Lovell: It is a debate about a renewable energy zone in central Victoria, not gas.

The PRESIDENT: Ms Lovell, you will get to reply for 2 minutes soon.

Tom McINTOSH: A process has been run and a decision has been made, and it is a decision that I hope the 11,000 signatories are happy with. I want to park that to the side. I want to talk about our state – a state that has a proud automotive industry history and a proud manufacturing history. We need electricity. This is about electricity, and we have got to build generation. If we do not build generation, we are going to find ourselves, in the next five to 10 years, without any electricity. We have heard Yallourn is not going to continue. We have heard AGL do not have interest in continuing Loy Yang A. Where is the electricity going to come from? Victorians deserve to know. This is fine. The reason why we have had the renewable energy zones is to identify with community, with farmers, with regional towns, with businesses, with industry, with jobs, with investments, with training and with skills where we are going to put the generation.

We have got to get some agreement, and we have got to get on and build it. We cannot have petition after petition after petition saying what we are all against. At some point someone has got to stand up. Someone has got to be an adult in this state and say that we need electricity and that we need to build the generation. Where is the workforce going to come from? Where is the investment going to come from? Is it going to be private investment, or is it going to be like the small modular nuclear reactors we talked about for two years that have gone nowhere and that were going to be state funded? Let us just be really, really clear, because we do not want to be back here in four or eight years with power prices going through the roof because we had people saying what they are against and no-one had the guts to stand up and say what they are for.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (17:18): I want to thank everyone who contributed to the debate: Ms Watt, Ms Copsey, Mrs Broad and even Mr McIntosh. I also want to thank the affected communities within the proposed Central North renewable energy zone who rose to demand that their voices were heard – and they were. I thank the minister for listening to them and for making that decision. But the reality is, without them rising to that challenge to make their voices heard and without this petition that they collected 11,760 signatures on, this would not have happened.

This petition brought significant attention to Labor's irresponsible choice to create the eastern section of the renewable energy zone without any consultation. The community drove a campaign to raise awareness and inform the Minister for Energy and Resources and VicGrid about how precious their land is and how it must be protected. I congratulate the people within the REZ who stood up for what is right. Without your determination, the government would have pushed ahead, but instead you forced them to fold. I also congratulate the 11,760 petitioners who signed the petition. This is a real win for people power. I have to say that this is absolutely a magnificent way for me to end my career: to have been the voice of these people in the Parliament, to have been their conduit and to see them get this win for the communities within that Central North renewable energy zone. I am so proud to have been able to do that for all of you.

Motion agreed to.

Business of the house

Notices of motion

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:20): I move:

That the consideration of notices of motion, government business, 278 to 1619, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Bills

Local Government Legislation Amendment (Stronger Communities) Bill 2026

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Jaclyn Symes:

That the bill be now read a second time.

David ETTERS HANK (Western Metropolitan) (17:20): I rise to speak briefly on the Local Government Legislation Amendment (Stronger Communities) Bill 2026. There are two elements, broadly, to this bill. The first deals with governance and integrity reforms for local government. The second creates a Local Government Fair Jobs Code Regulator and the regulatory framework to enforce it. Frankly, we are profoundly ambivalent about this bill. We have concerns about the tepid implementation of the recommendation from IBAC's Operation Sandon investigation into alleged corruption in local government planning and property development decisions. We feel these amendments do not address many of the real issues that were identified by IBAC.

If we are really to tackle corruption in local government, we need to prioritise donation reform. We need a cap on donations. Certain groups such as property developers should be banned from making donations, given the high risk of corruption that comes with a large donation with donors from certain interests. I think we have seen that play out in a number of our largest councils, where many councils have been forced to abstain from critical planning decisions because they have been compromised through those donations. These reforms have also already been introduced into other jurisdictions, such as New South Wales. We also need real-time disclosure of donations. I believe Dr Mansfield will be elaborating on these concerns, and when we see them we will I think almost undoubtedly be supporting the Greens amendments.

We also have concerns about the development of the fair jobs code and the creation of a new body to regulate it. There is no question that we all seek job security and decent working conditions for all workers, no less council workers, and we absolutely understand the desire of the Australian Services Union and its members to maximise secure employment in the local government sector. It goes without saying. But as it stands in this regulation, the package is a black box. Once again we are seeing the government relying on regulations rather than legislation and being asked to vote on legislation that has insufficient details. It is lazy governing. We saw it repeatedly with the planning legislation, which directly impacted local government, and it was, 'Trust us. You'll see the rest later.' My God, wasn't that a terrible outcome for local government, and now we are seeing it here. We were asked to vote on that bill with the caveat that details would be sorted out in the regs, but stuff that came out of, for example, the inquiry into planning amendments has simply been ignored by the government, and in fact the government has declined to even respond to the findings from that inquiry.

I am very cognisant that in driving those reforms in the context of planning the government showed scant regard for local government's input or their responsibilities in that area, and similarly, we are aware that there has been very limited consultation with local governments on this bill and particularly the jobs code and its implementation. That said, I understand that Minister Richardson is new to the job. He has only been there for four weeks, and he has inherited a bill and I guess a concept that has already been through two sets of ministerial hands, with limited consultation with local government. As we know from the parliamentary inquiry into government consultation, a briefing is not a consultation and an indication of future regulation is not an acceptable way to do reform. I would also like to note, though, that I am very appreciative of the time that Minister Richardson has spent personally trying to work through these issues over the last couple of weeks. I would, however, say that ideally if you are going to reform something, put it in legislation and let the whole thing be subject to scrutiny and review. I must admit, whilst I might have had a limited civics background, I thought that is pretty much why we are here: to review legislation. But I might be naive. We understand from discussions with Minister Richardson that there will now be an extensive consultation with multiple stakeholders, and that is very welcome. But there remain a range of concerns by local government as to what the jobs code will be and how it might work.

Councils have been subject to successive governments effectively starving their funding through rate capping and bad policies, and at the same time increasing their responsibilities, including some of the more onerous ones like, for example, being the debt collector on the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund. Local government workers have borne the brunt of that fiscal starvation. If you look at what they have achieved through improvements in wages and conditions, it has been very, very poor. That is no criticism of the ASU. There are good folks there. It is simply the capacity of council to pay given those constraints.

Earlier when this bill or this package was floated, and that is close to two years ago I think now that it has been bounced from one part of government to the other, there was discussion about whether the code would have specific cost imposts and whether this would provide an opportunity to reopen the question of the application of rate capping. If there were to be a significant cost impost associated with a job code change, there would be the capacity to offset that through amendments to the rate cap. However, that seems to have largely fallen off the table, and I guess there is a sense of confusion as to what and how this will actually work in real life, particularly if there are cost imposts associated with the changes.

We note that local government requested an exposure draft from the government and that that was not forthcoming. They then requested to see a sort of set of principles that could sit behind the code, and this was not forthcoming. Again, these all predate Minister Richardson's involvement here. So now we come to a certain point where the legislation is before us. We understand that the ASU do not necessarily share the same concerns as the Municipal Association of Victoria and the local councils. That is perfectly normal and understandable, but clearly it does provide a certain tension for those in this place who have close relationships in both camps.

At this point I will finish my contribution. There are, however, a number of questions that strike to the purpose and the application of the code, and we will be pursuing those vigorously in the committee of the whole. At this point we will reserve our position until the committee stage and see what the government puts forward before we determine where we stand on this bill.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:29): I would also like to say a few words on the Local Government Legislation Amendment (Stronger Communities) Bill 2026. This bill does a few things, but I will start with the first thing which concerns me most and that is what the government is calling the fair jobs code. I am always sceptical when the government calls something 'fair' because it is rarely true, and when they talk about jobs, it rarely creates more jobs as well. But the intention with this apparently is to remove as far as possible from councils what they term insecure work. I would like to push back on that idea for a moment. The Municipal Association of Victoria recently did a survey of 54 councils on their labour resourcing. Seventy-five per cent of their staff were permanent ongoing staff, and 92 per cent were above the national tenure benchmark, so as far as I can tell there is no imminent or current insecure work crisis within councils. In fact the majority of their staff are permanent staff.

So what really is the motivation here? It seems that the government wants councils to have permanent staff at the request of the CPSU, because it is easier to sign people up as members, I guess. If they are not contractors and they are not casuals or that sort of thing, it is much easier to sign them up. But this is going to cause all sorts of problems. Regional councils especially often have trouble finding permanent staff. They might have long-term relationships with contracting companies and those sorts of things, and this may interfere with that. I say 'may' because, as has been pointed out, we do not actually know how this is going to work, because the government is just asking this chamber to trust it because they are going to put all the details in the regulations later, which I think is just unacceptable here. They are saying basically that they want to consult with people after the bill has passed to come up with these regulations. I think that that is a terrible idea. If the intention is to increase the number of full-time staff at councils, then whatever consultation they are going to do can only end in disaster, I think, because a lot of people and a lot of councils I have spoken to hate this idea. They think it is a terrible idea. In fact many of them are very happy with the arrangements that they have, both with their permanent staff and suppliers. So that is one reason to oppose it.

Another thing that really concerns me is that there are some changes around governance. Some of these things I note are recommendations of IBAC reports, and I do not necessarily oppose many of them. But there is one in particular which I actually think is dangerous in certain situations, and that is making it possible to remove the mayor or deputy mayor with a simple motion through council. In some councils the mayor position is held by a single vote on the council – a single-vote majority – and you could imagine situations where all sorts of shenanigans might go on and the mayor might no longer be the mayor if someone does something for someone. It sets up incentives for corruption, and I do not think that is a good idea at all. In fact in some councils I think that would result in disaster, so I think that is a terrible idea as well.

I am also disappointed that the government has not put something in this bill which the Libertarian Party has been pushing for, and that is to clarify the councillor code of conduct around what is robust public debate. We passed a motion in this chamber that was brought forward by me, and many people seem to be concerned with what is happening, with councillors feeling scared to talk or speak out about things. But if you are concerned about stopping corruption, that is exactly what you want. You want people to speak out about things when they see something is wrong, not to be scared of getting dragged before some arbiter and getting suspended from council over minor things like, as I brought up, when Cr Barker questioned the number of people at an event. Another person questioned the quality of roadworks that the council was doing. These are all the sorts of minor things that I think constituents of councils expect their councillors to actually raise and bring up in public debate, and we have not done anything to rectify that. I think that it does provide some protection against corruption when you

have councillors that are able to speak out on things and not get slapped on the wrist and suspended by the arbiters, but unfortunately this does not really do anything around that.

The bill does some the things around conflict-of-interest rules and these sorts of things. I am supportive of that. But ultimately, overall, I think with what we are doing with the fair jobs code and some of the governance issues here, it is just too big an ask to ask this chamber to give the government total control over this through the regulations at some future date. We are setting up a system for how councils are meant to employ staff without actually knowing how that is going to work, and for that reason the Libertarian Party will not be supporting it.

Moirá DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (17:35): I rise to oppose Labor's so-called stronger communities bill because this bill does not make communities stronger; it makes the state government stronger and everyone else weaker, which is absolutely typical of most laws that come through here. Yet again we have got this concentration of power, these unaccountable bureaucracies, removing agency from the people that are closest to the ground that have to deliver the services or receive them. And of course it is anti-democracy, as my colleague Mr Limbrick pointed out – the removal of a mayor with a single vote from their position. Again, it is just something that seems to me is going to entrench the culture that is already rampant across Victorian councils, where if there is anybody on that council who does not follow the Labor Party line, they have the code of conduct used against them and they face arbitrary decisions from the government-selected arbiters.

Many councillors across Victoria have pretty much had their lives ruined when all they wanted to do was serve their local community as councillors. They did not really break any rules – the rules were vague anyway – but the whole entire system was turned against them in these kangaroo courts with no standards of evidence. Not only do the taxpayers and the ratepayers deserve better, but people who put their hands up to represent the interests of those people deserve to have better protections. As Mr Limbrick said, that is just not in the law. This is the second time we have had an opportunity to fix that problem.

People want to know who makes decisions that impact them, where their rates have gone and who they can vote out if nobody fixes a problem. They do not want to be sent around in circles between a minister, a regulator, a CEO and a council, where everyone is just going to say, 'It's somebody else's fault. It's not my responsibility. I cannot recall.' But that is exactly what this bill creates – or recreates – just another version of the same failed, broken system that we have already got. A state-appointed regulator is apparently going to be able to enforce more of these rules that get written. But how many regulators have we criticised in the last four years because they do not enforce the regulations that were already made? What we do know is that councils and ratepayers are definitely going to be funding them. Yet the blame, when it all goes wrong yet again, is going to fall on the individual councillors because they are the ones who have to front up and meet face to face with actual community members.

I really do think this is just political cowardice written into law. There are all these lovely terms that get thrown around. Of course everybody wants workers to be treated well. Of course everybody wants them to be paid well, to work in safe environments and to have protection from exploitation. And again, just because something is called a fair jobs code does not mean that it is actually going to deliver a fair jobs code, similar to how the Safe Schools program did not deliver safer schools. We have not even seen this code. I find it ridiculous that they can bring law after law to this Parliament and say, 'Oh, we'll fill in the details later. Just give us the power and the money. Just give us the power and the money, and we'll fill in the details later.' Nobody deserves that trust. A trustworthy authority would never ask people to do that.

But nothing is going to stand in the way of this government building another big enforcement machine. This bill requires every single council CEO to comply with these future codes and report on their compliance every year. The regulator can act on complaints, demand information, make findings and publish reports. We have already got systems like this, and they do not seem to have any impact.

Parliament is not a blank cheque for Labor. It is also not supposed to be a membership and money funnel for their preferred unions. We should not have to stand here and approve an empty legislative shell so ministers and bureaucrats can fill it in later. Laws should be made so that they are accessible, clear and predictable. You should be able to know and reasonably predict what the rules are going to be before the government accuses somebody of breaking them. It is a bit of a disgrace that this needs to be explained to a government that is writing legislation.

Labor has not even established the supposed crisis that this bill is apparently fixing. The Municipal Association of Victoria has reported great outcomes. Permanent ongoing employees averaged 75 per cent of the workforce across 54 responding councils. It also reported that 92 per cent exceeded the benchmark it used for long-serving employees. When I was a councillor I was amazed; I thought no-one would ever, ever leave local government if they could just get a job there. They were the best conditions I had seen, and honestly, after reading report after report, I thought perhaps some of them were actually overpaid or the actual positions were not necessary. We have got a massive financial crisis in this state. This is a bill that is going to cost everybody more money so that councils can be less responsive to their individual community needs and waste resources. People get minced up in the middle of bad laws all the time, and that is what I think is going to happen.

A rural council cannot permanently employ every specialist it occasionally needs. Coastal councils need extra workers over summer. Growing municipalities need contractors to build roads, drainage and community infrastructure from time to time. Needs change. We have got workers and small business owners who train apprentices, take risks and keep communities functioning. But you do not need them all at once. You do not need them all permanently; you need them for time-specific projects. If compliance costs force those smaller contractors and businesses out, of course you are going to end up with larger firms swallowing up the contracts, and I bet you they will be aligned to some union that is aligned to Labor. Then I predict that Labor will hold another inquiry into disappearing small businesses, scratching their heads – ‘Where did they all go?’ – without ever admitting that the regulations and the laws that they put in are the very reason that they were driven out of this state in the first place.

Then there is the money. All these assessments, complaints, document demands, legal opinions and workforce reviews are going to consume staff time and public funds, which we have precious little of to waste. The state is going to establish a regulator, but all 79 councils are going to have to feed that beast. Nobody can spend the same dollar twice. The money feeding this bureaucracy cannot also repair roads, clear drains, maintain sporting grounds, collect rubbish or actually do anything that local councils were set up to deliver. Ratepayers of course are going to pay through higher charges, delayed maintenance or disappearing services, but they always pay in the end.

Of course this is just socialism, and socialism always ends in tears. Central government cannot know every community’s needs or the labour market or the financial circumstances. It replaces local knowledge with uniform rules and local judgement with compliance that is centralised and unresponsive, and it replaces responsibility with bureaucracy. Strong communities are not built by centralised authorities. That disenfranchises them, removes their agency and just rips their money out of their pockets. It makes everything harder; it is so illogical. Strong communities are built by free citizens accepting responsibility for their own lives, workers and businesses serving one another and elected representatives answering directly to the people, not to these little political games once they are inside the building. And they are not built by ministers dragging power all the way back to Spring Street and hiding the real rules in regulations written after we have all voted on it.

I do not think this is the way that laws should be made. I think it is dishonest; I think it is dishonourable. I think it is leaving everything – all the money, power and authority that we are supposed to wield wisely – open to misuse. It does not serve communities, and all of these local government councillors who try and do something about it are definitely going to be the ones that cop the blame. I oppose it.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (17:45): I move:

That debate on this matter be adjourned until later this day.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned until later this day.

Sitting suspended 5:45 pm until 6:15 pm

Members

David Ettershank

Valedictory statement

David ETTERSANK (Western Metropolitan) (18:17): I start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the unceded lands and waterways on which we meet today and who I have represented in the Western Metro Region, the Wurundjeri, Bunurong and Wadawurrung people of the Kulin nation. They have been the custodians of this land since time immemorial, and there is so much that we have failed to learn from them. I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging, and also any First Nations people who are with us today.

Summarising the highlights of the last four years was a lot harder than I thought it would be. My repeated drafts inevitably ended up in the bin. Thankfully, ChatGPT was there to help, although having said that, I should say at the outset that all or part of this presentation may in fact be entirely inaccurate.

It is now almost 53 years since I started work, and it is time for me to hang up my sword and shield, as they say. I can unequivocally state that my final four working years in Parliament is about the most novel way I could have finished up my life of paid employment.

I have always sort of worked on a project basis, and irrespective of the complexity of the challenges or the tasks, it has been a case of breaking it into doable chunks and then going from there. So coming into Parliament, I thought, 'Well, how hard could legalising cannabis be?' Well, here we are four years later, and I have my answer. And I have to say, if I hear one more government member tell me that 'It's not good policy, but it's good politics' or 'Yes, it's overwhelmingly popular, but it's not a priority' or 'I support reform, but I'm not free to act on it' or my personal favourite 'We have to be seen to be tough on crime', I will possibly run amok. However, having vented my spleen, colleagues, I shall now move on to topics less reflective of my accumulated political scar tissue.

There have certainly been many parliamentary moments that I will remember with great fondness and pride. While the lack of progress on cannabis reform has been disappointing, it has been rewarding and even exhilarating to push the envelope on a range of other issues, like being part of the progressive crossbench campaign to get pill testing at Victorian festivals as well as at a fixed site in Fitzroy – despite the claims from the usual suspects about the dire outcomes of such a reform, all we have seen are fewer hospital presentations and a hell of a lot of relieved parents; or seeing medicinal cannabis patients finally being given the right to have their day in court when they test positive for THC but are unimpaired while driving. It is such a basic right but, equally, such an important rejection of the stigma faced by the cannabis community. That it was supported by all the parties in this place bar the Shooters and One Nation gives me hope that it will endure into the next Parliament and beyond.

It has also been a real honour to support some major social reforms that we have seen in the last four years. Following the lead from our New South Wales Legalise Cannabis Party comrade Jeremy Buckingham, it was terrific to see the government adopt our vicarious liability private members bill virtually verbatim. Nothing can undo the terrible, terrible harms done to survivors of historical institutional sexual abuse, but to have such a contrived defence as vicarious liability available to those churches, which so often turned a blind eye or even facilitated such abuse, was an outrage.

On getting treaty over the line – while I was but a tiny part of that process and Ms Payne likewise – it was a profound honour to have been one of the deciding votes that delivered the historic Statewide Treaty here in Victoria, and I will be eternally grateful for the opportunity to have participated in that.

After more than 200 years of failed policy, this may finally deliver meaningful change for our First Nations brothers and sisters, and I would like to express my deep respect to the generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activists who have struggled to redress this – our country's greatest shame.

I have been pretty vocal in critiquing a lot of the actions of this government, it has been alleged, on a range of issues, but I do want to take this opportunity to recognise a person who I see as a true Labor hero in the historical sense of that term, and that is Natalie Hutchins, who lived and breathed the delivery of treaty for more than a decade. She is I think an inspiration to us all. To any colleagues here who are in the other place for Ms Hutchins's valedictory, but for the fact that I had a prior commitment, I would be over there as well.

The challenge before the next government will be to ensure that treaty can do its necessary work for not only our First Nations people but for all Victorians, and I implore the Liberal and National parties to reconsider their commitment to abolishing it. It has been an absolute privilege to work with agencies such as the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Djirra and the First Peoples' Assembly, now Gellung Warl, in articulating their concerns in this chamber.

While I am briefly in fanboy mode, I would also like to pay tribute to my friend Lily D'Ambrosio, who has led the critical but profoundly problematic mission of guiding our state away from coal and gas to renewable energy. She has done this with quiet determination and great skill. Hats off to you, Lily.

To my friends and comrades in the union movement, I have been proud to work with you to advance workers rights in this place and equally dismayed that so many of those fights were simply to defend existing rights and entitlements. Progressive governments sometimes over time lose their connection to the movements that built them, and changes like those to WorkCover and for injured workers should be a source of shame. Likewise, to the many activists in the community, legal and advocacy sectors: it has been great to work together to slow the race to the bottom.

The ineffective pissing competition to be the party seen as toughest on crime: there are real and understandable fears in our community over public safety and over crime, but they will not be solved by arresting more young, socially marginalised and overly criminalised working-class people. It is deplorable and antithetical to common sense and what I believed were core Labor values. Sometime next year our jails and remand centres will be full, with more prisoners on remand than have been convicted, and that is pretty shameful.

My fondest memories of my time in this place will be the many community campaigns I have been privileged to support. At our first meeting with the then Attorney-General, Ms Payne and I were invited to provide a brief verbal CV – over a cocktail, I will say – and when it was my turn, I was told, 'No need; your reputation precedes you.' I am happy to take the four points on that one.

I came into this place as a one-term MP – here for a good time, not a long time – but I would qualify that by saying that my idea of a good time is fighting the good fight and making trouble, and I will be done with that when I am dead. I have had a spectacularly good team to share these good times with. I think we have all understood how fleeting our time is in this place, and my staff have equally revelled in fighting the good fight for our constituents in the west and in the cannabis community, there being a very significant overlap between the two.

Early in the piece we coined the phrase 'The west is the best, but it gets so much less'. It has been true for decades and at so many levels, be it public transport, roads, schools, libraries, health, community and culturally supportive services or public housing. The people of the west will tell you that they have been ignored by conservative governments and taken for granted by Labor governments. That is not to say that there have not been many Labor champions for the west, but the proof is on the ground, and it is now graphically reflected, I suspect, in the polls. Successive governments have said that these

issues stem from having the fastest population growth in the country, and it is true that three of the 10 fastest growing growth corridors in the country are in our Western Metro region, but that has, to my mind, always been a bit of a facile argument. If it is growing too fast to service properly, then stop releasing or approving vast tracts of land for broadacre residential developments.

We have had some memorable fights and some no less memorable victories, like working with the community of Little River to block Pacific National's vast multimodal freight terminal, which would have adjoined the Ramsar-listed Werribee wetlands, a place with more species of bird than Kakadu – there is your fact for the night – or standing with the residents of Sunbury and Bulla, who previously got shafted with 1.5 million cubic metres of West Gate Tunnel spoil and now face a giant waste-to-energy incinerator dumping toxic fumes over their homes, schools, shops and agriculture. And now we have data centres. In my 40-plus years of campaigning I have never seen a campaign explode like this one, and I implore the government to join the six western and northern councils to declare a moratorium on further planning approvals until they develop proper regulations and achieve a level of social licence for these data centres. All in all it has been a joy to roll up the sleeves and work with our communities to achieve change, to improve lives and to protect amenity.

Before I move on to quite a few thankyou's, I want to talk briefly about the rise of the far right. I thought we would go out on a party note. The far right are no longer simply marching on the streets, they are seeking and winning parliamentary representation. Germany is a striking example, and Australia is not immune. Over time we have seen the erosion of the social contract and we have seen the erosion of the social wage. I have spoken often about the lack of a social contract on proposals like data centres, waste incinerators and any number of inappropriate developments where people felt viscerally that they had been ignored or misled by government and by politicians. By 'social wage' I mean the principle which says that if the government spends our taxes on fundamentals such as services, education, public transport and infrastructure, it is as good as money in your pocket. If in the west you can get a decent bus, you do not need to own 2½ cars. These two things are fundamental to a healthy and cohesive society. Without them we invite a brand of populism which legitimises and amplifies grievances then directs that anger against people who are simply perceived as different. We seem to forget that this country and our allies fought and died to stop this very movement. History does not necessarily repeat itself, but it does rhyme. People who are supporting these parties believe the system is broken – and let us face it, they are not entirely wrong. But we cannot restore public trust in our institutions by burning them to the ground. We need to rebuild them one brick at a time, starting with truth, transparency and faith in the common sense of our wonderful and diverse people.

We also need a Parliament that reflects the diversity of our uniquely multicultural society. That is partly why I am entirely comfortable not recontesting the next election. I know there have been concerns expressed that there is a chronic pending shortage of old white guys in this place. I recognise that my leaving will potentially contribute to that shortfall – as, may I say with the greatest respect, President, will your pending departure. But I am entirely confident, colleagues, that merit and the free market can deal with that problem, and I thoroughly oppose any sort of quota to remedy it. That one fell flat. To that end, I wish our Western Metro candidates Xavier Menta and Channa Burson the very best, and I will be with them in the trenches and on the barricades, if that is not too totally mixing my metaphors.

At the risk of appearing like one of those Logie winners who keep talking long after the music starts playing, I do have a few thankyou's that I need to get on the record. In terms of the party I would like to thank our federal president and spiritual godfather Michael Balderstone, our federal secretary the incredibly hardworking Craig Ellis and our federal executive. Love also to all the wonderful folks in and around Nimbin who keep us grounded. Thank you to my friend, comrade and colleague of almost 30 years Ken Ridgwell, who in addition to everything else also now serves as both our state and federal treasurer. When I was preselected they did not think that I came with financial brilliance as well. Thank you to the fabulous and inexhaustible Mira Fraser, our state secretary and the beating heart of Legalise Cannabis Victoria. Mira came in and set up our offices when Ms Payne and I were first elected, in a

state of what I can only describe as barely contained panic, and yes, I will always be grateful to her for that.

I also express my thanks to our state executive comrades. My special love to the minties, Tony, Raf and Carmello, who were there when we had nothing but \$20,000 for the entire statewide campaign and had been preselected two weeks before the early voting centres opened. They were, I think, very correct in their analysis that given the 585,000 people on the roll, a two-week doorknocking strategy probably was not going to be incredibly effective. Nonetheless, we had a small bunch and were at those early voting centres every day, and somehow I ended up here, as did Ms Payne. To the grassroots collective, Xavier, Hannah and all of the other wonderful young seedlings, as we call them, I wish them every success and I thank them for all of the time they spend and all the times they just turn up, turn out and support the cause. To the roughly 3500 party members here in Victoria, my thanks to you for keeping the face of limited progress.

I would like to thank my wonderful parliamentary team. Together we have kept our shoulders firmly to the wheel and I believe have punched well above our weight. I do seem to be mixing my metaphors tonight. Among those who got us going four years ago are Tony Lee, Andrew Shears and the irrepressible and veteran of this place Fiona Patten. My thanks to Christine Tondorf, our former comms manager, who 18 months ago said, 'We should look at data centres. I reckon that could be going to be a big issue.' She was damn right on that. I would particularly like to recognise my current crew: Paul Fawcett, always at the barricades and never really that happy unless he has got six screens open at the same time; and our formidable campaigns coordinator Lucy Best, fresh back from the Edinburgh fringe festival. Somehow I have a staff of five and two of them have been to the Edinburgh fringe festival, and we are all neurodiverse, so make of that what you will. Thank you, Lucy, for your hard work. Also thanks to Norma Costello, our fabulous and incredibly hardworking comms director.

In particular, I would like to thank two people who have been with me pretty much from the start: David Peake, manager, parliamentary adviser, musician and truly beautiful gentleman – also an Edinburgh fringe festival veteran; and the extraordinary Justine Donohue, adviser, speechwriter, conscience and one of the most grounded people you could meet. Without David and Justine and without their support, their talent, their wisdom and their protection, I would not have made it through this term, and I will be eternally grateful to them. To Rachel Payne: it has been quite a ride. Thank you to you, my friend, and to your team.

Thanks to my progressive crossbench colleagues; it has been fabulous. And to my parliamentary colleagues in the chamber, who have challenged, taught, amused and infuriated me in equal measures over the last four years, my sincere gratitude. President, thank you for putting up with my potty-mouth and my sometimes unparliamentary zeal.

I would like to sincerely express not only my appreciation but my awe to the many parliamentary staff who make this place operate and make it an extraordinary place to work: the clerks, the table staff and the Office of the Chief Parliamentary Counsel staff, who perform the parliamentary equivalent of juggling chainsaws and somehow keep it all together and make it look easy. To the wonderful folks who provide research and analysis, the committee staff and the librarians, without you our capacity to be a house of review would be greatly diminished. To the attendants, who are always there for us; the catering staff, who refuel and revitalise and nurture us with such panache; to the mighty maintenance and gardening crews who keep the place running and make it a delight to simply walk around through these spectacular gardens; and likewise to the many Department of Parliamentary Services and security staff, again, my thanks.

To the hundreds of locals across the west with whom I have had the opportunity to converse, to learn, to collaborate and to campaign, it has been an honour and a privilege. I look forward to joining you on the barricades after I have had a bit of a lie-down and a cup of tea. To my friends, colleagues and comrades who I have barely seen for years, I look forward to having my life back and sharing some good times.

Finally, to my family, thank you for your love, for your support and for your tolerance. To my sister Kath and her family – love you. To my son Charlie, I am so very proud of the man you have grown to become. And finally, to my beautiful wife Kate, my best friend and my colleague of 40 years, I very much look forward to ageing disgracefully with you, my love. To you, my colleagues, I wish you every happiness in the future, and I thank you for your time.

Members applauded.

Adjournment

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (18:43): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Warrnambool rail line

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (18:44): (2786) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Public Transport Vicki Ward. With the recent announcement of the six-car services commencing on the Warrnambool line, I seek an update on how many additional seats will be available for south-west Victorians.

Electricity infrastructure

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (18:44): (2787) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Energy and Resources, and the action I seek is that she disclose the commercial payment arrangements underpinning the Western Renewables Link and subject them to proper public scrutiny before Victorian electricity consumers are required to pay for them. For years communities across western Victoria have been told that WRL is necessary and that they must bear the towers, easements and disruption that come with it. Yet there is still a very basic question this government will not answer: how much exactly has it committed Victorian electricity consumers to paying AusNet, and when? This is not an academic concern. AusNet's own corporate material places Western Renewables Link within its 'development and future networks' business. That business has previously been described as operating through long-term, take-or-pay fixed annuity agreements commonly running for 20 years or more, with contracted rates adjusted for inflation. But the commercial arrangements for WRL itself remain hidden. Indeed the Australian Energy Market Commission has expressly noted that Victoria's contestable transmission contracts are confidential, meaning there is no publicly available information about the costs or other conditions of successful bids or how they compare with a regulated alternative. It identified WRL as the only major transmission project then being delivered through this Victorian contestability model.

Now compare that with New South Wales. Transgrid is seeking to recover about another \$1.2 billion from consumers for project EnergyConnect. The Australian Energy Regulator has published the application, invited public submissions and on 1 September published its preliminary view that Transgrid has not met all seven criteria required to reopen its revenue determination. Consumers can see the claim; they can see the regulator's reasoning. They can make submissions before those additional costs are recovered from them. Where is the equivalent scrutiny in Victoria? Victorians are entitled to know the duration of the Western Renewables Link payment arrangement, whether and how payments are indexed, the annual amount payable, the total nominal and present value of those payments and ultimately how much will be recovered from electricity consumers. Minister, publish those figures and the relevant commercial terms and explain why Victorian consumers so far have been denied the transparency and independent scrutiny being afforded to consumers interstate.

Sexuality and consent education

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (18:47): (2788) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Education, and the action I seek is for the government to make comprehensive education on domestic, family and sexual violence mandatory for students in years 10

to 12. Not too long ago 13-year-old Layla Jeffery was killed in regional Victoria. A 16-year-old boy has been charged with her murder. Layla should have had decades of life ahead of her. Her family and community should not be mourning the loss of a child. We cannot talk about violence against women and girls only after another life has been lost. We have to talk about what we teach young people about violence, power, coercion, pornography, consent and healthy relationships before that violence occurs. Victoria has rightly led the country in Respectful Relationships education. It is an important foundation and I do not suggest we abandon it, but we need to be honest about the gaps. The petition I am sponsoring, brought to this Parliament by What Were You Wearing Australia, calls for mandatory domestic, family and sexual violence education for years 10 to 12 students. It specifically calls for students to learn about coercive control and abuse; sexual violence beyond consent, including pressure, coercion and peer abuse; and practical information about seeking help, supporting friends and accessing services. That is the education our young people deserve. If a young person cannot name coercion, manipulation or abuse, how can we expect them to recognise it? If they do not know what sexual violence looks like, how can they know when something is wrong? And if they are experiencing abuse themselves, we need them to know where they can turn. Senator Larissa Waters has rightly argued that young people are increasingly exposed to violent and degrading pornography while they should instead be learning about respect, intimacy, consent and healthy relationships from trusted adults and schools. This is not about blaming young people; it is about giving them the tools to navigate a world that is already teaching them, often through pornography and social media.

Ambulance services

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:50): (2789) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Health and Minister for Ambulance Services. Every single day our ambulances and paramedics show up when Victorians need them the most. Between January and March alone they responded to nearly 95,000 code 1 emergencies, roughly a thousand life-saving responses a day across the state. Since last year nearly 300 new graduate paramedics have started on the job, which is part of a broader push that is expanding our road workforce by over 50 per cent and upgrading more than 51 ambulance branches. In the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region major health hubs like Box Hill and Maroondah hospitals and the Austin do incredible work, but they rely heavily on well-staffed, fully equipped paramedic teams to keep the entire system moving. Minister, local residents want to know what these new recruits and funding mean for emergency coverage on the ground in our community, so the action I seek is for the Minister for Health and Minister for Ambulance Services to outline how the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region will directly benefit from the recent rollout of 53 new paramedics and our \$2 billion investment in ambulance services.

Kingswood golf course

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (18:51): (2790) My adjournment matter is to the Minister for Planning. The action I seek is for the minister to adhere to all the findings of the Golf Course Redevelopment Standing Advisory Committee in relation to the Kingswood golf course redevelopment, including implementing flood controls, considering the nearly 2000 submissions sent by residents to Engage Victoria in April 2025, ensuring that the development is at least halved in number and retaining the entirety of flora and fauna on the site and a lot of the canopy. The Kingswood golf course redevelopment does not put Victorians first; it puts the state government and a developer's greed before residents. Recently I led the petition debate in this chamber about the proposed redevelopment of Kingswood golf course. Dingley Village residents have been battling this inappropriate development for more than 12 years. The original development plans, which, importantly, were much smaller than the current plans, received 8000 objections. AustralianSuper was the developer that made these plans. They gave up after nearly a decade of being locked in battle with residents, selling to Satterley for \$200 million.

With this history, how can this Labor government be so delusional as to think that they can get away with an even bigger set of development plans? They cannot. That is why they set up the golf course redevelopment committee. The Labor member who spoke on the petition described them as

independent experts. Well, my constituents have told me the real story, and let me tell you, just like everything else this government does, this committee was dodgy. It made 100 resolutions, some of which were completely reasonable, but the Carroll Labor government only seized one – that Kingswood could be built on. It ignored all 99 other resolutions. More recently, Kingston council produced over 1000 pages on what is wrong with the Kingswood redevelopment plans, but this Labor government continue to do what they do best: turn a blind eye.

These 942 houses are not for Victorians. They are there for the Carroll Labor government to simply tick a box and desperately salvage their promise of building 80,000 homes in 10 years. The 3000 Victorians who would live in this development will have their houses flood. They will not be able to insure their houses. They will not be safe in an emergency. They will have no school to send their children to, no medical centre close by to go to when they are sick and no local shopping centre to duck down to, and they will constantly be stuck in traffic.

This Carroll Labor government does not care about livability. It does not care about Victorians. Victorians deserve better. It is time for a fresh start. A Wilson-led Liberals and Nationals government will give planning decisions back to locals through our ‘more homes, more choice’ policy, because Victorians should get to choose where and how they live.

Bellarine link

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria) (18:54): (2791) My matter is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. I note the recent announcement by the Premier and the Minister for Roads and Road Safety that a re-elected Carroll Labor government would provide \$237 million to build the first stage of the Bellarine link. This new 3.5-kilometre link will provide two lanes in each direction between the Surf Coast Highway and Barwon Heads Road, helping take trucks out of central Geelong and easing pressure on our local roads. The action I ask of the minister is for him to provide information on how this first stage of the Bellarine link will benefit residents in South Barwon. This is a project that has been a local priority for some time, and I take this opportunity to acknowledge Sandy Gatehouse and everyone involved in the Combined Bellarine Community Association for their strong and persistent advocacy. I also want to acknowledge my colleagues Alison Marchant, Chris Couzens and Ella George and Labor’s candidate for South Barwon, Rebecca Thistleton, for their advocacy.

Education system

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (18:55): (2792) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Education regarding the rise in harmful sexual behaviour between students in Victorian schools and the need for stronger protections to keep our children safe. The action I seek is for the minister to outline what additional measures the government is implementing to prevent harmful sexual behaviour in schools, improve early intervention and ensure students receive appropriate support when incidents do occur.

Figures obtained through freedom of information reveal that Victorian state schools recorded 2645 concerning incidents of a sexual nature between students between January 2023 and August 2025. Alarming incidents increased across primary schools, secondary schools and P–12 schools, with more than 800 incidents recorded in the first eight months of 2025 alone. Even more troubling is that hundreds of these incidents involve children under the age of 10. What should concern every member of this house is not only what some 10-year-olds are doing today, but what they may be doing in five years time if these behaviours are allowed to continue unchecked. A child involved in such harmful sexual activities at the age of 10 is at risk of becoming a repeat and more serious offender as they grow older. That is why intervention must occur early, with clear consequences, strong family support and effective rehabilitation to break the cycle before it becomes a lifelong pattern of offending. Raising the age of responsibility to 18 instead of 14 is definitely not the answer. Experts have warned that these figures are likely to only include a fraction of the true number of incidents that occur across schools. Researchers have raised concerns about the growing influence of harmful online content, sexual

harassment, exploitation, image-based abuse and other forms of gender-based harmful behaviour among young people.

Parents rightfully expect their children to be safe when they go to school. Schools must not only respond appropriately when incidents occur but also have the resources, training and support systems to help identify risks early and prevent harm before it occurs. This issue goes beyond individual incidents. It is about creating a safe learning environment, supporting victims and ensuring schools are equipped to deal with the increasingly complex challenges facing young children today. I ask the minister: what additional action has the Carroll government taken to address this rise in harmful sexual behaviour in schools to ensure that every child in Victoria can learn in a safe and supportive environment?

Prostate cancer

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (18:58): (2793) My adjournment matter this evening is for the attention of the Minister for Health, and the action I seek is for the minister to ensure Victorian men do not lose access to specialist prostate cancer nurses following federal Labor's decision to disgracefully cut funding to the Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia's nursing program. More than 7000 Victorian men will be diagnosed with prostate cancer this year. Those men and their families will suddenly face frightening decisions about surgery, radiation, hormone therapy and other treatments while confronting potentially life-changing consequences, including incontinence, sexual dysfunction, anxiety and depression. Sadly, too many will succumb to this insidious disease. For more than a decade, PCFA specialist nurses have helped men navigate that journey.

There are 23 PCFA specialist prostate cancer nursing positions across Victoria, a mix of full-time and part-time roles equivalent to around 18 full-time positions. Almost 14 of those full-time equivalent positions are supported by Commonwealth funding. They are already under enormous pressure. At the Alfred alone, the specialist prostate cancer nurse recorded more than 3500 patient contacts last year, almost twice what is considered a sustainable workload. Across the Victorian positions affected by this decision, there were more than 26,000 patient contacts last financial year. Yet federal Labor has decided to dismantle this proven specialist model.

David Davis interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: It is shameful, Mr Davis. What makes this decision even more extraordinary is that the Commonwealth's own independent evaluation of cancer nursing programs will not be completed until June next year, so Labor has made this decision before its own evaluation is even finished. Just three years ago the federal health minister described prostate cancer nurses as invaluable and committed another \$35.4 million to expanding the specialist workforce. Now his government is dismantling the very model it championed.

Minister, you cannot simply wash your hands of this and say it is Canberra's responsibility. These nurses work in Victorian hospitals and support Victorian patients, and it will be Victorian men and their families who pay the price if specialist services are lost. Minister, you should demand your federal Labor colleagues reverse this disgraceful decision, and if Canberra refuses, you need to step up and fund them.

Adoption

Moira DEEMING (Western Metropolitan) (19:01): (2794) My adjournment matter is for the Attorney-General, and the action that I seek is that the Attorney-General publish the average time from a mother's first contact with Adoption Victoria to an adoption order and table a plan to cut that process down to months rather than years, including early plain language information for women facing an unplanned pregnancy. There are many, many mothers who want their child raised, but sometimes they are not ready or they do not have the money or a home. They do not want an abortion. They want to adopt their child out. They want a family that is ready for their child. In Victoria that path barely exists.

The state now runs adoption itself. Private agencies stopped arranging adoptions in October 2022. Last year the government arranged 13 local adoptions. On 30 June there were 19 families on the whole approved-to-adopt register. That is not a system with any spare capacity. It is a terrible indictment. A woman looking for a real alternative should be able to get one from the government. Instead she is met with delays, forms and uncertainty. Families who have already been assessed are sitting in queues, and the child and the mother are supposed to be at the centre, but instead there is bureaucracy and paperwork that does not actually serve anyone who needs it.

This government pretends that it is all about equality of choice, but in the case of adoption the government seems to have all but removed that choice off the board for pregnant women and especially for the many Victorian families who wish to adopt. The government must make the changes necessary to provide a genuine option to those interested in adoption. When adoption is this slow, it really does stop being a choice. That is a failure of administration, not the mother and not the families who would be willing to adopt that baby. It is not a complicated fix; it is just a matter of improving bureaucracy so that we can tell expectant mothers early, and without pressure, that adoption does exist, it is easy and it works. We need to support the mother and the child and support the families ready to take the child in.

Eltham community hospital

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (19:03): (2795) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health, and it concerns the failure of the Labor government to deliver the Eltham community hospital. At the 2018 election Labor promised 10 community hospitals. One of the community hospitals Labor proudly announced would be constructed in Eltham. The member for Eltham called it ‘a great outcome for our local community’, and her website told residents construction would start in 2022 and finish in 2024. Austin Health would run it, with urgent care, dialysis, day surgery, chemotherapy, public dental and mental health services all close to home. And then nothing – no sod turned, no contract let. In April 2024 the ABC reported that none of the 10 community hospitals were built, and the health minister’s explanation was that the government was:

... working with each of the communities ... to understand the healthcare needs of those communities.

Subsequent to the promise, obviously. Six years later, after it promised them a hospital, it was still working out whether they needed one. In November 2025 the project vanished from the Health Building Authority website entirely, with no announcement and no letter to residents. A spokesperson said the government was ‘looking at how we best deliver the remaining community hospital builds’. This year’s budget gave it nothing. The program has now been revised upwards to \$870 million, almost 30 per cent above the promise, and three of the 10 hospitals have opened – more money, fewer hospitals and the Eltham commitment quietly removed. It more or less sums up the Labor government’s commitment to transparency that the only notification was actually the deletion of it on the website.

Our Liberal candidate for Eltham, the hardworking Paul Byrnes, is running to ensure residents of Eltham have access to quality services close to home when they need them. Unlike Labor and the current member, who has never explained the broken promise, Paul is out on the ground speaking to his community, meeting with constituents and having sincere conversations. Paul will deliver for Eltham, unlike the tired Labor government and the absent local member. The action I seek from the minister is to come clean with the Eltham constituents and explain to them, in writing, before the end of the parliamentary term, why the government has broken another promise to not build the Eltham community hospital.

Flood mitigation

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (19:05): (2796) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Water. The action that I seek is for the minister to take immediate steps to reduce the risk of flooding in Rochester. In October 2022, Rochester experienced a catastrophic flood that inundated

more than 90 per cent of the homes, and the town is still recovering from the traumatic event. The deluge was driven by water in Lake Eppalock overflowing into the Campaspe River, which then surged into Rochester. I have been contacted by numerous constituents who are deeply worried that the town is sitting directly in the line of danger once again, and they are asking for the minister's intervention. For context, in 2022 Lake Eppalock was only half full at the start of winter, before heavy spring rain filled the storage and caused it to spill and flood Rochy. At this time last year the lake was at 55 per cent capacity, but this week it has already reached over 100 per cent capacity, holding more than 306,000 megalitres. That level is a sharp rise, from just 34 per cent capacity at the end of June 2026, gaining more than 200,000 megalitres in the last couple of months during very wet weather. There is now no headroom to contain inflows from further rain, but it is reported that Goulburn-Murray Water is only releasing half of the water that it could.

This winter's heavy rain also means that the ground is absolutely soaked in the central Victoria catchment area. With the ground unable to absorb further water, even a small rainfall event of just 10 millimetres will result in an estimated 8000 to 12,000 megs of inflow at a time when there is no air space in the storage. The risk of a spill that will flood the Campaspe River is now very high, and farmers along the river as well as residents of Rochester are seriously worried. One farmer has contacted me to share a flood risk assessment he commissioned, which shows that there is a high risk of flood in the next eight weeks. He asked why more water has not been released to create more space in the storage for spring inflows and lower the risk of spillage and flood. I urge the minister to listen to the Rochester residents' concerns by taking immediate action to reduce the risk of flooding in Rochester and communicate more effectively with the community whose fears mount while the government remains silent.

Police resources

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (19:08): (2797) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Police, and the action I seek is for the minister to reverse the decision to permanently close police stations in Fitzroy, Collingwood and Southbank. When the new Premier took the role by knifing the previous Premier, one thing that was quite clear from him is that he wanted to see police stations open. It was the same for the Minister for Police. He wanted to see police stations open and police stations would be open. No sooner than six weeks later do we see police stations close under this government, under this police minister and under this Premier, betraying the confidence of the Victorian people when they said they wanted to see police stations open. This is because of neglect and underfunding of our police force. We see that Collingwood and Fitzroy, which were previously open to the public 24 hours a day, are now said to have their public counter hours shut permanently. The Crime Statistics Agency Victoria data shows that offences against the person in the City of Yarra have increased by 25.8 per cent over the past two years, while theft has surged by more than 22 per cent. Under Labor, crime is up but police stations are closed. They are down.

We need a fresh start here in this state, and only the Liberals and Nationals under Jess Wilson have a plan to deliver 3000 new police to return the hours and reopen the over 40 police stations that are closed or have reduced operating hours – I think it is now up to 43 – under this Labor government. Victorians are increasingly concerned about crime in their communities, and instead of putting more police on the beat and making police stations more accessible, the government is shutting their doors. Of course we saw a terrible incident at Reservoir police station about a year ago, where a woman fleeing a domestic violence offender went to Reservoir police station as a refuge, only for it to be closed and to be stabbed.

I looked on the member for Preston's Facebook page, and he actually welcomed the permanent closure of the front counter at Reservoir police station – a police station that Lisa Neville, as police minister, opened in 2021 for over \$15 million, boasting about the fact that this Labor government was going to deliver a new 24-hour police station. Can you believe this government? It has got a police minister and Premier that say they want police stations open, and we have the member from Preston welcoming a police station being shut – an absolute disgrace.

Energy policy

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (19:11): (2798) My matter for the adjournment tonight is for the attention of the Minister for Energy and Resources, and it concerns the transmission plan statewide and the renewable energy zones. I make this call now, noting the absolute chaos and confusion that is the state government's energy plan: its transmission plan and the associated renewable energy zones. The state government has had 12 years, and yet now we learn that there are massive problems from 2028. The minister today did not know in the chamber about the medium-term projected assessment of system adequacy, which is the advice from the Australian Energy Market Operator pointing to concerns with energy reliability into the future, the medium term in this case. The warnings are from July 2028 onwards.

The state government's transmission plan, recently announced, with the renewable energy zones is in chaos. The whole process was botched from the start, and this is causing delays and slowness to roll out a whole series of energy projects across the state. What we have seen is VicGrid rolling over local communities, not listening, not engaging properly and not putting in place properly thought-through renewable energy zones. The opposition has said we will pause the transmission plan, the renewable energy zones, and we will review them openly, honestly and with a short, sharp and independent process. But we learned today in this chamber, in the recent discussion of a petition concerning the Central North renewable energy zone, that the minister for energy unilaterally announced – tonight – that that zone is gone. Well, that is a win for people in around Dookie, it is a win for those around Colbinabbin, but what about the rest of the state? This is policy adhocery, policy on the run, and an incompetent new minister who does not know what she is doing. She is rumbling around –

Wendy Lovell interjected.

David DAVIS: Well, it is a great result there, but what about the rest of the state? What about the transmission plan around the rest of the state? This is VicGrid's mistakes, VicGrid's arrogance and VicGrid rolling over local communities. I am asking the minister to step back and to adopt the opposition's policy – to pause and properly and independently review the renewable energy zones and the transmission plan. This state government has botched its energy policy. It is years behind time. The Auditor-General made clear that the wind projects are years and years and years behind time. We know that major wires are years and years and years behind time under this government. They have been in power for 12 years now. Every problem in the energy system is their fault. It is all down to the last three premiers and the hopeless previous minister. It is time to pause and review.

Responses

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (19:14): A number of members have raised a number of matters for different ministers, and I will refer them accordingly.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 7:14 pm.