



Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Thursday 28 August 2025

Members of the Legislative Council

60th Parliament

President

Shaun Leane

Deputy President

Wendy Lovell

Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Jaclyn Symes

Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Lizzie Blandthorn

Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

David Davis (from 27 December 2024)

Georgie Crozier (to 27 December 2024)

Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council

Evan Mulholland (from 31 August 2023)

Matthew Bach (to 31 August 2023)

Member	Region	Party	Member	Region	Party
Bach, Matthew ¹	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib	Luu, Trung	Western Metropolitan	Lib
Batchelor, Ryan	Southern Metropolitan	ALP	Mansfield, Sarah	Western Victoria	Greens
Bath, Melina	Eastern Victoria	Nat	McArthur, Bev	Western Victoria	Lib
Berger, John	Southern Metropolitan	ALP	McCracken, Joe	Western Victoria	Lib
Blandthorn, Lizzie	Western Metropolitan	ALP	McGowan, Nick	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib
Bourman, Jeff	Eastern Victoria	SFFP	McIntosh, Tom	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Broad, Gaele	Northern Victoria	Nat	Mulholland, Evan	Northern Metropolitan	Lib
Copsey, Katherine	Southern Metropolitan	Greens	Payne, Rachel	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LCV
Crozier, Georgie	Southern Metropolitan	Lib	Puglielli, Aiv	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Greens
Davis, David	Southern Metropolitan	Lib	Purcell, Georgie	Northern Victoria	AJP
Deeming, Moira ²	Western Metropolitan	Lib	Ratnam, Samantha ⁵	Northern Metropolitan	Greens
Erdogan, Enver	Northern Metropolitan	ALP	Shing, Harriet	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Ermacora, Jacinta	Western Victoria	ALP	Somyurek, Adem ⁶	Northern Metropolitan	Ind
Ettershank, David	Western Metropolitan	LCV	Stitt, Ingrid	Western Metropolitan	ALP
Galea, Michael	South-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Symes, Jaclyn	Northern Victoria	ALP
Gray-Barberio, Anasina ³	Northern Metropolitan	Greens	Tarlamis, Lee	South-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Heath, Renee	Eastern Victoria	Lib	Terpstra, Sonja	North-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Hermans, Ann-Marie	South-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib	Tierney, Gayle	Western Victoria	ALP
Leane, Shaun	North-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Tyrrell, Rikkie-Lee	Northern Victoria	PHON
Limbrick, David ⁴	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LP	Watt, Sheena	Northern Metropolitan	ALP
Lovell, Wendy	Northern Victoria	Lib	Welch, Richard ⁷	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib

¹ Resigned 7 December 2023

² IndLib from 28 March 2023 until 27 December 2024

³ Appointed 14 November 2024

⁴ LDP until 26 July 2023

⁵ Resigned 8 November 2024

⁶ DLP until 25 March 2024

⁷ Appointed 7 February 2024

Party abbreviations

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

CONTENTS

PAPERS	
Papers	3383
PRODUCTION OF DOCUMENTS	
Working with children checks	3383
BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE	
Notices	3383
Adjournment	3383
MOTIONS	
Middle East conflict	3383
MEMBERS STATEMENTS	
Archbishop Bashar Matti Warda	3384
Eastern Victoria Region community awards	3384
Victoria Police deaths	3385
Christian College Geelong bus crash	3385
Leura Aged Care	3385
Bus safety	3385
Treaty	3386
Mirboo North school gymnasium	3386
Commerce Ballarat Business Excellence Awards	3386
St Catherine of Siena Catholic Primary School	3386
Mount Egerton Primary School	3387
Victorian State Merino Field Day	3387
Jumps racing	3387
Carers Victoria	3387
Victoria Police deaths	3387
Glen Waverley Tennis Club	3387
Melbourne Loong Football Club	3388
Nunawading Wargames Association	3388
Illicit tobacco	3388
Christian College Geelong bus crash	3388
BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE	
Notices of motion	3389
BILLS	
Wage Theft Amendment Bill 2025	3389
Second reading	3389
Third reading	3410
QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE AND MINISTERS STATEMENTS	
Working from home	3410
Alcohol and other drug services	3411
Ministers statements: housing	3412
Corrections system	3412
Community safety	3413
Ministers statements: water policy	3415
Community safety	3415
WorkCover	3416
Ministers statements: STREAT Parkville cafe	3416
Working with children checks	3417
Housing	3418
Ministers statements: early childhood education and care	3419
Written responses	3419
CONSTITUENCY QUESTIONS	
Eastern Victoria Region	3420
Southern Metropolitan Region	3420
North-Eastern Metropolitan Region	3420
Eastern Victoria Region	3420
Northern Victoria Region	3420
Northern Victoria Region	3421
South-Eastern Metropolitan Region	3421
North-Eastern Metropolitan Region	3421
Northern Victoria Region	3421
South-Eastern Metropolitan Region	3422
Western Victoria Region	3422

CONTENTS

Eastern Victoria Region	3422
Southern Metropolitan Region	3422
Western Victoria Region	3422
Northern Metropolitan Region	3423
North-Eastern Metropolitan Region	3423
Western Victoria Region	3423
BILLS	
National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Bill 2025	3423
Second reading	3423
Committee	3466
Third reading	3499
Australian Grands Prix Amendment Bill 2025	3500
Introduction and first reading	3500
Statement of compatibility	3500
Second reading	3503
Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Medication Administration in Residential Aged Care) Bill 2025	3505
Introduction and first reading	3505
Statement of compatibility	3505
Second reading	3507
Statute Law Revision Bill 2025	3509
Introduction and first reading	3509
Statement of compatibility	3510
Second reading	3511
ADJOURNMENT	
Community safety	3511
Kingston City Council	3512
International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance	3512
Suburban Rail Loop	3513
Wombat protection	3514
Pick My Park	3514
Fire Rescue Victoria	3514
Rail freight services	3515
Suburban Rail Loop	3515
Goulburn Valley Highway	3516
Indian community	3516
Community safety	3517
Retail workplace safety	3517
Homeschool Academy Australia	3517
Fire Rescue Victoria	3517
Planning policy	3518
Kingston City Council	3519
Health system	3519
Solomon Heights precinct	3520
Responses	3520

Thursday 28 August 2025

The PRESIDENT (Shaun Leane) took the chair at 9:33 am, read the prayer and made an acknowledgement of country.

*Papers***Papers****Tabled by Clerk:**

Major Events Act 2009 – Major Sporting Event Orders, of 26 August 2025, under section 22 of the Act, for the following NBA x NBL Melbourne Series 2025 Tour to be held at Rod Laver Arena –

New Orleans Pelicans v Melbourne United on 3 October 2025.

New Orleans Pelicans v South East Melbourne Phoenix on 5 October 2025.

Planning and Environment Act 1987 – Notices of approval of the –

Baw Baw Planning Scheme – Amendment C151.

Bayside Planning Scheme – Amendment C209.

Boroondara Planning Scheme – Amendment C420.

Campaspe Planning Scheme – Amendment C127.

Maroondah Planning Scheme – Amendment C153.

Stonnington Planning Scheme – Amendment C353.

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 – Documents under section 15 in relation to Statutory Rule No. 82.

*Production of documents***Working with children checks**

The Clerk: I table a letter from the Attorney-General dated 25 August 2025 in response to a resolution of the Council on 30 July 2025 on the motion of Ms Payne relating to the initial review of Victoria's working with children scheme. The letter states that the date for the production of documents does not allow sufficient time to respond and that the government will endeavour to provide a response to the order as soon as possible.

*Business of the house***Notices**

Notices of motion given.

Adjournment

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (09:39): I move:

That the Council, at its rising, adjourn until Tuesday 9 September 2025.

Motion agreed to.

*Motions***Middle East conflict**

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (09:40): I move, by leave:

That this house:

- (1) notes the public health crisis in Gaza as a result of Israel's continued acts of genocide;

- (2) further notes that:
- (a) Gaza is experiencing heatwave conditions, with temperatures over 40 degrees contributing to extreme dehydration amongst the Palestinian population due to limited water supply;
 - (b) famine has been declared, affecting over a quarter of the population of Gaza, and the remainder of the population face significant food insecurity due to the deliberate blockade of food and aid by Israel;
 - (c) infectious diseases cases are rising due to inhumane and unsanitary living conditions for Gaza's population;
 - (d) health infrastructure continues to be destroyed, including the bombing of Nasser Hospital this week that killed over 20 people, including four journalists;
 - (e) healthcare workers lack critical medical supplies, medication and equipment due to the deliberate and ongoing blockade by Israel;
 - (f) according to the United Nations, healthcare workers continue to be targeted, detained and tortured and now starved by Israel;
- (3) does not support the State of Israel's continued invasion of Gaza; and
- (4) calls for sanctions, an end to the two-way arms trade and an immediate and permanent ceasefire.

Leave refused.

Members statements

Archbishop Bashar Matti Warda

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (09:41): Last week I had the privilege of hosting His Excellency Archbishop Bashar Matti Warda, the Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Erbil, with the hardworking member for Greenvale Iwan Walters. Having had the honour of meeting Archbishop Warda in Erbil earlier this year and seeing firsthand the positive impact he has made, it was especially meaningful to welcome him again, this time here at the Parliament of Victoria. He is renowned for his tireless advocacy for religious freedom, for interfaith dialogue and for serving communities through education and health care. We were delighted to be joined by Monsignor Thair Sheikh and Father Mahir Murad of Our Lady Guardian of Plants parish, along with the federal member for Calwell Basem Abdo and community leaders Ayad Youkhana, Walid Bidaweed and Wally Hanna. We all welcome the recent \$1.95 million investment from the Albanese Labor government into this community, in particular Our Lady Garden of Plants and St George Chaldean Catholic Parish and Centre in Campbellfield. I look forward to continuing our government's work with the Chaldean community over many years to come.

Eastern Victoria Region community awards

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (09:42): We have a fantastic teacher in our midst in Latrobe Valley: Jacquie Burrows, principal of Churchill Primary School. She has been recognised as the most outstanding educator in Victoria at the education excellence awards. Jacquie has been teaching for over 20 years, and for the past eight years she has led Churchill Primary School with a vision, a determination and an unshakable belief that all children can learn. Under her leadership the school has built an exemplary instructional culture, one that inspires teachers and lifts student outcomes even in the face of disadvantage. Congratulations to Jacquie. You are an outstanding human being, and we are so thrilled to have you in the Latrobe Valley.

Another Latrobe Valley resident Frank Bezzina received the honourable Tony Shanahan Award for services to country racing. He was presented with this award by the Pan Pacific Hotels Group. For eight years Frank has volunteered as CEO and chair of Latrobe Valley Racing Club, managing track maintenance, administrative duties and race day with dedication. He and his wife Wendy are fashionistas. They are incredibly great supporters of country racing but also of their community, and we congratulate Frank.

Finally, congratulations to Anchor Belle Holiday Park, winners of the Bass Coast People's Choice Award for the third year running. Congratulations to Kelli and James.

Victoria Police deaths

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (09:44): August is always a tough month for Victoria Police. In 1998 we had Rod Miller and Gary Silk murdered in Moorabbin. Now, tragically, we have had two more members murdered in Porepunkah. Neal Thompson and Vadim De Waart were murdered on Tuesday, the day before yesterday, 26 August 2025. All police face the risk of death and injury every time they put on the uniform and go about serving the state of Victoria. It is part and parcel of that calling. The entire force will feel the effect of Neal and Vadim's murders, and they will feel it for a long time. Victoria Police is a large organisation, but it is made up of brothers and sisters, many who will never meet; however, they would willingly risk their lives for each other. As the people that make up Victoria Police – both sworn and unsworn – and the 000 or D24 call takers and dispatchers come to terms with this event, I urge them to remember that the decent people of Victoria have their backs and to remember they are not alone. Vale, Neal Thompson and Vadim De Waart. Hasten the dawn.

Christian College Geelong bus crash

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (09:45): I would like to rise to express my deepest sympathies and condolences to everyone affected by the Christian College Geelong bus crash yesterday in Stonehaven in my electorate. Our thoughts are with the children, families and school community that have been impacted by this dreadful tragedy. Thank you to all of the first responders who once more rose to the occasion with professionalism and compassion.

Leura Aged Care

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (09:45): On another matter, Leura Aged Care in Camperdown was officially opened last week by Minister Stitt alongside member for Western Victoria Jacinta Ermacora and South West Healthcare CEO Craig Fraser and deputy chair Bill Brown. Supported by \$39.6 million, Leura Aged Care is now a 36-bed state-of-the-art facility that has been designed with dementia-friendly principles, natural light, open views and green spaces to support residents' wellbeing. With modern single rooms, household-style living and shared spaces, including a cafe, reflection room and a hair salon, it offers a warm, home-like environment. This project also supported 120 local construction jobs and will now provide ongoing employment in Camperdown. It is part of the Allan government's commitment to ensuring that regional Victorians can access world-class care close to home. More than \$700 million has been invested in public residential aged care, including \$370 million through the rural and regional aged care revitalisation strategy. This government continues to strengthen and modernise aged care right across the state. This new facility is giving older people in our community the care, comfort and dignity they deserve.

Bus safety

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:47): I would actually like to join in with Minister Tierney and express my condolences to all of those impacted by the bus accident in Geelong. It also strikes me that it is an opportune time to remind not only this place but the ministers and the government and even the Premier that for too long we have allowed buses to roll off the production line in this state – on all sides of politics; this is not a partisan issue. I have raised this issue previously. In the early days of me being elected as a member of Parliament, President, you will recall also there was a bus accident in Newcastle, and it impacted very many constituents in our electorate. And yet there is no concerted effort to actually review bus safety, so I would ask the government to do exactly that. These accidents happen with such regularity that we are just waiting for tragedy to occur and be reported. We know that the buses have inherent design flaws. We know that every child should be seatbelted in a bus – in fact every person. No-one should be allowed to stand. We also desperately

need to look at the design of the glass, because as we learned from Newcastle, if you have glass that splinters rather than shatters, the splinters turn into weapons and very many casualties, if not loss of life, occur as a result. It is not only about the glass, it is not only about the seatbelts, it is not only about those standing – it is also about the safety of the bus drivers, just as you would at an airport, where you have a separate cabin for bus drivers and a separate cabin for those who are passengers. It is time to review bus safety in this state.

Treaty

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:48): Treaty means listening to First Nations people. Treaty will make sure that Aboriginal communities in our state always have a say. Treaty will take us forward. Australia's first treaty right here in Victoria is an opportunity to acknowledge – to celebrate – the world's oldest living culture. It is a momentous opportunity to be walking alongside First Nations people. This is a significant step for First Peoples in our state who have been fighting for treaty for decades. Treaty recognises the fact that First Nations people should always be the ones to make decisions about what is best for their communities. It will support the development of practical solutions at a local level and improve the way services like health and education are delivered. Treaty is an important and historic moment for First Nations justice and for truth-telling. Treaty means self-determination. Treaty now.

Mirboo North school gymnasium

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (09:49): I would like to use my members statement this week to talk about Mirboo North. Mirboo North is a great town. I stay in the pub often, when I can, when I am passing through. I did footy tipping there last year, but I was about as successful as Collingwood were, President, which I am sure you can appreciate with me. I visited the primary school and the secondary college, and I was enthusiastically met by the primary school student leaders and secondary school student leaders. We sat down and we talked broadly about things, but when we focused they really wanted to talk about the gymnasium. The gymnasium has been used, loved and cherished by the school and the town for decades. It is used for basketball, for netball, for badminton, for community fitness, for a variety of things – people get in there and use it. The gymnasium is in need of some love.

In talking more broadly with the community, I have heard and can see clearly the absolute passion and the buy-in around the town to get the gymnasium upgraded. Look, it takes time, but I am absolutely committed to working with the school and with the students. I just have to say again, I sat down with the year 12s afterwards, and they showed maturity and passion when they spoke about what this means to them and the town more broadly. I just walked out of there knowing that this is something that we have got to work on. Things can take time, but I just want everyone in Mirboo North to know that I am really committed to walking alongside them on working towards getting the gym funded for generations to come.

Commerce Ballarat Business Excellence Awards

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (09:51): I rise to acknowledge Commerce Ballarat and the 2025 business awards that were held in Ballarat recently. I want to pay tribute to Jodie Gillett OAM, who is the CEO, and the chair Darren Trigg, who have done an amazing job along with the entire team. I want to pay particular congratulations to the business of the year in Ballarat, the Turret Cafe. Well done and congratulations to Belinda, LeRoy and the entire team, and I want to extend congratulations to all nominees and category award winners as well.

St Catherine of Siena Catholic Primary School

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (09:51): I also had the pleasure of attending St Catherine of Siena in Melton West recently. I have got to say, the students and staff were absolutely amazing. I want to pay tribute to our hardworking teachers who do such a good job working with the students. I had some very interesting questions from the young people there.

Mount Egerton Primary School

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (09:52): Similarly, I also went to Mount Egerton Primary School, and again the staff and students had some very interesting questions about civics. We had a wonderful conversation about young people and driving. I was so thrilled to see that coming through the pipeline there are a lot of very talented and bright young minds that are going to serve the community very well.

Victorian State Merino Field Day

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (09:52): Lastly, I want to congratulate Trent and the team who ran another successful Victorian State Merino Field Day in Marnoo, where I visited recently. There are plenty of sheep studs around, and although the farmers are doing it a bit tough at the moment, there is resilience, there are optimistic people. I was so pleased to be there and support the farmers and the farming community in all the work that they do.

Jumps racing

Georgie Purcell (Northern Victoria) (09:52): Victoria's 2025 jumps racing season finally came to an end on the weekend, and five horses were killed. It was the first season after our state's eighth – yes, eighth – independent review into jumps racing in our state. This review was initiated after the last day of the 2024 season was the deadliest day in our history, killing three horses and seriously injuring two jockeys. At that time I joined with former Labor racing minister Rob Hulls to say enough is enough, but appallingly Racing Victoria chose to continue with the blood sport. Queensland stopped jumps racing in 1903, Western Australia in 1941, New South Wales in 1997 and South Australia in 2022, yet we stay behind as the only state in the entire country killing horses at breakneck speed for gambling profits. The so-called safety improvements implemented for this season after the review are clearly a farce. They did not work – horses still died. None of us should be shocked. There is nothing that the industry can do to make jumps racing safe. If we are truly the progressive state, then there is no other option but for the Minister for Racing Anthony Carabine to finally intervene on Racing Victoria's total incompetence and finally ban jumps racing in Victoria.

Carers Victoria

Ann-Marie Hermans (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:54): I had the great privilege of meeting with Judith Abbott from Carers Victoria, who helped me to understand that there are about 82,000 volunteer carers in the south-east. More needs to be done, and I urge the government to consider talking to organisations like Carers Victoria so that we can support our many families and individuals who are helping so many people without any financial support.

Victoria Police deaths

Ann-Marie Hermans (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:54): This week we had a terrible tragedy where two families lost a loved one and our community lost two police officers, who gave their lives to keep us safe. I want to honour Detective Leading Senior Constable Neal Thompson and Senior Constable Vadim De Waart. We are aware too that another officer has been seriously injured. Everybody is shocked and saddened by the events that have taken place in regional Victoria. Police officers know their job is dangerous, but they do it anyway to protect us. To the families who are mourning: know that everyone in Australia is with you. Our thoughts are also with all the Victorian police officers who will be feeling this very deep loss. We know your work is hard. The dangers you face are real, and your sacrifices are often unrecognised. We acknowledge your courage, and we thank you for your efforts and work.

Glen Waverley Tennis Club

Richard Welch (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:55): Earlier this month I had the pleasure of visiting the Glen Waverley Tennis Club and meeting the outstanding community volunteers who run that club so well. Outgoing club president Paul Bowman has just finished a 22-year marathon set as

president and on the club committee and 28 years at the club, and the club has decided to name the clubrooms in his honour. Congratulations to you, Paul. I wish Paul and the new president Clive Edmonds and the committee all the best. I look forward to visiting again, when you will see my devastating first service.

Melbourne Loong Football Club

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:56): I would also like to point out that I enjoyed on the weekend the launch of the Melbourne Loong Football Club. This is the first Chinese Australian Australian Rules football club, launched in my electorate in Box Hill. I am incredibly proud to see the tradition and the unifying power of Australian football bringing communities together, and I think this is a great way to bridge communities, have greater understanding and, most importantly, have a lot of fun.

Nunawading Wargames Association

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:57): Lastly, on the Saturday the week before, we had the Nunawading Wargames Association show day at the Box Hill town hall. This is a growing event, near Comic-Con proportions. I congratulate president Geoff Kelly for what was an outstanding event, and I look forward to that event growing and growing and growing.

Illicit tobacco

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:57): The Libertarian Party has long been critical of tobacco control policies at both the state and federal level. It has been long known now that the tobacco control policies have led to an explosion in organised crime and have been a contributor to arson attacks all across the state. But this week we have heard even more disturbing news – that there are connections between these same groups and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which is soon to be classified as a terrorist organisation. We need to have an urgent review at both the state and federal level, an emergency review, of tobacco control policies, because what is happening here – what recent wastewater analysis has shown – is that tobacco consumption has gone up. The current policies have led to an explosion in organised crime. Indeed they are putting our national security at risk. Before we can conduct this review the public health bureaucrats that have been pushing for these policies have put us at risk. They must be held to account before this review can happen. The people that have been pushing for these policies must be held to account and sacked.

Christian College Geelong bus crash

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (09:58): This morning I want to express the shock and devastation that we feel following yesterday's awful bus crash on the Hamilton Highway involving students from Christian College Geelong. The loss of a young life in such a tragic and sudden manner is almost unendurable. This has cast a shadow over our entire community, and our hearts are with all those affected. It is something we desperately wish no parent, no family and no community should ever have to endure. We also think of the students and driver who are still in hospital and wish them a swift and full recovery. In moments like this there are no adequate words to convey the scale of grief and shock we feel. As a mother who had to take the call that my son had been killed in an accident, I feel the grief – and it never leaves you. In times like this we must come together and support one another. We stand united with the Christian College community in their sorrow. To the emergency services and all the brave individuals who responded to this tragedy, we extend our profound gratitude. We will continue to offer our thoughts and any support we can give to those who are grieving and to the school as it navigates the difficult days ahead.

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

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:00): I move:

That the consideration of notices of motion, government business, 278 to 1047, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

*Bills***Wage Theft Amendment Bill 2025***Second reading***Debate resumed on motion of Lizzie Blandthorn:**

That the bill be now read a second time.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:00): I rise to speak on the Wage Theft Amendment Bill 2025. Wage theft, the deliberate and dishonest underpayment of wages and entitlements, is a crime. Every honest day's work deserves an honest day's pay, and on that principle, there is no daylight between the government and the opposition. The bill before us does several things. Amongst them, it repeals Victoria's wage theft offences now that the Commonwealth has legislated national laws criminalising deliberate underpayment. It renames the Wage Inspectorate Victoria as Workforce Inspectorate Victoria. It confers new functions on that inspectorate, including a complaints referral role. It changes the title of the act and makes necessary consequential amendments. Beyond that housekeeping, there are two real components: first, the repealing of the wage theft offences now covered federally, and second, the partial implementation of the review into Victorian government bodies' engagement with construction companies and construction unions – that is, under the auspices of what we know now as the Wilson review.

On the first component, the principle is clear: wage theft is wrong, obviously wrong, always. Employees and contractors must be paid what they are entitled in full, on time, by law. When wage theft entered the public debate in Victoria, it was because of egregious scandals, franchises underpaying migrant workers, hospitality chains exposed for systematic rorts, young workers too afraid to complain because they feared losing shifts. These cases rightly disgusted most Victorians. We have absolutely no sympathy for employers who intentionally underpay. They are not cutting costs, they are not being efficient in business and they are not making payroll errors. They are thieves and they should face the full force of the law. And there is another kind of wage theft, one that is particularly relevant in the context of the Wilson review, and that is, in a sense, conditions theft – the same principle, except that theft is of the working environment and expectations in any workspace.

But protecting workers requires more than good intentions. It requires a system that actually works consistently, fairly and credibly. This is where the government has failed. It created a duplicate regime in an area already covered by Commonwealth law. The Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry warned at the time that duplication would confuse business and damage confidence. The Australian Industry Group said the same, that it was an unnecessary and unwanted change, and even legal experts pointed to the constitutional risk of parallel state and federal laws. Yet the government pushed ahead, and the result was predictable confusion: employers unsure which inspectorate had jurisdiction, employees uncertain who would enforce their claims. Further down the line, when the Commonwealth reasserted its remit in this area via the closing loopholes reforms passed in 2023 and 2024, the Victorian laws became redundant, as they were always going to be.

This bill repeals duplication that should never have existed in the first place. So it is not a reform; it is a reverse. It took four months after the Commonwealth scheme began on 1 January for this government to even bring the bill to Parliament, and now we are obviously eight months on from that.

So if wage theft is an urgent problem, why did the bill sit on the notice paper for months? We can probably guess why, because we know that the government is more interested in appearances and announcements than actual outcomes. Look at the bail reforms.

We also have a startling double standard from the government as an employer. Even as the government denounced wage theft in the private sector, their own departments were guilty of it. Just this year it was revealed that junior doctors in Victorian public hospitals had been underpaid by \$175 million over nearly a decade. This is the highest individual example of wage theft in the state, higher than any private sector employer. There are national examples that are larger, but for Victoria alone, the highest individual one was Victoria's own government. 15,000 staff were affected across 36 health services, and these young workers worked brutal shifts – nights, weekends and emergencies – only to be systematically denied their lawful overtime. If a private company had been caught underpaying staff by \$175 million, this government would have called it a scandal, rightly; demanded their heads roll, rightly; and perhaps even pursued criminal charges, probably. But when it was their own health system, they downplayed it as a complex payroll issue. Not one minister resigned; no one official was charged. That hypocrisy is staggering. Laws should apply equally to all. If the state cannot pay its own people correctly, how can it lecture everyone else? It erodes trust. Victorians look on and see double standards and get a sense that these days in Victoria the law seems to be very selectively applied. Businesses see a government keen to punish them but gifting impunity for its own failings, and workers see government worksites as somehow above the law and granted effective immunity compared to the rest of us. Let us reiterate: the single largest wage theft ever in Victoria was performed by the Victorian government.

The biggest areas of workers rights needing urgent protection are on government worksites. For all the righteous rhetoric, wouldn't it be good to see the government turn that rhetoric on themselves for 5 minutes for once? There is an obvious place to start, because everyone in the industry has known about the CFMEU's behaviour on worksites for a long, long time. There is a very particular history here. Coalition governments, state and federal, tried to rein it in. The Turnbull government in Canberra established the Australian Building and Construction Commission, a watchdog that actually had teeth. Here in Victoria, the Liberal government introduced the construction code of conduct and a dedicated compliance unit to enforce lawful standards. But what happened? The Albanese government dismantled the federal ABCC, and the state Labor government scrapped the state's construction code and watchdog.

Labor time and time again turned a blind eye to the excesses of the unions and of the CFMEU in particular. Some people say it may be just incompetence, but when you have layered incompetence of this extent you might think it is intent. It was only when journalists from the *Age* and *60 Minutes* forensically exposed the rot on our worksites that the current Premier begrudgingly launched the Wilson review. To be very, very clear, the review was not a royal commission – it had no public hearings, no power to compel evidence and no protection for whistleblowers, and it could not probe how deep the problems really went. It was essentially a policy paper, not a cleanse inquiry to get to the bottom. It was not the disinfectant needed, and it was only done out of embarrassment, not out of conviction.

Now we have its outcome. The Wilson review delivered eight recommendations to clean up the construction sector. How many does this bill implement? One and a half, maybe two. The review highlighted that labour hire was a very problematic loophole – a back door for outlaw motorcycle gang members and disreputable figures to get onto sites under a different job guise. In fact the Wilson report noted media allegations of ex-CFMEU officials removed for corruption simply returning to sites as labour hire workers. Yet this bill says not a word about labour hire. The government's plan is to wait two years and then evaluate it further if reforms are needed. In the minister's own second-reading speech they effectively committed to reviewing the situation in 2027, conveniently after the 2026 state election. How comforting that is for everyone on those work sites, I am sure!

For years major taxpayer-funded projects in Victoria have been plagued by rorts, grey corruption and outright criminality. We have seen ghost shifts for billed hours for work never done. We have seen bikie gang members installed as safety officers. We have seen women bullied, threatened and even physically assaulted on worksites. These are not minor infractions of workplace rules, they are crimes, and yet the union responsible has been allowed to become a law unto itself. We all know the record of major projects under this government – the Metro Tunnel, the West Gate Tunnel, the North East Link, the Suburban Rail Loop – one after another, staggering cost blowouts. By conservative estimates, Victoria's infrastructure –

Sonja Terpstra: On a point of order, President, I know the lead speaker on a bill usually gets a lot of latitude. However, I have been listening for the last few minutes to what Mr Welch is saying, and I think most of his contribution in the last few minutes has been on anything other than anything remotely related to this bill. I would ask that he be brought back to the content of the bill and be relevant to the bill.

The PRESIDENT: Ms Terpstra, you are right about the first speaker having latitude, but I would just remind everyone if they can stay in the context of the bill, that would be appreciated.

Richard WELCH: It is clear, because obviously this bill is designed to implement certain selected portions of the Wilson review. The parts that it is choosing not to implement are very relevant. Those matters pertain to public worksites, and those public site worksites are part of the Big Build. There are obvious ramifications on those worksites of not reforming them. I would maintain that it is highly relevant to talk about the North East Link and the cost overruns of \$40 billion – it is not just a number.

CFMEU misconduct is not a side issue, it is central. It is a union whose culture has been infiltrated by bikie gangs and organised crime figures, and violence was normalised. Reporting to police was rare. Labour hire was used as a back door for disreputable actors, and this was on projects funded by taxpayers, which is why industry stakeholders are alarmed. They know the construction sector's scale, they know costs in construction flow through to every other sector, and they know that without tackling misconduct head-on, cost escalation and rorts will continue, which is where we are today. The CFMEU is still relatively unchecked.

The Wilson review was supposed to be the government's response to this crisis, but how did it respond? You would think the recommendations would be followed, acted upon and implemented. Recommendation 1 is to establish a complaints referral body. While this bill does that with the workplace inspectorate, which is good, to be clear it is just a clearing house. It does not have powers of investigation, it does not have powers of enforcement. It cannot investigate, it cannot compel, but it can refer on, so it is basically a reception desk. Recommendation 7 – to empower the inspectorate to receive reports from any person, including contractors – is partly covered by the bill. The bill does partly do that as well, which is fine.

What about the rest? Recommendation 2, to create an alliance of state and federal regulators to police and coordinate enforcement across agencies – that is not done. Recommendation 3, to broaden the fit and proper person test for labour hire to exclude applicants with serious convictions or close associations who fail the test – that is not done. Recommendation 4, to clarify that certain construction activities are within the scope of the Labour Hire Licensing Act 2018 – that is not done. Recommendation 5, to strengthen the labour hire authority powers to demand information – not done. Recommendation 6, allowing publication of contextual information about cancelled or suspended labour hire licences – not done. Recommendation 8, to review the reforms after two years – the government says it will do this but only after the 2026 election. 6½ of eight recommendations are left untouched, and industry clearly consider this inadequate.

The Civil Contractors Federation have said the review did not go far enough. Master Builders Victoria said the same, calling for fairer risk allocation in government contracts. The Ai Group went further, calling it a whitewash. These are the builders and contractors delivering our projects. They do not have

a particular political axe to grind, but they do have a certain vested interest that our worksites work efficiently. They are ringing alarm bells, so we should take them seriously. This bill basically ignores all of those matters. Instead the government says, 'Let's wait two years' – two years of drift, two years of cost blowouts, two years of misconduct unchecked, two years, conveniently, beyond the next election.

I think most people in the industry and the Victorian community are saying enough is enough. The government cannot claim to protect women while union enforcers still intimidate and harass them on taxpayer-funded sites. The government cannot claim to respect taxpayers while ghost shifts and sham contracts bleed billions from our infrastructure budget. For that matter, the government cannot claim to defend workers when junior doctors were unpaid \$175 million in overtime while ministers looked the other way. This is not reform; this is performative change to distract from having to deal with the rot beneath. We know why: because the government loves the rot, it profits from the rot and it is basically indistinguishable from the rot. It grants impunity to itself and a corrupt union and pats itself on the back for pushing enforcement penalties on others. It should be that the law applies to every actor in this state – employer, union, minister and state alike. It should be clear to every Victorian worker and taxpayer that integrity is not negotiable. But the government is not capable of this, because it is up to its neck in it and hamstrung by its own vested interests. It requires the government to reform itself, and that is something it clearly cannot do and far less wants to do. This is why, quite logically, a royal commission is needed. Only a royal commission has the powers to compel evidence, protect whistleblowers and expose the dark connections between union misconduct and organised crime. The sector is crying out for reform and the government is part of the problem, and it needs to be subject to it itself.

Where do we go from here? The coalition will not oppose this bill. Repealing duplicative offences was inevitable once the Commonwealth acted. Establishing a complaints referral mechanism is a good but modest step. This bill is not enough. It does not tackle labour hire loopholes. It does not create the enforcement alliance the Wilson review recommended. It does not confront the toxic culture of the CFMEU. That is why we have called for a royal commission into misconduct on government projects. Nothing less will break the cycle of silence and intimidation. Only a royal commission has the power of compulsion, the public hearings and the whistleblower protections to expose the truth. We have also pledged to reinstate the Victorian code of practice for the construction industry, so that integrity governs taxpayer-funded projects, and to establish construction enforcement Victoria, a dedicated watchdog to ensure compliance, accountability and value for money. These are not abstractions, they are actual, genuine reforms. They are not just an announcement, they are reforms. They are not a retreat, they are actually an advance. So they contrast very sharply with the government's half-measures.

Everyone in this chamber knows there is a problem in the industry – I think no-one would deny there is a problem in the industry. And the Wilson review confirmed it – no matter how hamstrung it was, it confirmed it. So if even a hamstrung review like the Wilson review could confirm it, imagine what we would find if we dug a bit deeper. Industry said it did not go far enough, yet this bill implements 1½ of eight recommendations, and that tells a pretty telling story. The truth is obvious: the government is pushing reform beyond the next election. Why? Just like everything else, why delay? There is clear evidence of action required, there are clear reforms on the table and there are clear recommendations from a report they themselves commissioned, ready to go. And yet they do not act, because I think the intent is not reform; the intent is delay. The intent is to shuffle along a little bit, just give enough of a little salami slice to make it appear like you are doing something when you are failing to address the root cause. That is why we need a royal commission – because this government cannot reform itself. It is congenitally incapable of reforming itself. I do not care where you are in society, an organisation that cannot reform itself will have to break. The government are pushing reform beyond the next election, so they are not on the side of workers, they are not on the side of the taxpayers, they are not on the side of business and they are not on the side of Victoria.

The Liberals and Nationals will not oppose the bill, but we will keep pressing until wage theft in all its forms – all its forms – is stamped out, whether by unscrupulous employers, by bureaucratic overreach or by union lawlessness. We will keep pressing until the construction industry is cleaned up, costs are contained and workers are treated fairly, because that is what workers deserve, it is what honest businesses deserve and it is what Victorian taxpayers have a right to expect.

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:21): I rise to speak on the Wage Theft Amendment Bill 2025. This bill will repeal our state wage theft laws, amongst other things, given that we now have federal wage theft laws. And given that we now have those federal laws, the Greens support this bill.

I will state I am glad that this whole country is now covered by wage theft legislation, but I am worried that too many workers continue to be mistreated and continue to be underpaid. I have heard from dozens of workers this year alone who have told me about the awful, often illegal, things that they have endured in their workplace – things that are, I would say, most certainly constituting wage theft, things that in many cases they have already reported to the appropriate authorities. It is people being paid a fixed wage but working ridiculously long hours, people who are made to clock out every 4 hours and 59 minutes, wait 2 minutes and then clock in again. That way they are not getting to take a break but also not getting overtime. It is criminal. It is clearly illegal, but it still happens right now. People continue to be paid ‘off the books’. Workers are expected to undertake online training at home without pay, then threatened that their pay will be delayed or their shifts cut if they do not complete the training within a strict deadline. There are places where there is an expectation that staff will volunteer their time to do extra work – work unpaid. The problems are still rife, and the solution is not entirely straightforward. These laws are important, and it absolutely should be a crime to incorrectly pay a worker. Too many workplaces are simply exploiting their staff, exploiting vulnerable people often, to get away with wage theft.

This is particularly a problem for young workers. It is particularly a problem for recent migrants to this country, and it is particularly a problem for other people who find themselves working in casual industries, working on a low wage. The Fair Day’s Work project recently surveyed over 2800 young workers. This report showed that a significant number of young people are facing wage theft. They are being underpaid. They are being exploited in a number of ways, including bosses reducing workers’ time sheet hours or bosses failing to pay compulsory super. From the workers that I have heard from alone, over two-thirds – two-thirds – reported having to do unpaid work. We definitely, clearly, have a long way to go to fully stamp out wage theft. There is more work to be done to engage with young people, to engage with other casual workers, so that they properly understand their rights and genuinely feel supported to stand up for themselves at their workplaces. People who work in casual positions can lose their shifts in the blink of an eye. Expecting these same people in precarious work conditions to stand up to their bosses is a big risk to them, which is why we definitely need the Fair Work Commission to continue to find new ways to hold workplaces to account. They need to be genuinely resourced to do so, and we need to support unions to continue their important work in advocating for workers rights. Wage theft is a crime. It is time it was fully stamped out in all workplaces. I commend this bill to the house.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:24): I rise to make a contribution on the Wage Theft Amendment Bill 2025. I am really pleased to be doing that, because I am going to talk a bit more factually about what it is actually about and not what other people want to make it about. I also want to thank Mr Puglielli for his very considered contribution on this bill. I agree with much of what he said about what is really important and what is at the nub of this – it is about wage theft. As a trade union official, I spent 30 years working in the trade union movement and represented many proud trade unionists, members of unions, hardworking union members who turned up to work each and every day, including on our government projects. I listened to Mr Welch constantly talk down our hardworking tradies who turn up on our Big Build projects. A lot of those tradies are small business owners. They are business owners locally who turn up and who have bid for works as part of that.

That is one of the things that our government did. On our Big Build projects we wanted to make sure that local business owners and operators who are tradies can actually make some money by contributing to these large government projects. Every time that Mr Welch over there talks down tradies on those government projects, he is talking down his own constituents in his own region. I hope that *Hansard* will reflect the record on what he has actually said. I am sure there will be many people in this chamber who will make sure that those remarks are read widely by many people in the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region, because I condemn those remarks. What a disgusting attack on hardworking tradespeople –

Richard Welch: On a point of order, President, I made absolutely no references to my constituents in my speech. It was clear I made absolutely no reference to my constituents, and my remarks were confined to the unions and in particular the CFMEU.

The PRESIDENT: That is more a point of debate.

Sonja TERPSTRA: On the point of order, President, that is not a point of order. I ask that I be allowed to continue in silence.

The PRESIDENT: I will monitor the debate. I will say that the previous point of order around the first speaker having latitude is 100 per cent correct. There are a number of rulings on that. But what it does do, though, is it affords following speakers the ability to rebut what the first speaker said and it opens up the debate. I just make people aware of that.

Sonja TERPSTRA: I want to give a shout-out to all those very hardworking tradies and proud trade union members in the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region who work on these projects, who are hardworking people, and also the many trade unionists who are decent and hardworking trade unionists. As I have been saying, I worked for 30 years in the union movement before coming to this place, and I will stand shoulder to shoulder with each and every trade unionist, despite what you say opposite, because you just want to talk down Victorians. It is actually disgusting, because what we are talking about here is wage theft. You want to talk about wage theft in the context of this bill? This bill is actually about repealing our laws because – as Mr Puglielli rightfully said – we now have a federal regime that is going to take this over. But the Victorian government had to act first, because we needed to take strong action.

I might just say last week I met with the assistant secretary of the National Tertiary Education Union Victorian branch, a proud trade union that represents academics. There are also endemic and systematic wage theft problems across the university sector. It is not just about whether it is happening on Big Build projects, but I could also talk about the large number of retail traders and chains – big chains – Woolworths and the like, the rich friends of the rich mates over there on the Liberal benches who have been systematically ripping workers off in terms of wage theft. We see what has been reported time and again in the newspapers in the mainstream media about which organisations have been systemically ripping off workers. I can reflect on some of the workers that I had to represent. At one point as a proud trade unionist representing workers I can remember having almost a hundred claims of wage theft that I had to process as an industrial officer. That is a gigantic, mammoth task, and that would only be a hair, a pimple on a log, of the entirety of the wage theft problems that exist. I also reflect back to when I was a much younger trade union official. I remember the days when, if someone came to you, a worker, and said, ‘Look, my pay’s been messed up’ or ‘I’ve been underpaid,’ the payroll department would immediately move to fix that. Now it is like, ‘Oh, no, we don’t think we’ve underpaid you’ or ‘Oh, no, we can’t rectify that because we’re in between pay cycles’ – whatever garbage excuse there is. But in the meantime workers do not have the correct pay in their pay packets.

It raises very interesting questions around when someone deliberately underpays workers on an instrument. Are they then in breach of an industrial agreement or instrument, and should there be fines applicable? There absolutely should be. There is stronger action that can be taken for workers to be

able to recover their wages, but there should be strong fines and an inspectorate with real teeth. What the rich corporate mates who talk to the Liberal Party all the time about wanting less regulation and less red tape are really saying is that they want to have impunity when ripping off workers. That is what this is really about: they do not like regulation over there. As I said, I am proud to be part of a government that has introduced groundbreaking wage theft laws. We decided to act because we knew the problem was huge, and we are proud to have acted. We are also proud to have been able to motivate our federal colleagues to now take action to make sure that we have a strong Commonwealth regime.

ABS data, for example, suggests around 400,000 Australians are paid below the applicable minimum wage. That is not by accident. That is wage theft – it is not by accident. All Mr Welch did in his contribution was carry on about Big Build projects and alleged corruption. What a shameful contribution. What an absolute disgrace. Why not talk about the 400,000 Australians that are paid below the applicable minimum wage, one in five of whom are under 25 – young people who get ripped off all the time. No, they want to talk about how bad unions are. They want to talk about how bad this government is. What a disgrace. You can just tell what an absolutely thin veil they have, with scant regard for workers and complete disregard for anybody who gets ripped off. It is garbage. I am glad the opposition is supporting this bill. Honestly, what choice would they have? By saying, ‘No, we don’t support it,’ they would be saying, ‘Yes, we want more wage theft.’ I think that is actually what they would really be saying, because they do not like regulation. They do not want bosses to be accountable for ripping workers off.

Our party and our government always stands with workers. We will always stand shoulder to shoulder with trade unionists and hardworking tradesmen and tradeswomen who work on our government projects. This is about amending and repealing some laws, as we have discussed earlier. Now we do not need these laws because the Commonwealth have the regime, and it is in their bailiwick in any event. I am also just going to say the Fair Work ombudsman reported that they recovered \$473 million in unpaid wages and entitlements for nearly 160,000 employees in the 2023–24 financial year and recovered more than \$1.5 billion for nearly 800,000 underpaid workers in the past three financial years. That is huge. That does not even go to people who do not get paid superannuation, because you cannot recover super through these laws; you have to go through the tax office.

There are a multitude of ways, which bosses know, to rip workers off. It is disgusting. You are the party of the bosses over there, so you should be looking at your shoes in disgrace, because all you wanted to talk about was how bad the unions are. I think unions do an amazing job representing their members and advocating and either going to the Fair Work Commission or taking action with the Fair Work ombudsman to make sure that their members get paid what they are entitled to. Let us face it, when a union negotiates an enterprise agreement with a boss, basically the boss agrees to pay a certain amount of wages in return for work that is being done in their business. Why an employer would think that they can then disregard that is beyond me. But again, you did not hear anything about that from Mr Welch over there. You heard him talk about corruption blowouts on Big Build projects rather than actually addressing the content of the bill. They are very light on detail over there and very high on attacking hardworking tradies who turn up every day to work on our Big Build projects – and local tradespeople, people in my and Mr Puglielli’s North-Eastern Metropolitan Region – and of course our hardworking retail workers who turn up every day. As I said, some of our large retail chains have been some of the biggest offenders, and also some of our banks – the Commonwealth Bank, for example. Some of these people have deliberately underpaid their workers, and it is an absolute disgrace.

I also reflect on Mr Welch hooking into the underpayment of doctors in our hospitals, and again it is a mischaracterisation of what happens, because they just want to cast aspersions on this government. I might say that our government respect our hardworking healthcare workers, who turn up to work each and every day, and that matter has been resolved. The hospital has worked with anybody who has been affected and will continue to do that. In any agency where we became aware of underpayment, the government and those agencies would act to ensure that those workers were appropriately remunerated and any problems were rectified. Again, Mr Welch over there casts

aspersions on this government because it suits him, rather than talk about the hundreds of thousands of workers and young people who are underpaid each and every day. It is an absolute disgrace.

There is always more to do. We need to have an inspectorate with strong powers, and the inspectorate has been doing some amazing work. The inspectorate also does more than just look at wage theft. For example, the investigations that were launched by the inspectorate prosecuted, as I talked about, Commonwealth Bank. They prosecuted CommSec and Bankwest for breaching Victoria's long service leave provisions, for example. In these matters CommSec pled guilty to failing to pay more than \$38,334 in long service leave entitlements to eight former employees, ranging from \$1113 to \$10,321. That is not an insignificant amount of money. Then Bankwest pled guilty to failing to pay more than \$22,847 in long service leave entitlements to nine former employees, ranging from \$521 to \$9957. CommSec and Bankwest are kind of large organisations, I would have thought. Those organisations were each fined – justifiably and deservedly so – \$18,000 and ordered to pay combined costs of \$12,000. Most importantly, the impacted employees were able to receive their entitlements as they were due to them, which was entirely appropriate. Also, the inspectorate led investigations into Optus, providing an additional \$218,000 worth of long service leave to approximately 560 current Victorian employees who had not been allocated their full entitlements, with Optus also paying \$13,000 in fines and \$15,000 in costs. So you can see there is a range of large organisations who deliberately go out of their way to steal wages from workers. It is a disgrace.

This is really important work. In the front-facing aspect of the inspectorate, for example, they had 7300 calls to their helpline from people seeking information about rights and obligations under laws within the wage inspectorate's remit and responded to over 1000 written inquiries. They do a power of work, really important work, and on top of that you have our hardworking unions who go out and represent workers and are doing that work as well as part of this. It is a huge problem. It is a massive problem. I know our government will continue to work to eradicate wage theft. The work will never be done. A bit like the harbour bridge, we are constantly finding different things and different ways – or like this building – in which employers actually do the wrong thing. Nevertheless, we will continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with our trade unions, who do an amazing job. I am a proud trade unionist; I will always be a proud trade unionist. I am a proud member of the AMWU and a proud member of the Australian Services Union – very proud and strong unions. I will continue to always be a member of trade unions because they do important work pushing back the largesse of greedy employers.

As I said, this bill really is just about repealing the wage theft laws, because we now have a Commonwealth scheme that will be doing the work that we spearheaded to ensure that people can get paid. There are still issues out there. I know a constituent of mine whose son was ripped off recently. It is really hard work going through the Magistrates' Court. There can absolutely be some streamlining done there. A lot of people are self-represented, and I hope we can continue to perhaps refine processes in that regard. I will leave my comments there. I commend the bill to the house.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (10:39): I rise to speak on the Wage Theft Amendment Bill 2025, which is referred to as the 'abolition of offences'. This is quite an ironic title, because what this bill really does is abolish not just an ineffective law but the very pretence that the government is serious about tackling systemic wage theft, or corruption or criminal behaviour in our public construction sector for that matter. This legislation repeals the Wage Theft Act 2020, which has been declared constitutionally redundant since the introduction of the Commonwealth's Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Closing Loopholes No. 2) Act 2024. The alignment makes legal sense, but what we are doing here is not just debating a repeal but exposing this government's refusal to confront the very system it helped create.

This bill does nothing to address the deep-rooted misconduct in Victoria's building sector, which has been the source of vast intergenerational wage theft for decades, money stolen straight from the pockets of hardworking Victorians. The 2015 Royal Commission into Trade Union Governance and Corruption exposed union bosses trading away work conditions for cash. In one case a deal was struck

that saved a company millions; in return the AWU took \$25,000 a year and put 100 fake members on a list. This government is well aware of this history. The government has offered a minor legislative adjustment to appease growing scrutiny while leaving deep structural corruption completely untouched. Billions continued to be funnelled into union-dominated projects, while inflating contracts, projected figures and enforcement-free zones.

From the outset the government's 2020 wage theft laws were not about enforcement – they were about headlines, with only one prosecution commenced against a private business. That was a test case, and when it failed the government gave up and offered this amendment bill instead. The test case was the prosecution of the owner of the Macedon Lounge, who was hit with 94 charges over alleged underpayment of just \$7200 to four employees across five months. In March 2023 the case collapsed. The defendant lodged a constitutional challenge, arguing that the state's wage theft laws were invalid under section 109 of the Australian constitution. That was what ended the government's big showcase.

Now the government comes to this chamber with a repeal bill and a symbolic complaints referral function dressed up as reform. Chris Crewther, a colleague in the other place, called it exactly what it is: another missed opportunity – another Labor half-measure on integrity in public construction and on tackling the culture of lawlessness, intimidation and waste. Innes Willox of the Australian Industry Group summed it up well. He said:

Establishing another 'referral body' to act as a clearing house just adds another layer of complexity, delaying any actual rectification. Another referral body is not going to make employers feel safer to make complaints about the union's conduct or for complaints to result in positive outcomes.

Let me ask this: why was the Macedon Lounge dragged through the courts while no-one in the public health system was ever prosecuted for stealing from junior doctors? The contrast between this and the Macedon Lounge is massive on so many levels. Fifteen thousand exhausted junior doctors who worked across 36 Victorian health services and did not claim overtime won \$175 million in back pay in a landmark case. The *Age* followed the back pay proceedings for several years as junior doctors sounded the alarms about unrostered excess overtime of up to 16 hours every day, causing ill health and burnout amongst staff and increasing the risk of errors. Why wasn't the Minister for Health brought up on wage theft charges? No-one in the government has been held accountable for massive underpayments. The question still has no answers. The case that really opened the door was Dr Gaby Bolton, who went to court to recover overtime she was denied by Peninsula Health. The Victorian Wage Inspectorate was clearly busy elsewhere, looking for another small company to prosecute, because it was the Commonwealth, not the state, that acted on this. It found Peninsula Health had breached Fair Work legislation by not paying Dr Bolton for the overtime that she had worked. This government has never prosecuted itself. It has never applied its own laws to its own agencies. Instead, it chooses to punish small businesses and parade them as an example, not its own broken systems. This bill says it is implementing the Wilson review. I quote Minister Dimopoulos from his second-reading speech:

The Formal Review into Victorian Government Bodies' Engagement with Construction Companies and Construction Unions, led by Mr Greg Wilson ... has exposed a rotten culture in the construction sector and the Victorian Government is taking strong action to stamp it out.

But I think, and many have said, that this Wilson review just did not go far enough – it did not have any teeth, it did not have power to compel witnesses. Innes Willox, head of the Australian Industry Group, again said:

Employers can only regard the report as whitewash of union misbehaviour amounting to a continued government protection racket for the CFMEU. The report is in places almost touchingly naive and perhaps a logical extension of the state government's ridiculous claims in recent months of a lack of knowledge of the CFMEU's unlawful activities.

The Business Council of Australia added:

An inquiry has the ability to compel any document or witness, which is essential in understanding the extent of the alleged influence of criminal organisations and corruption within the union.

Federal Labor also moved in to put the union under administration, talking up its tough action. But alongside the Wilson review, this too was a political farce. As the BCA notes:

The Administrator's role is to get the CFMEU operating again, not to get to the bottom of every issue, and it's clear that if we're serious about doing this we need to have a full, open and transparent national inquiry – because this is likely to be a problem across every state.

This is what on this side of the chamber we are calling for. But the government of course rejected that, because who knows what we would find. Instead what we get essentially is not a royal commission; we get a referral mailbox. That is the response to one of the country's worst public integrity scandals in living memory. I like the way Peter Walsh in the other place put it, quite bluntly. He said:

... we have got this body to effectively do stuff-all other than pass stuff on and then maybe write a report in the future.

I think that is true. Only two of the review's eight recommendations are touched on in this bill, and neither have teeth. Meanwhile, far from stamping it out, the CFMEU remains untouched. Here is an organisation that has been a big donor to the Labor Party and has broken federal laws more than 2600 times, costing the union more than \$24 million in fines. Since 2003 the CFMEU has been the subject of findings of contraventions of federal workplace laws on more than 1500 occasions, plus 1100 contraventions by its own office holders, employees, delegates and members. That is around 213 court cases and total penalties ordered of about \$24 million, yet their flags still fly over the massively overblown public construction sites. The best this government could do is give us at least a decent review that will actually get to the bottom of what is going on.

This government cannot feign ignorance about what is happening on its own construction sites – no-one who has looked into the issue for more than 5 minutes believes them. Last year the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that women had been bashed, locked in rooms and harassed by violent offenders placed on taxpayer-funded worksites – men with bikie links, criminal records and protection from the CFMEU. One woman was filmed being bashed by a bikie-linked workplace health and safety officer – just let that one sink in – during his lunchbreak from a government-funded project. Another was locked in a room by a man previously jailed for violence against women, who smoked ice as he detained her. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported:

The women's stories ... reveal a pattern of the troubled union pushing men with violent histories onto worksites and then punishing women who complain ...

Building companies agreed to employ them in pursuit of industrial peace. Isn't that crazy? In order to have industrial peace you can have these thugs come onto worksites and bash women, and anyone that speaks up against this becomes a target. This is what the government defends when it looks the other way and offers reviews and interventions that go absolutely nowhere. This is what happens when complaints go into an expensive mailbox and remain stuck there. Yet Minister Dimopoulos can stand still and gushingly tell Parliament with a straight face during his second-reading speech that criminal and unlawful behaviour has no place on Victorian construction sites. He said:

The measures the Victorian Government is adopting aim to complement Commonwealth reforms and CFMEU changes, as well as actions already taken by the Government, which includes passing anti-bikie laws in 2024 that make it easier to prevent certain individuals from associating with each other.

Let me just quickly provide the minister with some common sense. Firstly, it may come as a surprise, but bikies do not actually list their membership. They do not. As a former bikie boss, Jay Malkoun made it clear in his recent interviews. He has said that many bikies have ordinary jobs and families, wearing their bikie colours only when they are on club rides. They will simply change their clothes, put on a hard hat, a vest or a business suit and continue to flout the laws that are rarely enforced. This

is happening on all the government's projects funded by our taxpayers, the actual people you were given a legislative and moral responsibility to protect.

In closing, we support the alignment with federal laws and we support the streamlining of jurisdictions. What we do not support and what we have pointed out is the hypocrisy. We can make this change, but unless there is a clear-eyed, real deep dive into what is actually going on, it does not matter if we align laws and it does not matter if we are doing these things to bring ourselves into line with Commonwealth standards. This government can look at its own projects, its own unions and its own contracts and apply the same rules it preaches to everyone else, because if it does not do that, nothing will change. These are more meaningless optics dressed up as reforms.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (10:53): I am here to speak in support of our Wage Theft Amendment Bill 2025, brought to the Parliament by the Minister for Economic Growth and Jobs in the other place. The Allan Labor government is committed to stamping out wage theft and dodgy employment practices in Victoria and has led the nation in combating wage theft. We were the first jurisdiction in the country to criminalise wage theft, in 2021, making dodgy operators liable for fines of up to \$200,000 for individuals and nearly \$1 million for companies and risking up to 10 years of imprisonment in serious cases. We intend to keep taking a hard line against such practices to ensure the safety of our workers in the future and protect employees from having their entitlements deliberately withheld, and this bill is designed to do exactly that.

I have listened to the last couple of contributions that we have had from those opposite, and they have totally been an exercise in union-bashing. I cannot believe some of the things that they have come out with. I have been associated with a union for nearly 40 years – in fact my life membership comes up with the Transport Workers' Union in 2026 – and I have come across all sorts of dodgy employers in terms of wage theft. It generally starts with superannuation, and the first thing that the employer will do is not pay it. Given that there are only a certain amount of times that they have got to pay superannuation in any one year, the opportunity to ensure that the employee is getting that money is fairly limited if they are not checking their accounts daily, weekly or monthly, as the case might be. Those of us who have got superannuation accounts would be probably guilty of not checking those accounts, because we think it is one of those things that you set and forget and do not take the time to forensically look at it.

Especially in transport, if we look at the gig economy I can give you countless examples of how the people working in that particular industry are ripped off on a daily basis. They are working off apps, getting jobs via particular companies, and if they get a job for any one particular day are they making sure they are getting paid the correct rate of pay? I am sure those opposite that are getting their pizzas delivered to their homes would not give two hoots about the wages of the person who has just driven through the rain to get their pizza to them or their bottles of wine that they get delivered to their house. They would not ask a question about what they are being paid, whether their entitlements are there or if in fact they are actually being paid at all for the job that they are doing. So I am not going to sit here and be lectured by those opposite about what it means to be a union member and ensure that all of your entitlements are going to be correctly paid.

Getting back to the bill, specifically the bill will make amendments to the Wage Theft Act 2020, substituting 'Wage Theft' within the title of the principal act to 'Workforce Inspectorate Victoria', as well as making the changes necessary to repeal Victoria's wage theft offences and related investigation functions and powers to avoid potential confusion with the introduction of the Commonwealth legislation on wage theft. It will rename Wage Inspectorate Victoria to Workforce Inspectorate Victoria to better reflect its role and confer a general function on the workforce inspectorate which will enable it to provide information and advice in relation to workplace entitlements as they are prescribed.

The bill will amend other acts consequentially named in the bill as the Child Employment Act 2003, the Criminal Procedure Act 2009, the Long Service Benefits Portability Act 2018, the Long Service

Leave Act 2018, the Owner Drivers and Forestry Contractors Act 2005, the Public Administration Act 2004 and the Integrity Oversight Victoria Act 2011.

The workforce inspectorate will have their regulatory functions and capabilities broadened in contrast to the current wage inspectorate. This will contribute to achieve our government's aim in tackling wage theft within the state, ensure we are aligned with Commonwealth laws that have criminalised the intentional underpaying of wages and repeal any parts of the legislation that create unnecessary confusion for the community as well as workers and businesses.

In the bill the inspectorate's new responsibilities are to be designated as follows: to receive complaints or matters and related information regarding public construction from any person; to refer the complaints or matters and disclose related information regarding public construction to other government agencies and bodies, including agencies and bodies of the Commonwealth and another state or territory; and to receive notifications and information from other government agencies and bodies regarding any complaints or matters the workforce inspectorate has referred to those government agencies and bodies. The workforce inspectorate authority will have the ability to provide advice, information and education on working entitlements and report to the minister, where appropriate, on any complaints, matters, notifications or information that Workforce Inspectorate Victoria receives or refers.

The bill aims to enforce compliance with the law and ensure legal minimums are respected. The workforce inspectorate functions are regulatory, not representative. This does not impede on the work of trade unions. Instead, it supports the voice of unions in their representation of workers rights and advancing conditions, enforcing the floor of workplace standards to allow them to focus on their vital work and provide for bargaining for better pay and conditions. While employment law is largely legislated by the federal government, such as the Fair Work Act 2009, with the recent amendments that have driven a change at a Victorian level, states still retain the power to implement workplace legislation in relation to areas such as health and safety, discrimination and workers compensation. This legislative amendment takes into account investigations done into dodgy practices.

The second objective of this bill relates to the Wilson review into Victorian government bodies' engagement with construction companies and construction unions led by Mr Greg Wilson, who was a former Secretary of the Department of Justice and Regulation and Secretary of the Department of Sustainability and Environment and most recently the acting commissioner for the Victorian Public Sector Commission. The review was released by the Victorian government into public purview on 18 December 2024. All of the recommendations listed were accepted either in full or in principle. The bill addresses that first recommendation by establishing a complaints referral body, Workforce Inspectorate Victoria, which acts to receive and refer complaints referring to Victorian government construction sites.

The Allan Labor government also amended the Labour Hire Licensing Act 2018. That serves to add discretionary considerations to the fit and proper person test. As such, the Labour Hire Authority may find that an applicant is not a fit and proper person if the applicant reflects the following: has any conviction or finding of guilt for an indictable offence as specified in section 22(a) of that act in the previous 10 years; has held any role as an officer in other companies in the previous five years where that company has become insolvent or had a labour hire licence cancelled, suspended or revoked within six months of that person's departure from the company; has a close associate who would not be found to be a fit and proper person; or is a member of a Part 5C organisation as defined in the Criminal Organisations Control Act 2012.

The government's amendment of the Labour Hire Licensing Act gives the Labour Hire Authority the power to request in writing that a person provide information or documents that the authority reasonably believes are necessary for the monitoring of compliance with the Labour Hire Licensing Act. This request should provide its recipient with the power to provide the information and preserve the recipient's right to refuse to provide the information. It can also require by written notice that a

person provide specified information for the purpose of monitoring compliance with the Labour Hire Licensing Act within the time specified and in the manner specified. Failing to comply with a notice should therefore be an offence. The government's amendments to the Labour Hire Licensing Act enable the register of licensed labour hire providers to include contextual information in relation to suspensions and cancellations of licences, with the publication to be limited to information that is not confidential under other state or federal laws and information that does not breach the privacy of people other than the licence-holder. These previous legislation changes demonstrate the Allan Labor government's commitment to implementing the recommendations of the Wilson review.

The workforce inspectorate would serve to receive and refer complaints relating to Victorian government construction sites and would be responsible for protecting, investigating and enforcing workplace regulations, such as long service leave, child employment laws and owner-driver and forestry contractor laws. These will provide better regulation of the environment of our workers and ensure that fair practices are followed and maintained, working in tandem with other workplace regulatory bodies such as the Victorian Labor Hire Authority. The wage inspectorate successfully fought for over \$1.2 million of unpaid long service leave for Woolworths workers in 2024, impacting over 1000 retail employees. Recently the sole director of Minto Nominees Pty Ltd was charged \$10,000 for breaking the child employment laws after the wage inspectorate received a tip-off that they may be employing staff under 15 years of age. The wage inspectorate has allowed for workers to receive rightful compensation for work that they do, providing clear channels of support and shutting down loopholes that feed exploitation. I would like to thank commissioner Robert Hortle for his work since 2021.

The workforce inspectorate's new oversight and strengthening of the Victorian Labour Hire Authority's powers are designed to close loopholes in high-risk industries where unlawful practices have been documented. The Labour Hire Authority regulates who can provide labour, ensuring providers are legitimate and licensed, while the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria will regulate how workers are treated once employed. These reforms are led by the recommendations from the Wilson review. This bill aims to strengthen their coordination, mutually reinforcing the keeping out of dodgy labour providers and ensuring workers are paid fairly and are sufficiently protected. The bill represents a deliberate action by the Allan Labor government to support our hardworking trade unions. The Allan Labor government will engage in consultation with relevant bodies to implement these changes effectively.

Construction work contracts and policy for Victorian government sites under the new legislation will require clauses that cover criminal and other unlawful conduct, enforce that contractors report or deal with suspected criminal or unlawful activity at their worksites and promote the new complaints referral body. This aligns with recommendation 7 of the Wilson report, that construction policies and contracts for Victorian government-funded construction projects:

... include clauses that cover *criminal or other unlawful conduct* that require principal contractors ... to:

- report any suspected criminal or other unlawful conduct to the new complaints referral body
- ensure that where possible, they and their contractors ... address criminal and unlawful conduct
- promote, support and work with the new complaints referral body
- have systems and processes in place to fulfil these obligations with respect to the overall construction project, including its subcontractors.

Alongside this, the bill provides for a definition of 'public construction' to go along with these obligations, with the Wilson report estimating potential for complaints to reach around 200 per quarter, with verifiable actual numbers depending on the proportion of individuals directing complaints to the Fair Work Commission or other appropriate bodies in regard to awareness. Data used in the Wilson report was itself based upon information provided by the Fair Work Commission's online portal, opening on 31 July 2024 and receiving 793 complaints and pieces of intelligence as at 31 October

2024. A measured judgement was made that complaints in Victoria would represent approximately 25 per cent, or a quarter, of those, equalling approximately 200.

Critically, the Allan Labor government has recently announced that this new inspectorate will use its new powers to receive concerns and complaints, with a particular focus on women's safety. Our government is committed to achieving gender parity within the construction industry, and a major part of the work is to ensure that women are safe, respected and supported in their work. The Labor government has been doing the work to stamp out gender discrimination in the industry, with Building Gender Equality: Victoria's Women in Construction Strategy 2019–2022 investigating barriers to women's participation, including attraction, recruitment and retention in construction site-based roles. The CFMEU administrator, Mark Irving KC, and his team have been working hard to address allegations of gender discrimination and violence on public construction sites, and his work is to be commended. In construction women remain under-represented and too often face unsafe and hostile conditions.

This bill is a step towards change by providing safer pathways for women to raise concerns. As stated in the review itself, stamping out wage theft in the industry will require oversight and consideration of many influential factors, whether cultural, regulatory, legal, policy related or contractual, and will require the involvement of Commonwealth industrial relations law and the CFMEU administration. With the administration and cultural changes being spearheaded by Mark Irving in the CFMEU, these amendments must be able to be implemented quickly and effectively.

The Allan Labor government is responding to a complex and multifaceted legislative matter to improve oversight and management of the construction industry across the state. I would like to highlight further the work the Allan Labor government is doing to stamp out criminal and unlawful activity in the industry and improve the general culture of construction work, including the building of equity policies which work to train and employ more women in the sector, bridging gender disparity and encouraging diversity within the industry, because long-term structural cultural change is needed across a male-dominated construction sector. With that, I commend the bill to the house.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (11:08): I rise to speak to the Wage Theft Amendment Bill 2025, and I note that this bill has been brought into the house by the government. Previously there was the government's Wage Theft Act 2020, which criminalised the deliberate and dishonest withholding of employee entitlements. At that point the government established the Wage Inspectorate Victoria to enforce the laws under that act. This bill is repealing some of this because the Albanese government introduced legislation into the federal Parliament, the Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Closing Loopholes) Act 2023. This tries to close some of those loopholes given that federal legislation.

Why are we debating this? We are debating it because of the corruption in the CFMEU. As members know, the government instigated the Wilson review, which was a complete farce. It did not go far enough in relation to what is going on – the extraordinary level of corruption and mismanagement in the CFMEU and the Big Build. As a result, we have seen some appalling reports about what has gone on, with various allegations around inappropriate and criminal behaviour and intimidatory and coercive acts that have gone on. It is just a shocking situation where the taxpayer is footing the bill because of this ongoing corruption. We have had allegations of bikie gangs linked with the Big Build and a high degree of criminal activity that has been involved, and that has all been reported. There has been some excellent reporting by journalists who have really uncovered – not the extent, because we do not know the true extent – very, very serious behaviours in the Big Build here in Victoria, and I do not think that is anything for the government to be proud of. We have got a Premier who oversaw that portfolio when she was infrastructure minister, and looking at this she turned a blind eye to it all, quite frankly, and did nothing, and then when it was exposed they decided that they had better do something on wage theft.

This is what this bill is doing. It is allowing for the workforce inspectorate to be renamed to better reflect the revised legislative issue, so the Wage Inspectorate Victoria will now be known as the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria. It really does not go to the crux of what we are talking about in terms of the level of corruption and those issues around wage theft and other components in Victoria. As I said, the Wilson review, which was quite farcical in terms of what it found, made eight recommendations. The bill implements recommendation 1 of the Wilson review and supports the implementation of recommendation 7. I understand that when the shadow minister asked the government ‘Why aren’t you implementing all of these recommendations?’ of course the standard line was, ‘Well, there’s further work underway.’ How long do they need?

Richard Welch interjected.

Georgie CROZIER: As Mr Welch said, there is always more work to do. It is a very convenient excuse. We have seen it with the childcare legislation that has been debated this week and in how the government’s bill that we urgently had to debate on Tuesday did not close the loopholes. Mr Erdogan, who was the minister sitting at the table, in the questions that I asked of him did not close those loopholes. Here we have another bill where, again, there is more work to be done, and I think that is an absolute slap in the face to every Victorian who is paying for the extraordinary waste and mismanagement as a result of a lot of this corrupt behaviour that has gone on. It is quite horrifying, given the extent of that criminal behaviour and what has gone on.

I want to go to a point about what the Liberals and Nationals say. We know, and so do all Victorians, that taxpayers have been ripped off blind because of the turning of the blind eye to this corrupt behaviour. That is why we say a royal commission needs to be established to really understand the extent of that corrupt behaviour, the criminal activity that has gone on and the implications to Victorians and the Victorian taxpayer. That is why we need a royal commission, and I stand by it. The government is too weak to actually call for a royal commission. If they truly had the interests of all Victorians at heart, they would also demand a royal commission to get to the bottom of this corruption in the Big Build. It stinks to high heaven. It is a very significant and serious issue and should not be brushed under the carpet. It should be taken very seriously, and this bill does nothing to the extent of what really needs to be spoken about.

While I am on wage theft, can I say that not only has wage theft gone on with the Big Build, wage theft under Labor has occurred in our hospitals, and for years. It has been entrenched. In fact the AMA have found that entrenched practice within our hospitals. For the last 10 years junior doctors have been underpaid, and a federal court found in favour of the junior doctors when this historical action took place. It was by \$15,000 or thereabouts that those junior doctors were underpaid for the overtime that they had done. \$175 million is being paid to junior doctors because of wage theft. It was theft of wages from junior doctors under Labor. They have no excuse for this given that they knew about it for many years. The AMA *Working Conditions of Junior Doctors in Victoria* report is very damning. It talks about 93 per cent of Victorian junior doctors having experienced burnout in the last 12 months, 94 per cent of Victorian junior doctors fearing making a clinical error due to burnout and fatigue and 98 per cent of junior doctors consider burnout fatigue a major reason for junior doctors leaving the profession in Victoria. That is the issue here: the overtime that doctors are working. The survey shows that 87 per cent of Victorian junior doctors have worked unpaid overtime in the last 12 months. Eighty-seven per cent worked unpaid overtime – that is what the class action was about. That is why Victorian taxpayers are paying out \$175 million, and that is why our health system is really trying to support these young junior doctors in the work that they do, looking after very sick Victorian patients, yet they are being faced with this. This was a very damning finding.

This issue has been swept under the carpet a little bit. I do not think there are many Victorians who know that the wage theft that has occurred in relation to these junior doctors over the last 10 years has gone on. That \$175 million payout is not an insignificant amount of money, and it is not an insignificant number of doctors – 15,000 over the last 10 years who were underpaid by the government. I do think that, while we are looking at the Wage Theft Amendment Bill, it is not just

within the Big Build, with the Labor government overseeing historical blowouts, waste and mismanagement and billions of dollars of Victorian taxpayers money being blown, but the \$175 million that has been paid to doctors by government because of the wage theft case that found in favour of doctors and against the Labor government.

More needs to be done on the CFMEU and the Big Build. I would again urge the government to support the Liberals and Nationals push for a royal commission. Victorians deserve nothing less than to get to the truth about the extent of the corruption, the extent of the crime and the very serious criminal links with all sorts of unsavoury types that are causing so much destruction and despair in this state. At the very least, the billions of dollars wasted of taxpayers money is an outright disgrace.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (11:19): It is my absolute pleasure to stand and speak on the Wage Theft Amendment Bill 2025. Wage theft is a real thing. This bill will legislate to carry forward Victorian Labor's proud legacy of protecting workers. It will modernise the way we regulate workplace rights here in Victoria.

Before I say some further things, the bill does three things. First, it repeals the Victorian criminal wage theft laws, recognising that Australia now has a stronger national framework to hold employers to account for deliberate and dishonest underpayments. The second thing it does is it renames and refocuses our state's workplace regulator. Formerly known as Wage Inspectorate Victoria, it will now be known as the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria. This is a more suitable title, as the inspectorate has never just been the regulator of wage theft and will ensure resources are better directed. Thirdly, it builds on the findings of the Wilson review, establishing a new function for the inspectorate to receive and refer complaints about public construction sites. This will include complaints of corruption, unlawful behaviour and, importantly, gender-based harassment and discrimination.

The story of wage theft in Victoria is one of Labor values and Labor action, and it brings me to reflect on the reason for being of the Labor Party. I can tell you that we have a very clear compass. We know what we stand for, and we are busy working towards implementing what we stand for. The shearers under the tree at Barcaldine in Queensland all those years ago were definitely talking about wages and conditions. That was their driving force for forming our party, and here we are today, all these years later, still working on these issues, still protecting workers rights and still looking to ensure that our judicial system and our criminal system do what they ought to do for working people. I must say that the lack of compass and lack of direction from those opposite really was reflected in what we saw last night in this chamber, and I think that we are absolutely the opposite to that in terms of having direction and knowing what values underpin our party and what we do.

In 2020 we were the first jurisdiction in this country, again, to introduce criminal offences for wage theft. It was recognition of something our communities knew all too well: that too many workers – often young people, often migrants, often women and often people in insecure work – were being ripped off. We have all heard the stories of wages stolen, entitlements denied and deliberate underpayments dressed up as mistakes. These were not mistakes; they were acts of theft. Our laws make it clear that if you steal from your workers, you are a criminal. We backed those laws with the creation of the Wage Inspectorate Victoria, which had the power to investigate, to prosecute and also to educate. This is a testament to the commitment of our government to working alongside the trade union movement and to the fact that the right to a fair day's pay for a fair day's work is not negotiable. That is the link all the way back, and that link is still alive and well in our party today. It is the bedrock of dignity in the workplace, and it is what our Labor Party has always stood for.

It is important to note that these laws are not being repealed because they are no longer needed in Victoria – that would be the ideal. They are being repealed because the Albanese Labor government shared our recognition of the need to legislate on this important issue, enabling a national approach to wage theft. Through its landmark Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Closing Loopholes) Act 2023, federal Labor has enshrined wage theft offences into the Fair Work Act 2009. That means that wage theft is no longer just a Victorian offence, it is a national one. Every Australian worker in every state

and territory now has these protections. These offences came into effect at the beginning of this year, which now means we can put aside our laws in this space. We can direct the resources of the inspectorate towards outstanding and ongoing areas of industrial relations within the Victorian remit. There is strength in having Labor governments working together.

If we look at the history of our judicial system and the history of the idea of theft of property, our judicial system has been very tilted. The precedent system has been tilted towards people who own a bit more, perhaps middle and wealthy people who own property, basically. Back in the day, horse theft was a big thing; what we have been doing and what federal Labor has now done is introduce a bit more equality into the notion of theft and legislated the equal behaviour of theft whether it is property or whether it is wages. If \$1000 worth of property is stolen and \$1000 worth of wages are stolen, both ought to be treated as the criminal offence that they are. I am very proud of our federal Labor government for doing what they have done in this space. It provides an enormous amount of protection for the entire nation now and really should never be repealed.

In 2020 Victoria had to lead alone in this space. Now that we have a coordinated, national approach with wage theft offences regulated at the Commonwealth level, the bill will amend the name of the inspectorate to better reflect the scope of their work. It will be renamed the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria. It has not just been about wage theft, though. Its responsibilities are wider, deeper and critical to the protection of Victorian workers. Take child employment – between March 2024 and March 2025 the inspectorate granted 480 licences, enabling more than 3000 children under 15 to work legally and safely. Children under the age of 15 need to be properly supervised and given required rest breaks. The inspectorate also launched 786 investigations into compliance, prosecuting businesses who failed to meet their obligations, particularly long service leave. In the last financial year the inspectorate finalised more than 100 investigations and recovered millions of dollars in entitlements for workers. When CommSec and Bankwest failed to pay their staff leave, the inspectorate held them to account. When Optus was found to have short-changed hundreds of staff, the inspectorate stepped in. These are just a few examples.

Beyond its enforcement work, the inspectorate is also trusted for advice and support. The helpline has answered 7000 calls and responded to over a thousand written inquiries. New education programs have been rolled out in multiple languages to make sure every worker in Victoria knows their rights. One of the other significant reforms in this bill will confer a new complaints referral function on the workforce inspectorate. This will allow it to receive and refer complaints from any person relating to public construction. This comes directly from a recommendation of the Wilson review to examine how government agencies handle allegations of unlawful conduct on government construction projects. Specifically, the bill will confer on the inspectorate the ability to receive complaints and information from any person regarding public construction. It will then refer these complaints to the relevant enforcement or investigative body or agency. The review also found that people often did not know which agency to go to – should they call WorkSafe Victoria, IBAC, the Fair Work ombudsman or Victoria Police? It recommended the creation of a single entry point, and the bill establishes Workforce Inspectorate Victoria in that role. It will receive complaints, triage them and refer them to the appropriate agency for investigation, also keeping records, tracking trends and reporting to the minister when systemic problems emerge. This is important, because what is not counted does not exist. What is not counted is not talked about, so keeping a record of the issues and reporting on them and, importantly, reflecting on that data is incredibly important.

I want to stress one aspect of this referral function that is absolutely vital: its focus on gender-based discrimination and violence. We know the construction industry is one of the most male-dominated sectors in our economy. We also know that women working on construction sites face unacceptable levels of harassment, exclusion and intimidation. The bill ensures the inspectorate is not blind to that reality. Where a complaint reveals not just unlawful behaviour but a pattern of gender-based discrimination, it will be referred appropriately and often to more than one agency. For example, a complaint may go to Victoria Police if it involves criminal conduct but also to the Equal Opportunity

Commission if it involves sex discrimination. This approach recognises that workplace harassment is not banter and it is not just culture. It is unacceptable, and it must be addressed through a trauma-informed zero tolerance approach.

Our government has already invested nearly \$8 million to diversify construction and build equality into this industry. You only need to have a look at TAFE to see the support for women trade apprentices. We have created Victoria's first building equality policy, mandating targets for women on government projects – only Labor. I am proud we have launched the *Building Equitable Futures Strategy*, laying the foundation for a safer, fairer construction workforce. Whilst the bill implements the first Wilson review recommendation, the work does not end here. We are progressing further reforms to strengthen reporting obligations on contractors, to boost the powers of the Labour Hire Authority and to ban organised crime groups from Victorian government worksites. We will continue to evaluate these reforms over time and ensure they drive cultural change and redress corruption in this sector.

In conclusion, I would just like to say that this is our core business. This is something Labor is proud to do. This is complex as well, as you can see from the multiple issues at play. We are determined to continue to protect the rights of working families and women workers and to encourage women and diversity and inclusion across all workplaces in this state. Victoria has led the way with these reforms, reflecting the best of Labor values: fairness, accountability and justice for working people. I commend the bill to the house.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (11:33): I, too, would like to add my voice to this bill. It is great to carry on from Ms Ermacora and her contribution and echo everything that was said. I think it is pretty simple. Sometimes you just want people to be able to understand simply what a party's values are, what they believe in and what they will do for people. I wholeheartedly believe that Victorians and indeed in this instance Australians get better outcomes with Labor governments. It is about quality of life. If you want a good quality of life for yourself, for your family, for your broader community, don't wages make a hell of a difference in that. If you think about the Labor Party, the things that have been achieved over so long out of the union movement, out of the labour movement, include 8-hour days, safety, ensuring that people get home in one piece, ensuring that if people are injured there are schemes there to assist them to be able to continue to support financially themselves and their families – something we know the Liberals are vitally opposed to – and superannuation. The fact that Victorians, indeed Australians, can retire in dignity is just such an incredible achievement of the Labor Party. We know that the Liberal Party, whenever they have had the opportunity, have wanted to cut into people's superannuation to (a) see it not exist, (b) see it reduced or (c) have people cut into it. I might come back to that during my contribution. Whether it is industrial manslaughter legislation or, as we are here to discuss today, wage theft legislation, it is always the Labor Party that will strive to ensure that Victorians have a better quality of life than the generation before them and that working Victorians who have families can ensure that their children are set up to have a better quality of life than they themselves have had, which I am sure is the hope and dream of the majority of parents in this state.

It is pretty simple: a fair day's work for a fair day's pay. If somebody turns up to work, works and does the hours, they should be paid accordingly. It does not matter whether someone is working in retail, in hospo, in a laundry, in a factory, as a hairdresser, in construction, in child care, as a receptionist, in agriculture or in manufacturing, whatever it might be, it is a contract we can all accept and agree to: if someone turns up and does their hours, their day's work, they should be paid accordingly. Something that we on this side are very proud of is the work that was done to introduce the Wage Theft Act 2020 to ensure that Victorians of all employment types and of all professions can go to work and know that if their employer does not pay them for the hours done, there are means to deal with that and to have it amended. There are enough things going on in people's lives without them having to worry about whether their employer is going to pay them.

We know not only that the Liberal Party do not care about whether people get paid, but also that it is their economic policy. They do not have many policies, but one of the few policies the Liberal Party have is to drive down the wages and conditions of workers. We know that one of the few things that they have stood up and stood for over many decades is the lowering of pay and conditions for workers. It is why we are so proud on this side to be able to ensure that particularly some of our lowest paid workers, who are perhaps some of our most vulnerable, have a means to get the pay that they deserve when they are not paid by their employer.

The Wage Theft Bill 2020 was first introduced in 2020, and the Wage Theft Amendment Bill 2025 that we are here discussing today will repeal Victoria's wage theft offences and associated regulations and functions. As I said, we are very proud to have been the first in the country to introduce criminal offences targeting the deliberate and dishonest underpayment of wages. For someone to turn up and do their hours and to not receive pay is pretty low. I think it is why this policy and the legislation introduced in 2020 have been so popular. Of course it has been picked up nationally. We know it was there for a reason. It was not just something dreamed up that was not applicable to what Victorians were experiencing. The Fair Work ombudsman reported that they had recovered more than \$473 million in unpaid wages and entitlements for nearly 160,000 employees in the 2023–24 financial year and recovered more than \$1.5 billion for nearly 800,000 unpaid workers in the past three financial years. When we talk about a cost-of-living epidemic and cost-of-living pressures on working Victorians, I will tell you what helps that: getting paid. When you have turned up and done your hours, getting paid is pretty darn helpful.

There are a whole lot of other things a Labor government has done to support working people and to support families and communities around Victoria – and indeed around Australia, because we know that people have a better quality of life when Labor governments are in – whether they are the services in education or whether they are the services in health. We know that the Liberals, any chance they get, will close schools and will close hospitals. I hate to raise it again, but we know what they will do to public transport: cut services, close lines. Far be it from me to raise it in this place, but we know what the coalition did in the 1990s to our regional train lines. They just closed them and shut them down.

When you are looking at cost of living, when you are able to provide services that people dearly want and need to have a better quality of life and to reduce the cost and the expense of that life, as I said, getting your wages paid – what a great thing. For five years we have had that, and our laws in Victoria have been acknowledged by those nationally. When we introduced this in 2020, if my history is correct, we had a Liberal federal government. Of course they had no interest in this – no interest whatsoever. They did not have any policies to begin with other than driving down the pay and conditions of workers across Australia.

These laws are not being repealed because they are no longer needed in Victoria, they are being repealed because the Albanese Labor government shared our recognition of the need to legislate on this important issue, enabling us to have a national approach to wage theft. The Albanese Labor government's closing loopholes legislation enshrined the criminal offence of intentionally underpaying wages and related employee entitlements in the Fair Work Act 2009. This means not just all Victorians but all Australians can rely upon these laws to protect their right to fair pay. These offences came into effect at the beginning of this year, which now means we can put aside our laws in this space and better target the resources of the inspectorate towards outstanding and ongoing areas of industrial relations within Victoria's remit.

Following the line that imitation is the best form of flattery, I am just so proud that, first of all, there is a Labor government in Canberra that can ensure nationally that Australians' wages are strong and something that is valued and supported by a government and that services in education, in health, in transport and in energy – right across the domain, all the things that really are the touchpoints in people's lives and the things that improve the quality of people's lives – have those investments to make a material day in, day out difference. I think this is why my colleagues have been so passionate to speak on this bill. I think Minister Symes will follow me when I have used my time to make my

remarks. It is because this flows on directly not only to the individual, as I said, but to the families and the community. It actually gives us stronger economies. When people have money to spend down at the shops – and we are talking about ensuring people are paid – they can go out and get to the hairdresser and they can get down and have dinner or lunch in the local shops and stimulate our economy. That is what we have seen with a state Labor government and now a federal Labor government as well. It is these material differences to people's lives which are so incredibly important.

When it comes to renaming the Wage Inspectorate Victoria, with the inspectorate no longer regulating the offence of wage theft, our bill will amend the name of the inspectorate to better reflect the work they will continue to do. Instead of Wage Inspectorate Victoria, the inspectorate will now be called the Workforce Inspectorate Victoria and the governing legislation, the Wage Theft Act 2020, will be named the Workforce Inspectorate Act 2025. The inspectorate has never just been the regulator of wage theft. They have and will continue to play a critical role in regulating and enforcing key aspects of our industrial relations system. For example, the inspectorate is responsible for administering the Child Employment Act 2003 and the licensing system that applies to the employment of anyone under 15 years of age. Between March 2024 and March 2025 the inspectorate assessed and granted 480 child employment licences, enabling the employment of over 3200 children. There were 786 investigations launched into compliance monitoring across the state within a 12-month period. There is important work that will continue.

But again, I am just so proud that the labour movement, as I said at the start of my contribution, born out of ensuring better pay and conditions for workers, has continued decade on decade to deliver better outcomes for working Victorians, whether it has been making sure people get home safe or making sure if they are injured or there is a fatality, they are cared for, that their loved ones are cared for. We introduced other legislation into this place only last sitting week, I think it was, to ensure that the families of workers who do not come home from work are adequately, or further adequately, financially supported. The labour movement is always looking to strive to get the best quality of life for Victorians and ensuring that the safety net is there when things go wrong – the safety net to support those that are vulnerable, those that have been hurt, those that have found themselves in a situation that may otherwise leave them completely financially vulnerable and perhaps unable to keep a roof over their heads. That is why I am just so proud that this is one of many pieces of reform over decades to improve the pay and conditions of Victorians, of their families and of their communities, which sees a more prosperous society for all of us.

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (11:48): It is a pleasure to sum up on the Wage Theft Amendment Bill 2025. It is my first bill in the role of Minister for Industrial Relations. Thank you for the contributions both in the lower house and in our chamber today.

It is a relatively straightforward bill, but it is an important bill. It does three key things. First and foremost, it repeals Victoria's wage theft offences, not because they are not necessary but because they have been taken up by the federal government, ensuring that protection of workers that benefit from such protective measures in legislation remains. We were the first state to introduce laws of this kind – criminal penalties for the deliberate and dishonest underpayment of wages. As I said, these laws influenced a federal commitment in the space, leading to the Commonwealth amending the Fair Work Act 2009 to introduce federal wage theft offences. The commencement of the Commonwealth offences at the beginning of this year has put us in the obvious position that Victoria's offences are not only inoperable but it is appropriate to update the statute books to ensure that they are repealed, clearing the way for and removing any confusion in relation to the operation of the Commonwealth laws. The Commonwealth are now equipped to take action on this important area of protecting workplace entitlements.

Secondly, the bill will amend the powers and the name of the Wage Inspectorate Victoria, which will now be known as Workforce Inspectorate Victoria. It is fortunate because we call them the WIV, and we do not have to change any of that terminology.

Tom McIntosh interjected.

Jaclyn SYMES: It is a very sensible amendment, isn't it, Mr McIntosh? The unit will now be known as Workforce Inspectorate Victoria, as I said, and we will be repealing their powers of investigation into wage theft-related matters as appropriate. The repeal of wage theft offences means that the name Wage Inspectorate no longer aligns with the predominant area of their responsibilities, so, as I said, Workforce Inspectorate Victoria is much more appropriately fitting terminology for this important body. We will maintain ongoing responsibility for the regulation of child employment, long service leave and owner-drivers and forestry contractors and remain a sector regulator under the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005, and we will still be able to give advice and information in relation to workplace entitlements. I thank them for the important work that they do in those areas.

Finally, the bill will acquit recommendation 1 of the Wilson review, which was to create a complaints referral function to receive and refer complaints relating to Victorian government construction sites. Members have reflected on this, and I join them in their concern about the deeply troubling allegations and conduct that came to light within our construction sector. It was conduct that our government condemns to the highest degree and conduct that we have taken action on and will continue to do so. A key part of that action was commissioning the Wilson review to provide an independent assessment to identify weaknesses and opportunities for improvement and to address the conduct as best as possible, obviously also acknowledging that there is a role for Victoria Police in many of those matters.

A key part of the action was the Wilson review, which led to eight recommendations about how the powers of Victorian government bodies can be strengthened to better respond to allegations of criminal or other unlawful behaviour. Our response was to support these recommendations, either in full or indeed in principle, and in some way deliver the same outcome or go further than Mr Wilson's recommendations. We are underway in our aim to deliver on each of them by the end of the year, beginning with recommendation 1, which is contained in this legislation. This new function will be conferred onto WIV, who will act as the doorway for complaints about issues arising on government construction sites. The WIV will triage these complaints and, where appropriate, refer them to the relevant enforcement agency such as IBAC, Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission or police.

The impact of the Wilson review recommendations in addressing corruption on government worksites also ties in with the existing reforms that the government has taken outside of the industrial relations sphere that contribute to addressing the concerns raised. I had responsibility for these in my former role when we brought legislation in to strengthen Victoria's unlawful association scheme as part of the Criminal Organisations Control Amendment Act 2024, banning members of specified organised crime groups from entering Victorian government work sites. We have also taken proactive steps to address the systemic and cultural barriers to women's workforce participation across the construction sector, something we know is critically important to ensuring women can feel safe and represented on these work sites.

I just want to take a little bit of an opportunity to respond to some of the criticisms that have been raised. I acknowledge that there have not been major criticisms, but I wanted to explain some of why we have landed where we have. Some have questioned why we did not set up a specific body with its own investigative and enforcement powers. There are two reasons that we opted not to do this. The first is that it is not consistent with what the independent investigator in Wilson recommended as part of his review. He specifically recommended that the function serve as a clearing house and did not consider that this body should have the power to conciliate, mediate or investigate complaints. This is because the powers and mechanisms of existing bodies, such as IBAC, VicPol and indeed VEOHRC, are not what is an issue here. The responsibility for action belongs to the law enforcement or regulatory agency that has the relevant powers.

Second, we have a commitment as a government, as part of our *Economic Growth Statement*, to halve the number of regulators. Setting this function up in WIV as an established industrial relations

regulator not only aligns with this statement but enables us to leverage its existence, experience and capability in dealing with workforce issues to deliver this important service.

I also want to address the point raised that we will not be involved in relaying the outcome of complaints to complainants. The legislation does enable the workforce inspectorate to follow up on complaints and matters it has referred to other agencies by facilitating a two-way flow of information and to request and receive notifications and information about matters which it has referred. That does not mean that we should be the only place where someone seeks to follow up on complaints that they have made but also certainly does not mean that we have no role.

There has also been some criticism of the bill not rolling out the entire scope of reforms under the Wilson review. I can confirm we are on track to have each of these recommendations acquitted before the end of the year. We have already established the alliance under recommendation 2; we will have legislation addressing recommendations 3, 4, 5 and 6 in the Parliament before the end of the year; the recommendation 7 policy and contractual changes are underway; and the final recommendation, to review the changes, will be conducted within two years of implementation. I thank those who have worked hard on getting this bill into this place: department staff from Industrial Relations Victoria, Lissa Zass, Lisa Williams, Sharon De Silva and Naomi Snyder. And what better birthday present to my senior adviser Samantha Towler, who is the industrial relations adviser, than passing the bill in the Parliament. Happy birthday, Sam.

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Third reading

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (11:57): I move, by leave:

That the bill be now read a third time.

Motion agreed to.

Read third time.

The PRESIDENT: Pursuant to standing order 14.28, the bill will be returned to the Legislative Assembly with a message informing them that the Legislative Council have agreed to the bill without amendment.

Business interrupted pursuant to standing orders.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Working from home

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:01): (1029) My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, have you been briefed on whether proposed working-from-home arrangements could trigger a capital gains tax liability?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:02): Mr Davis, I have not sought that advice because I have not thought that to be necessary because, as I explained yesterday, in relation to working from home so many people are already doing it. So many people are successfully doing it, and there is no proposed change to the tax settings. For those that are not receiving tax implications for working from home, nothing will change under the proposed policy that we have.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:02): I take it from that that there has been no briefing to the Treasurer on that matter. I ask therefore: will the Treasurer rule out data-matching arrangements between the ATO and the SRO being used by the ATO to calculate the capital gains implications for

people working from home who claim the cost of their mortgage for the area of their home they are using?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:03): Mr Davis, you know that the federal government have responsibility for the ATO, not me. Capital gains is a federal government responsibility.

Alcohol and other drug services

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:03): (1030) My question is to the Minister for Mental Health. Mildura was promised a 30-bed residential rehabilitation centre in 2022. The community is deeply concerned that the proposed location in Merbein is unsuitable due to issues including the police station having limited opening hours, no ambulance station and that known drug dealers operate in the immediate vicinity. I ask: will the minister join with the member for Mildura and meet with locals to hear and address their concerns?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:04): I thank Ms Bath for her question, and it gives me the opportunity to highlight the investment that the Allan Labor government is making right across our AOD system. Indeed we have committed to building a new AOD residential rehab centre in Mildura. It is the case that advocates and the community more broadly in Mildura have been advocating for this project for a number of years, including First Nations organisations, particularly the ACCHO up there. It is incredibly important that people can have access to AOD treatment in the communities that they live in. The government was pleased to commit to this investment and this project because of the fact that, until this project is delivered, people will have to continue to travel long distances to be able to get the drug rehabilitation treatment that they need.

I will just take issue a little bit with the way that you framed your question, Ms Bath, because you implied that a residential drug rehabilitation centre would somehow have a honey pot effect for the dealing of drugs. This is a theme that we have heard from those opposite in different locations around the state, and it is disappointing because all it does is add to the stigma. People who voluntarily put their hand up and say, 'I've got an addiction issue and I need help' are not the people who are going to participate in the kind of behaviour that you have implied. That is what I would say in relation to that.

I am also aware that there have been some community consultations that have been led by VHBA and that they have been engaging with the community through letter drops, through doorknocking. I am also aware that the local member up there has been trying to initiate a public forum about these issues. The dates that she wrote to me about were dates that I was not available to travel to Mildura, but I have offered for her to come and speak to me at any time that we are in Parliament. I have been very open with the member for Mildura that my door is open if she wants to talk to me about this important project in the Mildura area. I think that those who take up the opportunity to come and speak to me about my portfolios know that my bona fides are pure when it comes to talking to people about important projects in their communities that our government is investing in.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:07): I thank her for her response, but the minister did not answer my question, because it was about listening to locals – her attending Mildura and listening to their concerns, their valid concerns. My supplementary is: Mallee District Aboriginal Services were promised six beds in the centre would be dedicated to local Indigenous people and they would be included in the design of the site to ensure the facility was culturally appropriate. MDAS has now been told these beds are no longer in the scope of the proposed works. Have these dedicated beds been scrapped, breaking the promise to local First Nations people?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:08): Thank you for your supplementary question, Ms Bath. I actually went to Mildura for the announcement of this project. I met with a number of key stakeholders that have been involved in the co-design of this project, including the location, the design and the model

of care that are most appropriate for this residential rehab centre. I met with a number of traditional owners and elders who have been calling for this project for a very long time. I will continue, as will my department, to work closely with the community in Mildura and of course the surrounding areas that are going to benefit from this project to make sure that it is meeting the expectations of the community.

Ministers statements: housing

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:09): The housing statement, as people would know, refers to the target of developing and building 800,000 homes in Victoria over the next decade. We want to make sure that in delivering that housing we are delivering housing which is fit for purpose, which is in the relevant configurations to meet the needs of our communities, which is affordable and which is available. We know that with the planning approvals and completion rates that we are seeing here in Victoria, the work outlined in the housing statement, including on planning reform, activity centres and targets, is working. We have more completions, more approvals and more commencements than other jurisdictions. We are also forecast to achieve 98 per cent of our share of the 1.2 million homes pledged under the National Housing Accord. 11,100 homes have been completed or are underway through our Big Housing Build and the Regional Housing Fund, and that includes more than 3700 new homes in regional Victoria.

While we are getting on with the building, we are seeing the Liberals and the Greens getting together time and time again to block and to oppose the delivery of new housing for people who need it and who want it, including across their own electorates. A member for the Northern Victoria Region said – and who could forget it – in this place:

There is no point putting a very low income, probably welfare-dependent family in the best street in Brighton ...

and then went on to refer to sneakers and to iPhones. Nothing typifies the approaches from those opposite quite like that particular quote. Those opposite are so obsessed with the idea of ‘not in my backyard’ that they will say that housing should not be developed too close to a cemetery, for example, which is what is happening with the Shadow Minister for Housing in the other place – what a disgrace. You are blocking. We are building.

Corrections system

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:11): (1031) My question is for the Minister for Corrections. There has been lots of speculation by people around these machete bins and where they were manufactured. I spoke to a metal fabricator in my electorate, and they said that they did not see them pop up on a government tender website. There was some speculation from other people that they were actually built within the prison system. Can the minister please confirm whether or not that is actually the case?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:12): I thank Mr Limbrick for his question and his interest in our inside jobs program in our corrections system. We are nation leading and dare I say internationally leading with our employment pathways, and some of those pathways are in metal fabrication, I may add, at a number of our public prisons. We are proud also of our partnerships with the TAFE sector in terms of our centres of excellence, and the Kangan Institute in Bendigo, for example, is an important partner in this space. In relation to the manufacture of those bins, it is probably a question better addressed to the Minister for Police in the other place, which I am happy to put to him, because that work was commissioned through the police portfolio. I will ask him about the manufacture of those bins and seek a response in line with the standing orders if that pleases Mr Limbrick.

The PRESIDENT: Minister, I would prefer that you do not do it that way. If Mr Limbrick wants to redirect his question to the Minister for Police, then the standing orders will apply, but you can offer to give information outside the standing orders if you feel that would be helpful.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:13): If I could just clarify, I am not actually sure whether that was a yes, a no or a do not know.

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:13): Mr Limbrick, in terms of the work inside our prison system and the contracts they have in place, Corrections Victoria manages those. I can seek guidance from them if you wish me to do so and take that on notice to get a response. But in terms of the broader bins, that work was commissioned through the police minister's portfolio, and I am happy to get a written response if you want me to redirect your question about who they contracted to build those bins.

Community safety

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:14): (1032) My question is to the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. Minister, I refer to the rally on Sunday in Melbourne where hundreds of anti-Israel protesters gathered in the Melbourne CBD and a man claimed the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023 was a hoax, saying:

October 7th was a hoax set up by Israel to justify its slaughter in Gaza ...

My question to the minister is: why did you, as the Minister for Multicultural Affairs, decide not to call out this clearly antisemitic approach that must inevitably weaken our multicultural fabric?

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! I am struggling with that being within the minister's remit. A man said something – that was your question – and that is within the responsibilities of this minister?

Ingrid Stitt: On a point of order, President, there was a bit of interjecting going on, and I did not quite catch the very end of Mr Davis's question – there was a big lead-up. Could he please repeat the end of his question?

The PRESIDENT: Just so I am not going down the wrong track too, I am happy for you to read it all. Do not change it, read it all, and then we will go from there.

David DAVIS: Minister, I refer to the rally on Sunday in Melbourne where hundreds of anti-Israel protesters gathered in the Melbourne CBD and a man claimed the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023 was a hoax, saying:

October 7th was a hoax set up by Israel to justify its slaughter in Gaza ...

My question to the minister is: why did you, as the Minister for Multicultural Affairs, decide not to call out this clearly antisemitic approach that must inevitably weaken our multicultural fabric?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:17): I am not going to take lectures from Mr Davis or any of those opposite about social cohesion in our state after their pathetic performance yesterday. They are so lost in their own political, divisive wilderness that they cannot actually understand that their actions are what is undermining our social cohesion here in Victoria.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, this is an opportunity for the minister to answer a question, not attack the opposition. She could just get on and answer it. I know this minister does not want to answer this question. I know she is resistant to answering this question. I know she has got difficulties with it.

The PRESIDENT: A point of order is not for a minister to attack the opposition in replying to a question – that might have been there – but the issue is that if a member asks a provocative question, it is very hard for me to maintain the situation in the chamber. I will ask the minister to continue.

Ingrid STITT: The nub of Mr Davis's question was about weakening the social fabric of our community, and I would ask them to look at their own track record on this.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, the point of question time is questions are asked of ministers. The minister does not get to ask questions of others. That is not what question time is about.

Ingrid STITT: Let me just say this: Mr Davis can spend his time as a representative in this Parliament going on Sky after dark and picking at the social cohesion in our state. He can critique me, as the minister, all he likes. He can critique the Premier all he likes on Sky after dark, but what I am focused on is making sure that in Victoria, no matter your cultural background, no matter who you pray to, no matter where you live, you feel that you belong and that you are supported at every level of government and at every level of our community. That is my focus. Those opposite might like to focus on how they can play their little political games, but what we saw yesterday was on full display. They do not know what they stand for, and they do not know what they care about.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, it is very clear that the standing orders do not allow the attack of the opposition. They provide an opportunity for ministers to answer questions.

The PRESIDENT: That ruling has been made a number of times over the years. I uphold that part of the point of order, but the minister is allowed to respond to a question in the way it has been put.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:21): At the same rally on Sunday Senator Lidia Thorpe called for a boycott of major fast-food chains McDonald's and KFC, claiming they had connections to Israel. She went on to say:

The only way we're going to get traction here is to boycott Israel in all its forms.

We have to come together, no more maccas, no more KFC ... we have to deprive Israel of their power.

Senator Lidia Thorpe appears set to reintroduce a version of the BDS, the boycott, divestment and sanctions regime, targeting businesses with links to Israel. Minister, is such an antisemitic activity at that rally clearly not consistent with our multiculturalism and our legislation?

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! I do believe it is asking for an opinion. Also, as far as the minister's responsibilities in the general orders go, she is not responsible for an independent senator. She is not responsible. She may have some remit with federal ministers, but I do not think she has got any responsibility for any other federal MPs.

David DAVIS: On a point of order, President, the Minister for Multicultural Affairs is well able to make statements against a new form of BDS, and she could launch an investigation. She could do all of that.

The PRESIDENT: I am struggling with the lack of sleep I think, but I do not know how I can put that question. Do you want to try and rephrase it?

David DAVIS: I will put it very succinctly if the minister would like.

Members interjecting.

David DAVIS: I am dealing with a barrage. Given Lidia Thorpe appears set to reintroduce a new version of BDS – boycott, divestment and sanctions – targeting businesses with links to Israel, I ask the Minister for Multicultural Affairs: will she launch an investigation into this?

The PRESIDENT: It is not in the minister's remit to do an investigation into something that was said by an independent senator.

David Davis: Actually it is, President.

The PRESIDENT: I do not think it is.

Ministers statements: water policy

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:24): We know that in the future our climate will have more extremes, from floods to bushfires and of course drought. Drought does not just put pressure on our farmers but increases pressure on our precious drinking water supplies. Residents of Daylesford and Hepburn Springs know this all too well, having experienced the driest summer and autumn in 30 years. Daylesford, Hepburn and Hepburn Springs remain on stage 2 water restrictions. That is why the \$25 million Daylesford water supply pipeline delivered by Central Highlands Water is so important. It was a pleasure to be alongside the member for Macedon Mary-Anne Thomas to see this massive investment into Daylesford's water supply firsthand. Completion of stages 1 and 2 of the project has already seen the construction of 17 kilometres of pipeline connecting Daylesford to the Goldfields superpipe. Works are now starting on upgrades to the treatment plant to boost its capacity, ensuring more high-quality water is available for households and businesses. This will support over 300 million litres of additional water to flow into the system each year. This secures more water during times of drought and low rainfall, reducing the risk of restrictions. We are taking action to ensure we have reliable, safe and affordable drinking water into the future. All Victorians have a role to play by making simple changes such as taking shorter showers, fixing leaks, washing with full loads and not watering gardens in the heat of the day. We can all make a difference. Every drop counts.

Community safety

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:26): (1033) I have a further question to the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. I refer to the welcome decision of the Commonwealth to list the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organisation made by the Commonwealth in the wake of ASIO's discovery of links between the Iranian government and at least two incidents in Australia, including the terrible Adass synagogue bombing. I ask the minister: has the government or any member of the Victorian Multicultural Commission had any links or dealings with the Iranian revolutionary guard?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:26): I think that there is a whiff of desperation today – an absolute stench of desperation over there today – because obviously they are deeply embarrassed about their performance last night in this place. What I will say about the –

David Davis: On a point of order, President, we all understand that question time is for questions to be answered by ministers and not to attack the opposition.

The PRESIDENT: Mr Davis, you are 100 per cent right on that ruling. As I said before, it is very difficult when the question can be to the point of being quite provocative.

David Davis: It is actually a simple question.

The PRESIDENT: I am a simple man, and I am trying to deal with question time today.

Ingrid STITT: What I was about to go to was my ministers statement in this place this week welcoming the Prime Minister and the foreign minister's statements, their decisive leadership on this issue and the fact that they have taken swift action in relation to any foreign actor acting in this way in Australia. I know how much concern there has been right across the government and right across the community about the events at the Adass Israel Synagogue. Many of us have been to visit that community in the aftermath of that dreadful, dreadful arson attack. I went down there the day after the attack. What I would point out to Mr Davis, in his ongoing attempts to dirty up particular organisations and people in this state, is that commissioners of the VMC went down there in the days after that attack

to offer their support to that community, which was very well received – a very important gesture on the part of the organisation in our state who are charged with upholding social cohesion. Maybe those opposite might want to reflect on that and actually spend a bit more time talking about how they are going to bring people together rather than continuing to divide.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:29): I note the minister did not specifically answer the question. I ask therefore: is the minister prepared to ensure that the VMC investigates any links that agencies it has dealt with or individuals it has dealt with may have with the revolutionary guards?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:30): I thank Mr Davis for his supplementary question. What I would say is that I have very clear expectations of the VMC in terms of them acquitting their legislative obligations under the Victorian multicultural act, and that is subject to regular correspondence from me to the commission and discussions that are ongoing about their role in upholding community harmony in Victoria. If there are investigations to be held about anyone suspected of being involved with any terrorist organisation or any event that might implicate them more broadly, what I would say is that is a matter for the AFP and for the federal agencies in this space.

WorkCover

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (12:31): (1034) My question is for the minister representing the minister for WorkCover in the other place, who I believe is the Treasurer. Lakes Entrance Fishermen's Co-operative is an 89-year-old institution that has supported generations of hardworking Victorian fishing families across eastern Gippsland. Unfortunately, this vital organisation has now been pushed to the brink by skyrocketing costs, particularly WorkCover premiums that have more than tripled in just a year, rising from 2.3 per cent of wages in 2022–23 to 7.4 per cent this year. This increase alone has blown out the co-op's bill from \$60,000 to \$90,000, while individual operators like 79-year-old John Barrett have seen their premiums surge from just over \$4000 to more than \$24,000, forcing some fishermen to the extreme measure of not paying themselves a wage simply to avoid additional payroll costs. Minister, why is an industry that is already facing some of the toughest working conditions and lowest margins in regional Victoria being punished so disproportionately with these premiums?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:32): I thank Mr Bourman for his question. I am more than happy to refer that matter through the standing orders to Minister Carroll. If you want to provide it, we can get them looking at it asap for you.

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (12:32): I thank the Treasurer for passing it on. Minister, what immediate action will you take to ensure these small family-run fishing businesses are not driven to collapse under a system that was supposed to protect workers, not bankrupt their businesses?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:32): I am confident that Mr Carroll's office will be helpful in getting you the information that you need.

Ministers statements: STREAT Parkville cafe

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:33): Last week I had the pleasure of visiting the STREAT cafe in Parkville, just next door to our Parkville Youth Justice Precinct and located in my electorate of Northern Metropolitan Region. During my visit I met with co-founders Rebecca Scott and Dr Kate Barrelle, along with several other dedicated members of the STREAT team. We spoke about the important role social enterprises can play in creating employment pathways for young people, particularly those that have had contact with the justice system.

The Parkville cafe has been operating since 2020, providing young people in custody and on parole with structured training in hospitality. Through barista, front-of-house operation and customer service skills young people are building confidence and learning practical skills that support their reintegration into the community. STREAT is proof that business can be a force for good. Young people in their programs have already clocked up more than 10,000 hours of supported learning. Their broader work across Melbourne demonstrates the importance of employment in changing lives. From the cafes and food businesses to national leadership through Social Enterprise Australia's community of practice, STREAT shows the true power of social enterprise.

I want to give a big shout-out to the team at STREAT for their vision and commitment to helping young people get back on track. The work at the Parkville cafe and well beyond is giving young people the chance to build skills, grow confidence and step into a brighter future. 'And the coffee?' you may ask. It is absolutely first rate, so drop by when you are in the neighbourhood.

Working with children checks

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:34): (1035) My question is to the Minister for Children. Minister, a bill was passed this week closing one loophole on working with children checks. An agreement exists to close the loophole whereby anyone whose check has been removed in another jurisdiction will lose their check here in Victoria. But I refer to the need to ensure the safety of children by ensuring that recent overseas arrivals meet the standards expected of local childcare workers too. Therefore I ask: is it a fact, Minister, that overseas criminal history is not checked by the working with children check unit, and consequently it is not known whether a recent arrival employed in child care has a criminal history?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:35): I again point out to Ms Crozier that in accordance with the general orders the working with children check system is the responsibility of the Attorney-General and the Minister for Government Services.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:35): Minister, I understand that, but you do have a responsibility for children. It is very important that we are looking after the safety of children, so I will ask: anyone travelling from overseas into Australia applying for a visa faces a tick-box process for declaration of criminal history, but this does not include a detailed criminal history check with the country of origin. Have any steps been taken to close this obvious loophole and weakness in the working with children checks to guarantee the safety of our children in childcare? It might be something that you have spoken about with the Attorney – I do not know – but I am asking on behalf of children and in order to keep them safe.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:36): While it is great to see that Ms Crozier is present in the chamber at the moment, as I have previously told her and informed this place, the working with children check is the responsibility of the Attorney-General and the Minister for Government Services. Indeed much of Ms Crozier's question goes to matters of home affairs and immigration, which are the purview of the federal government. But given we have been asked questions that might fall into the responsibility of ASIO today as well, those opposite seem to be very confused, both in terms of Victorian government responsibilities and also between levels of government in this country, and it is very concerning.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:37): I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Housing

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:37): (1036) My question is for the minister for housing. Is it true that Homes Victoria relocation officers are being offered performance bonuses if they move residents out of public housing towers by a specific date?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:37): Thank you for that question. I am a bit perplexed by the question, because what it seems to indicate is that there is some reward for people doing what sits at the heart of their work in the public service – namely, to assist with the delivery of government programs. One of the things that we are doing, as you would be well aware, is working really closely with residents of the towers who are in the process of or who have completed a relocation to ensure that they have the information that they need; that they have access to the supports and services that they require, whether that is an interpreter, whether that is being able to have meetings, including those attended by a representative or by a family member; and that everyone is allocated a dedicated relocations officer. This is not about incentivising the workforce to do their jobs; it is about making sure that when the workforce do their jobs they are doing so with the relevant level of care and of dedication and of sensitivity. We have got a relocations team of about 26 staff, and they work day in, day out to make sure that people have what they need, including accurate information which addresses and counters a lot of the mis- and disinformation that is doing the rounds. One of the things that I want to be really clear about is that we are –

Sarah Mansfield: On a point of order, President, I asked a very narrow question, and I just feel that the minister has not answered that question. It was about performance bonuses if residents are moved out of the towers by a specific date – it was quite clear.

The PRESIDENT: I ask the minister to continue.

Harriet SHING: Again, that point of order seems to miss the point of everything that I have said until now – namely, that Homes Victoria staff and the 26 relocations officers, who are working day in and day out, have at the heart of their employment the responsibility and obligation to make sure that residents have the information that they need. A fair bit of the work that relocation officers do is about actually countering the sorts of conspiracy and fear-based campaigns being run that are suggesting that people will be evicted into homelessness, that are suggesting that demolition works are occurring while people are in the towers and that are suggesting that people will not have help with relocation costs or that there are deadlines or drop-dead dates by which support will not be provided to residents. That is the work that relocation officers are doing day in, day out, and they are doing it as much as anything because for clicks and likes people are creating this mis- and disinformation. Again, this is their job, this is what they are doing and this is what they will continue to do.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:41): With respect, Minister, you did not answer the question. I did not ask about whether the role of relocation officers was to provide information or anything about the information side of their job. It was a very narrow question about whether performance bonuses are being offered to relocation officers if they achieve a certain target, which is to relocate residents by a certain date. I will take it from that answer that possibly they are being offered these bonuses, but I would welcome an alternative. Can the minister rule out the future use of performance bonuses or incentive payments for Homes Victoria staff related to relocation targets?

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:41): I want to be really clear, and this is something which yet again shows a unity ticket between the Liberals and the Greens: when you stand up here in your preamble to the supplementary question and you are inferring in fact that there is some form of conspiracy in place here whereby people are being incentivised to move people out of their homes, that reflects exactly what we saw in this chamber yesterday – the peddling of conspiracy theories for the sake of cheap narratives, clicks and likes. Let me just be really, really clear: this is a completely false narrative from the Greens that sits alongside all of the other false narratives

that you are very happy to peddle or in fact you just put out there to release into the world in a way that causes very real harm, very real anxiety and anguish. Let us be really clear about the way in which VPS terms and conditions are set: they are set through an enterprise agreement. You, if you actually had a look at the VPS agreement, would know that through a range of VPS considerations sign-on bonuses are provided in incentives for recruitment, for example. They are not part of the classification system. Have a read of the EBA and you might well understand a little better.

Ministers statements: early childhood education and care

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:43): I rise to update the house on how the Allan Labor government is responding to the rapid review into child safety by beefing up the social services regulator. Last week the Premier, alongside the Attorney-General and I, outlined how we will be enacting every single one of the review's 22 recommendations, including by bringing the working with children check, the reportable conduct scheme and child safe standards into the social services regulator. For too long too many –

Members interjecting.

Michael Galea: On a point of order, President, the minister is talking about a very serious topic, and we cannot hear it for the constant heckling from those opposite.

The PRESIDENT: I apologise. I was distracted checking something with the boffins. I will ask one of the boffins to reset the clock, and then I will ask everyone on all sides of the chamber to afford the minister silence while she does her ministers statement.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I rise to update the house on how the Allan Labor government is responding to the rapid review into child safety by beefing up the social services regulator. Last week the Premier, alongside the Attorney-General and I, outlined how we will be enacting every single one of the review's 22 recommendations, including by bringing the working with children check, the reportable conduct scheme and child safe standards into the social services regulator. For too long too many pieces of information have sat in different systems in separate entities. By giving the social services regulator new powers, we will be able to remove these silos and weed out predators. Moving these schemes into the social services regulator will also help us to build a better understanding as to how to ensure that we eliminate risk due to disability, neglect, family violence and other forms of abuse. The beefed-up social services regulator will have powers to consider unsubstantiated allegations and intelligence and will be able to proactively share this information with other regulators. In addition, a complaints function will be established to ensure the regulator is a one-stop shop, making it easier for people, children and families receiving social services, including in disability settings and in out-of-home care, to make a complaint.

I want to take the opportunity to commend those opposite, who in a press release last week stated:

We will provide constructive support to any measures that improve our childcare system in response to the Rapid Child Safety Review.

With the support of the chamber we will be able to bring together regulatory bodies that hold breadcrumbs of information into the social services regulator. I look forward to the introduction and speedy passage of these reforms later this year, and I thank all of the people in this chamber for backing this reform. My focus is always on the safety of children, and with the support of this chamber I will continue to enhance our safeguarding system.

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (12:45): I thank Minister Symes, who will get answers under the standing orders for Mr Bourman's WorkCover questions.

Constituency questions

Eastern Victoria Region

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (12:46): (1786) My question is for the Minister for Health. Minister, what are the benefits for the residents of Eastern Victoria Region from the Labor government's community pharmacy initiative? We are making it easier and cheaper to get care for more health conditions at pharmacies without having to see a GP. Our community pharmacist program has been a huge success, providing treatment for uncomplicated UTIs, resupply of oral contraceptives and treatment for shingles, so we have made it permanent and will expand it to include treatment for 22 conditions, including asthma, nausea, ear infections, wound management and type 2 diabetes, without having to go to your GP. It is another way we are focused on doing what matters for Victorians: making health care more accessible and closer to home.

Southern Metropolitan Region

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:47): (1787) My constituency question is to the Minister for Planning. Windsor Avenue in Mount Waverley is the subject of an application for a boarding house, which is completely inappropriate in the location that is proposed. It is right near the station. It is near a particular family area. The community are in uproar about this. Indeed –

Michael Galea interjected.

David DAVIS: It is actually in my electorate. It is in my electorate, and I have been very active on this. I have been out to a rally. We had a large rally some weeks ago. There were 65 or 70 people there at 7 o'clock on a dark night, and they were all very unhappy with the planning minister – and with the member for Ashwood, I might add. Today the matter is at VCAT, and I am hopeful that the state government will change the law here so that this cannot occur nearby to Windsor Avenue in future, whatever the result of the VCAT case today. I wish the community well in their fight.

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:48): (1788) My question today is to the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. The North East Link toll road has ripped a gaping path through parts of our beautiful natural environment in the north-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Remnant bushland at the Simpson army barracks was flattened. This was some of the best remaining habitat for the matted flax lily and the Studley Park gum, two critically endangered plants. It was also part of a wildlife corridor used by the powerful owl and the swift parrot, two of our native birds that are vulnerable and critically endangered respectively. Living in the area it is pretty apparent that the environmental damage cannot be undone, but I think the public deserves to know just how bad the situation is. Minister, can you please provide any updated guidance you have received on the impact that this project's destruction has had on these endangered species at this site?

Eastern Victoria Region

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:49): (1789) My question is to the Minister for Mental Health, and it relates to the mental health and wellbeing locals in my electorate. Both Narre Warren and Leongatha are to be locations for these wellbeing locals, and I would like to understand what progress the minister has made, the timeline for their opening and indeed which organisation will be auspiced with conducting and running these locals.

Northern Victoria Region

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:49): (1790) My constituency question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and my constituents ask: will the minister commit to repairing the Murchison-Tatura Road in a timely manner? My constituent Kevin recently contacted me regarding the disgraceful state of the Murchison-Tatura Road, which leads to Ross Street in Tatura. Kevin reported crumbling road surfaces, dangerous potholes, deep rutting and the generally unsafe

condition of the Murchison-Tatura Road. It would be easier to count the sections of the road that are not in need of repair than the sections that are. Damaged sections include the Hogan Street roundabout, the Casey Street intersection, the O'Toole Street intersection outside Tatura Racecourse and a section just before the Toolamba-Rushworth Road, and that is just around the Tatura township. The condition of the entire road from Tatura to Murchison is in an unacceptable state of disrepair. It is dangerous; truck drivers, car drivers, motorcyclists, cyclists and school bus drivers all risk damage to their vehicles travelling this worn-out road daily. My constituents ask: will the minister commit to repairing the Murchison-Tatura Road in a timely manner?

Northern Victoria Region

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (12:51): (1791) My question is to the Minister for Agriculture on behalf of farmers in the Northern Victoria Region who are suffering in drought conditions. The Victorian Farmers Federation has warned that the crisis is far from over. Many farmers are facing critical pressures, record low rainfall, soaring fodder prices, depleted pastures and plummeting farm finances. The VFF has called for urgent long-term support, interest-free loans with no repayments for two years, statewide drought support not just in the south-west, expanded council rate relief and assistance to help bring in fodder from greater distances and cover associated costs. I have spoken with farmers who are exhausted, spending tens of thousands of dollars on feed every week and looking to leave the industry because of mounting debts. Minister, what immediate action will the government take to extend meaningful drought relief across all of Victoria and support the farmers who feed our state and power our regional economy?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:52): (1792) My constituency question is for the Minister for Planning. My constituent has lived in Edithvale for over 30 years. She has expressed deep environmental concerns about the proposed rezoning of Aspendale's Rosssdale golf course. This significantly contributes to the local tree canopy. Adjoining the internationally recognised Edithvale wetlands, it serves as a vital habitat and wildlife corridor for native flora and fauna. This site is also prone to flooding and currently acts as a buffer for neighbouring properties. Yet the government is considering plans to redevelop the privately owned land into 700 to 1000 residential dwellings. So my constituent asks: will the minister ensure there is a comprehensive and transparent environmental and flooding assessment before a final decision is made on the development of Rosssdale golf course?

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:53): (1793) My constituency matter is for the Minister for Housing and Building. A local constituent, Mr Talbot of Vermont, has raised concerns about what is a nearly three-month delay in repairs to a heating system at his Housing Victoria home and the difficulty he has had navigating the department's complaints system. Mr Talbot lives with chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia and relies on heating in order to manage his health. He lodged a repair request in early June and genuinely attempted to follow established processes to the letter, with follow-up phone calls, lodging a complaint with the department's online form, waiting two weeks for a call-back and seeking firm pledges of action, all to no avail. As of the start of this week, it still has not been resolved. I ask the minister to please look at this situation to ensure Mr Talbot's home is fixed and see if the Housing Victoria customer feedback and complaints service is still fit for purpose.

Northern Victoria Region

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (12:54): (1794) My question is for the Minister for Racing in the other place. The Shepparton greyhound racing track is responsible for the most track deaths in Australia this year, with six greyhounds killed already, and it is only August. It has had the third-highest number of life-threatening injuries across the country this year, and from the years 2020 to 2025 Shepparton also recorded the most on-track deaths in Victoria and the most injuries in Victoria. The new Traralgon track was closed after just three years due to safety concerns, but Shepparton has

recorded more deaths and more injuries than that track and yet it remains open. It is clear that this track is a death trap for dogs, so why is the Shepparton greyhound racing track still in operation?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:55): (1795) My question is to the Minister for Health. I have had a number of concerns raised with me by local constituents regarding the current state of care and patient support at Dandenong Hospital. It suggests a lack of funding in our health system. I ask: will you conduct an urgent review and provide improvements around food and nutrition supplies, basic standards of comfort for patient requirements and general overall issues around long wait times and under-resourced staff and facilities that are not meeting correct standards of health care and confirm that Dandenong Hospital is currently providing an adequate standard of care to patients and what immediate measures are being taken to ensure safe and timely access to health services? This should also be looked into for the much-needed funding of Casey, Frankston and Monash hospitals and the yet to be appropriately delivered so-called Cranbourne hospital.

Western Victoria Region

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:55): (1796) My question is for the Minister for Health. Bellarine Community Health provides critical supports for my constituents in the Bellarine to keep them healthy at home, included in the community and out of hospital. This financial year the unit prices paid for home and community care and community health increased. However, crucially, the number of funded hours decreased. So they are receiving the same amount of funding overall but are able to provide fewer services with it. Funding also is not properly indexed, which means that funding for Bellarine Community Health is effectively being cut. Minister, can you provide the modelling used to determine the 2025–26 HACC and community health unit prices and funded hours for Bellarine Community Health that explain these cuts?

Eastern Victoria Region

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:56): (1797) This week I was asked for an update on Labor's plan regarding beach erosion in Inverloch. According to reports, three rows of houses are at risk and the surf life saving club is about to be washed away into the ocean. This is causing Inverloch locals extreme anxiety. My question is for the Minister for Environment. What action will the minister immediately take to respond to this crisis? Because at the moment locals are currently feeling ignored.

Southern Metropolitan Region

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:57): (1798) My question is to the Minister for Mental Health. The health service Reconnexion, based in Malvern East, has provided support and counselling to thousands of people dependent on benzodiazepines since 1986 and remains the only state government funded pharmaceutical-specific treatment service in Victoria. Benzodiazepines were involved in 269 fatal overdoses in 2024, nearly half of all fatal overdoses in Victoria, and this trend has gone on for years. Last year Reconnexion lost approximately \$400,000, and its service provision is in jeopardy. Over the past year it has been self-funded by the community health service Each, and this is not sustainable. People with benzodiazepine dependence are atypical of other alcohol and drug treatment clients and require specialist services. Reconnexion's client group and the GPs who support them are highly concerned that it could be under pending closure. Can the minister offer an assurance to these Victorians and indicate what specific supports will be available to assist them?

Western Victoria Region

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (12:58): (1799) My question is for the Minister for Health. I had a constituent call for an ambulance due to his mother having a fall. After no action for an hour and a half, he called again. The response was, 'We'll call you back in 15 minutes.' Fifteen minutes later my constituent calls again, and they say, 'Oh yeah, we'll be there in 10 minutes.' So when the ambulance gets there he says, 'Where did you guys come from?' The ambulance officers say,

‘Beaufort station. It’s just around the corner – 10 minutes away.’ And my constituent says, ‘Well, why did it take so long?’ ‘Oh, we only got the call 10 minutes ago.’ After that they spent 7 hours in an emergency department in a hospital. Minister, this is an absolute disgrace. I ask the minister what she is going to do about this and the many other instances like this that are being inflicted on Victorians.

Northern Metropolitan Region

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (12:59): (1800) My constituency question is for the Minister for Public and Active Transport. Minister, the Bell stationers are a dedicated volunteer group who hold monthly working bees in my electorate to beautify the Bell train station in Preston. Their tireless work often fills two wheelie bins with weeds and litter each month. Their valuable work is now at risk, as they are not currently formally recognised as a station volunteer group through the stationer volunteer program at VicTrack. This group of constituents made an application in November 2024 and were recently told by VicTrack and Metro Trains Melbourne that they will not be onboarding any groups for another six months. That will be over a year since their initial application in 2024. Minister, will you act on my constituents’ request and ensure the Bell stationers are made official so that they can keep contributing to our community and our environment.

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (13:00): (1801) I would like to commend to the Minister for Mental Health Ingrid Stitt the open letter drafted by Mental Health Victoria but agreed to by the Victorian Council of Social Service; the Council of Single Mothers and their Children; Yourtown; Women’s Health in the North; the Parenthood; FVREE – that is, Free from Family Violence; the Satellite Foundation; the Mental Health Legal Centre Incorporated; Tandem; and Safe and Equal. Each of those organisations has authored and penned an open letter to this government – including to Minister Stitt – calling for this government to reverse their decision to close Parentline. Parentline is a critical service for parents of children aged anywhere from five all the way to 18. It services some 17,800 telephone calls a year. It is due to close on 31 October. It costs this state just \$1.6 million, which is equivalent to four machete bins. I urge the minister to review this decision.

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (13:01): (1802) My question is to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. For years the Central Goldfields Shire Council has successfully operated the VicRoads office in Maryborough on behalf of the state. Until July this year VicRoads covered staff wages and on-costs and contributed to rent and overheads, but under a new funding model VicRoads will now only pay a transaction fee, well below the actual cost of running the service. This leaves the small council with an impossible choice: either subsidise a core state responsibility out of ratepayers pockets or be blamed for cuts to services the community relies on. Minister, isn’t this just another shocking example of Labor’s financial mismanagement – running out of money and forcing everyone else to pay? Will you guarantee that the full range of VicRoads services will remain in Maryborough without cost shifting the bill onto council and the local ratepayers?

Sitting suspended 1:02 pm until 2:06 pm.

Bills

National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Bill 2025

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Lizzie Blandthorn:

That the bill be now read a second time.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (14:07): I rise to make a contribution to the National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Bill 2025. The purpose of this bill is to consolidate entirely within VicGrid transmission planning and jurisdiction on transmission planning

functions that were previously shared with AEMO, the Australian Energy Market Operator. The bill also establishes a compliance and enforcement regime, providing power of entry for VicGrid to access land and a wide variety of other powers. It amends the National Electricity (Victoria) Act 2005, the national electricity regulations, the Electricity Industry Act 2000 and the Electricity Industry (Residual Provisions) Act 1993. It grants right-of-entry powers to introduce extraordinary new offences and massively increase penalties for obstructing VicGrid and its contractors. It transfers the powers and functions of the CEO of VicGrid under the National Electricity (Victoria) Act to the statutory body corporate, VicGrid. It transfers certain property rights and liabilities of the state relating to the CEO of VicGrid, AEMO and its subsidiary, Transmission Company Victoria, to the statutory body corporate, VicGrid. It establishes a new physical access arrangement in the state to control access to the declared shared network, and it establishes a framework for the funding and payment of benefits to landholders, local communities and traditional owners impacted by new transmission, renewable generation and battery storage infrastructure. It exempts the body corporate, VicGrid, from the requirement to hold a licence to transmit under the Electricity Industry Act 2000.

It is important to explain that we have no objection in principle and in fact we support the concept of moving as much away from AEMO to Victorian authorities – that is a reasonable principle. We do not think that AEMO is transparent. We do not think that it helps Victoria to have control shifted to a distant body that is controlled by a whole series of ministers and a whole series of bureaucrats that are not responsive to the state Parliament, not responsive to Victorian citizens and not responsive to the decisions that Victoria would seek to make. That principle is fine, but the rest of the bill we think has deep and fundamental flaws. The decision to increase the powers in the way that has been proposed is wrong and it is draconian. It lays out a new set of penalties and powers. It is not as though government authorities do not have a wide sweep of powers already. Government bodies and government agencies have massive powers, and their ability to do a range of things on land, public and private, is considerable. But this adds a whole range of new powers and creates new offences.

I am going to put some of these on the record so people understand what we are talking about. New section 68B, providing false or misleading information to VicGrid in purported compliance with a market information instrument – that is 60 penalty units, or \$12,210.60, for natural persons; and 240 penalty units, or \$48,842, for body corporates. Obscuring, damaging or destroying a notice of proposed entry affixed under section 93BD attracts 60 penalty units, or \$12,210. New section 93BH(6) has obscuring, damaging or destroying a notice of application for entry affixed under section 93B also at 60 penalty units, more than \$12,000. New section 93BM(5) is about obscuring, damaging or destroying a copy of an order, and on it goes. Failure to provide identification: 20 penalty units, or \$4070.20. New section 93BQ(3), which is about providing false identification or a false address, is also 20 penalty units. New section 93BQ(5), failure to comply with a direction to produce identification, is 20 penalty units. New section 93BS(2), hindering, obstructing or delaying authorised authority – this sets up a regime for authorised officers – is also 60 penalty units, or \$12,210. Further penalties may be served on any person that an authorised officer has reason to believe has committed any of the following offences: obscuring, damaging or destroying a notice, \$1221.06; obscuring, damaging or destroying a notice of application or order affixed, \$1221; obscuring, damaging or destroying a copy of an order, \$1221; failure to provide identification, another \$407 fine; failure to comply with directions to produce, \$407; hindering, obstructing or delaying authorised activity, \$1221.

These are the sorts of new penalties that we have got in this act, and you have got to ask why on earth the government has put these draconian penalties in there. This is Jacinta Allan, and it is overreach. It is a nasty draconian twist, and you have got to ask why. The answer is, sadly, that this is a long-term government. It has been in power almost 11 years. They feel they own everything. They feel that they can do what they want. They do not feel they are bound by the normal democratic institutions and arrangements. They feel they want more power. They use the lower house to stamp that through, and they expect their friends in some of the other parties here to do that, as they often do – stamp through draconian and unnecessary overreach by this government. I hope that is not the case here. I hope that the crossbench are prepared to support the Liberals and Nationals in opposing this bill, in amending

this bill and in taking the nasty, extraordinary teeth from this bill. We will seek to do that. I am happy to circulate the amendments, if that is in order now. And I am also happy to make available, if any member of the chamber wants a copy, the list of penalties. I think it might be the only one that I have seen where it has been tabulated in a handy list for people to see the new set of penalties.

Bear in mind the government has enormous powers. There are lots and lots of abilities to enter properties and to acquire properties, and lots of other powers and legal processes. But these are actually like another additional new layer on top, to clobber farmers, to clobber communities and to go in and use this as a big stick inside local communities in country Victoria. We think it is wrong, we think it is draconian and we think it just simply goes too far.

You can be a person who is a huge supporter of renewables, a huge supporter of low-emission technology –

Tom McIntosh interjected.

David DAVIS: I am a supporter of low-emission technologies, and I always have been. However, that does not mean that is a free-for-all for any new power, any new draconian stick to clobber people with that the government is taking. I think people need to think about and separate what is important with renewables and low-emission technologies of various types and what is important with our basic democracy and an understanding of how we might best proceed.

Our amendments have been circulated. They do a number of things. They remove a lot of the additional powers that have been sought from the bill. I am probably jumping ahead here, and Ms Tyrrell will have a bit to say about that, but there is overlap, I am flagging for people, between her amendments and our amendments. I will let her talk to hers, but one of the key aspects of our amendments is the removal of some of those powers. We also want greater transparency. Let us understand what is going on here. The government is pushing forward with this set of proposals. What is the cost of these proposals going to be? It is going to be astronomical.

There is the issue of the costing of many of these long-distance wires, the renewable energy zones and the various connections. The best known example now comes out of AEMO's calculations itself. VNI West was initially around \$3.2 billion to \$3.4 billion. The latest AEMO publication puts it between \$7 billion and \$7.6 billion but with a 50 per cent range, which pushes the top end of the estimate up to \$11.4 billion. This is a gigantic amount of money, and who will pay? I will tell you who will pay: every person who is connected to electricity in Victoria – everyone; every business, every household. It is likely to push the costs up for businesses massively, and it is likely to push the costs up for the average householder who is doing it tough at the moment. I want to just put this in context too and pay tribute to the work that Bruce Mountain has done in recent times. He has done quite a lot of work calculating the figures from AEMO's work, and AEMO has treated a number of the calculations less than transparently. But Bruce makes it clear that the true cost of the lot of the new infrastructure is likely in aggregate to exceed \$28 billion – \$28,000 million. All of that is to be paid for by households and businesses – all of it.

When the government says that low-emission technologies and renewables are the cheapest, they might be cheap at the point of consumption. If you have got solar on your roof and you have got your solar there, it might be cheap at that point, and there is no great distribution and transmission cost in that. But if you count all of these transmission and distribution costs in, it quickly becomes a different issue. Then there is the storage that has got to be associated with it. So you have got the inherent intermittent nature of a lot of the low-emission technologies and there has obviously got to be matched storage or some other source that has got to come in. Inevitably, as low-emission technologies grow, there will be more, in my view, gas – the only technology that is going to be able to provide the peaking power that is needed to assist the grid and make sure that the grid is able to proceed in a way that is stable, secure and affordable.

The first thing I think we need is more transparency on the costs. There are two new funds established here – the community benefit fund and the traditional owner fund – as well as the cost of the various infrastructure. The infrastructure cost is pushed through to consumers and businesses, and the cost of these two new funds, the community benefit fund and the traditional owner fund, is pushed through to consumers as well, to businesses and households. But the businesses and the households do not know how much they are paying. They do not currently know how much they are paying, and it is not transparent, but it is a significant component on the supply bill of every business and every household in the state. Victoria pays the most for so-called green schemes of any jurisdiction in the country, and we are about to pay a lot more. It is the state government's plan that everyone will pay a lot more. They will pay more for the infrastructure, they will pay more for the community benefit fund and they will pay more for the traditional owner fund. All of that will be sheeted home to average families who are struggling and sheeted home to average businesses that are struggling too. They will all pay, and they will pay through the nose. These costs are added on top for every single electricity consumer in the state.

Let us understand what is going on here. The state government is bringing back more powers. We are not opposed to more being done in Victoria – it is more transparent, it is more clear and it is more controllable ultimately by the Victorian Parliament and people, so that is a reasonable principle – but we do not accept that the state government needs this huge suite of new sticks to beat farmers and local communities who are opposed to some of these developments and want to have their democratic say. State government wants to override them, and that is why it is taking a greater amount of powers. I think that the community is entitled to be very sceptical of this overreach, this grab for new powers, by this government.

I want to say something about some other points too. We think with the community benefit fund it is a good idea, where there is new infrastructure in a community and there are impacts on the community, that there be some financial support for those directly affected and those more peripherally affected. That is a good idea. The various bodies that are wanting to put in these projects are less than happy, I put on record, about the issues around the community benefit fund and the traditional owner fund. They say that they would be better placed to do this, and I reckon they are probably right. I am not going to name the various groups, but there are low-emission technology groups, renewable groups, that want to roll stuff out, and they say that they would be better placed to communicate and to work with communities than bogus committees set up by the minister based in Melbourne that will actually have hand-picked, cherrypicked people put on as so-called representatives of the community who will in fact be controlled by the department and the minister. That is what people are worried about. They are worried that they will not be genuine local community committees, that the community committees will actually have their strings pulled – let us be quite clear what is going on here out of the building just up the road here – by the minister and her minions. She will stack these committees with all her mates, and they will not represent the local communities. So that is a problem in itself.

Again, I would say the money that comes into those committees will be paid for by consumers. But there is actually a clause in this bill which enables the Treasurer to reach in and take that money and put it into consolidated revenue. I am worried about that clause; we will seek to delete that clause, because stripping that money out from the community benefit fund and taking it back into consolidated revenue is the wrong approach in our view. We think that this is actually just a mechanism to create a whole big new tax. You pay through your bills, small businesses pay through their bills, it goes on to this community benefit fund but that fund can be raided at will by the Treasurer. So understand what is going on here: this is again another grab for money by this government, a desperate government that has got itself in deep debt. It has found another source to tear back money out of the community. All of that money will come from those bills that Victorians pay, the electricity bills of Victorians, which are already up, up, up, up, up, up. The minister says, 'They're going down.' She parrots the Coles ads and says, 'Down, down' – no, they are going up, up, up. I invite people, if you doubt that, to just go and do a survey down the nearest main street and ask people whether they think their electricity bills and their gas bills are going up or down.

Tom McIntosh interjected.

David DAVIS: Well, just go and do a poll down your street. You do not live in your electorate, so it would take you a while to get there to do the poll down in the main street in your electorate. That is a reasonable point. I need to also point out that there are a number of other aspects of this that we are troubled about. I really want to just return to some of the points that Bruce Mountain made so helpfully about a week ago in the *Herald Sun*. Bruce Mountain, an electricity industry expert, a thoughtful person, a person who has been prepared to do these calculations, went through the AEMO figures. He pointed to the weaknesses in the AEMO figures; he pointed to the fact that the AEMO figures make assumptions on the positive side when they could make assumptions on a different side. The figure he comes up with is that the cost of the infrastructure that has been identified for Victoria is likely to exceed \$28,000 million over the period ahead. That is a gigantic amount of money that will be put onto the bills of Victorians. He says at least a 50 per cent increase, and I think he is roughly right. You may want to quibble on the edges about the calculation; you might want to engage on those. I would encourage people to read the Mountain argument and to look at that closely, and if you think he is wrong, well, let us hear why he is wrong and what your alternative calculations are. I think he is right, and I think AEMO is wrong.

I think what is clear here is the state government has sort of a plan, but it is actually a plan that is years and years behind. If you think of the VNI West, which we were just referring to before, that is two or three years behind at this point, and likely to be four or five or six years behind before anything happens meaningfully. The costs have gone up – as I have already outlined – massively. The state government's plan is in tatters. Then if you look at the other part of the state government's plan, in 2028 the brown coal at Yallourn is coming off. We have not seen the documents. The state government will not give us the documents in this chamber. It is a set of documents that we want to see, because it would actually inform policy for us and it would inform policy for the broader community. Those agreements in Victoria – the chamber has asked for those documents. They have been refused, they have not been sent to the arbiter, unlike in New South Wales at Eraring, where a similar situation was in the offing and a lot of the documents were made public. I say those Yallourn and Loy Yang documents should be made public, because they would inform market participants and they would inform the opposition and other parties. People say to me, 'What would you do with this contract?' And I say, 'Well, an agreement has been signed, a contract has been signed.' But I confess I have not seen the contract, and nor have you, Mr McIntosh, and nor has anyone else in the community. No-one beyond the cabinet has seen that document. I say let us make those documents public. Let us see what Victoria has been signed up to at Yallourn –

Tom McIntosh interjected.

David DAVIS: It is in your electorate. You should go and ask for those documents so that you know what is planned in your electorate and for the whole state.

Tom McIntosh interjected.

David DAVIS: I have been to Yallourn. Yes, I have indeed. I thank them for the opportunity to see the facility and to learn. It is clear that there is there is certainly a run down going on there, and I understand that. I might make another point, a very up-to-the-minute point: I am informed that one of the generators is down at Yallourn now.

Tom McIntosh interjected.

David DAVIS: Yesterday – that is right – and it was still down, I am told, as of about an hour ago. I stand to be corrected if that information has shifted in the last hour, but actually you have got a generator down, and you can go onto PocketNEM and see that. People could go and check that now for me. But let me be clear –

Jacinta Ermacora: It's out of date.

David DAVIS: The PocketNEM, is it?

Members interjecting.

David DAVIS: Well, you are going to close it. But let me just make a point here.

Jacinta Ermacora: You privatised it.

David DAVIS: Actually, much of the privatisation was started by the Kirner government. Let me be quite clear about that. I want to be very clear here. In Victoria there are a set of renewable energy targets that have been laid down by the government, including offshore wind targets. Offshore wind is now in deep trouble, as we know. The time delays are very significant, and I say the government needs to come forward with some information about the offshore wind delays and tell us what is going to happen there. They still do not have an assembly position for it. The Hastings option is now in deep trouble, and it is clear that the offshore wind time cycle is now very, very likely not to match the government's objectives and so forth. I say that that is going to cause significant trouble for Victoria. Offshore wind is important. We encourage offshore wind. We are quite happy to work with firms to support offshore wind. But actually the state government has not even been able to get –

Bev McArthur interjected.

David DAVIS: The truth is that one of the generators is still off at Yallourn.

Bev McArthur interjected.

David DAVIS: There you are – totally off. It is clear that there is an issue with 2028. The offshore wind is not coming in time for that. The offshore wind is not coming in for the time –

Tom McIntosh interjected.

David DAVIS: I have actually read the plan. I have actually FOI-ed a great deal around this, and I am also waiting on some further material from Hastings, which actually –

Tom McIntosh: 2032 is the plan, Mr Davis.

David DAVIS: I have got to say, nobody believes that the state government is on track with its offshore wind plan. Nobody I have met in the industry or in the broad sector actually believes that they are on track – or on the right tram, as it were – with their offshore wind.

We say the state government has got to come clean with the true costs of these energy projects. I think Bruce Mountain is much closer than the government and AEMO with his \$28 billion estimate. I say we need to push forward with a lot of these challenges to drag information out of the government, to get the truth out of the government and to actually –

Bev McArthur interjected.

David DAVIS: It is a secret society. It is a society that actually does not want to come to the party when it comes to various points.

I want to say something about the renewable energy zones. It is also clear that the renewable energy zones are being imposed on many communities. If I pick up an example, near Shepparton there are areas that have really been clobbered with renewable energy zones that were not in the initial discussions and areas that are being pressured to have the renewable energy zones without being consulted at all. It is being foisted on them. I say that the government, again, have not got the right process. Let us be clear here. The government is now going to use its new powers to go in with its jackboots and its truncheons to work its way through a lot of these areas where there are renewable energy zones and large connections. They are going to –

Tom McIntosh: On a point of order, Acting President, to say there has been no consultation is misleading. There has been extensive consultation around the zones.

David DAVIS: On the point of order, Acting President, it is clear that there was broad consultation, but other areas have been added in.

Jacinta Ermacora: On the point of order, Acting President –

David DAVIS: Other areas have been added in, Acting President. You will have to wait a second – I have not finished mine. You can have your point of order in a moment. My point is very clearly –

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Gaelle Broad): I think your point of order is more a point of debate.

David DAVIS: It is a point of debate.

Jacinta Ermacora: Acting President, my point of order was that the matter was being debated.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Gaelle Broad): A good point of order, thank you. I will ask Mr Davis to continue.

David DAVIS: I notice that I only have a small amount of time here. We will seek to amend this bill in the ways I have outlined. We oppose the bill overall though, because of the draconian and unreasonable matters in there. We have a much better future plan for Victoria, a set of options for Victoria which are grounded on actual costs and actual facts, unlike this government, which has more and more been drifting into an untruthful zone where the minister likes to lay out numbers and so forth that are very removed from reality.

Every Victorian knows that their cost of living has gone up. Every Victorian knows they are paying more tax. Every Victorian knows that their electricity costs have gone up. Every Victorian knows that their gas costs have gone up, and those costs are going up, up, up and up – unlike what the minister says. She says they are going down, but they are not going down, they are going up. Those in this chamber who doubt that should go and survey their local community. Nobody believes their bills are going down. They are going up, and that is because the state government has botched its energy policy. It has no real plan going forward. Its only plan is to go and belt local communities. Instead of that, they should be listening and working with local communities.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (14:37): I rise to express my strong opposition to the National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Bill 2025. At its heart, this bill strips away one of the most fundamental rights we have: the right to decide who enters our property and what is built upon it. It hands over extraordinary powers to VicGrid and transmission companies, powers that allow them to walk onto our land without our consent. If we say no, if we push back, we face fines of over \$12,000. And for what? For protecting our homes, our livelihoods and our families' futures. This is not cooperation; it is coercion. Yes, the government promises compensation, and yes, they promise annual payments, but no dollar amount replaces a lifetime of work stewarding a piece of land. No payment undoes the damage to trust and the sense that overnight our voices can be pushed aside in the name of the greater good. This bill sets a dangerous precedent that at any time this government can and will introduce legislation to interfere in the lives of Victorians.

We saw this during the COVID-19 pandemic – government overstepping boundaries, disregarding the human rights charter and introducing draconian restrictions on the lives of Victorians. These farms are people's homes, not just empty pieces of land prime for the taking. In some cases this land holds generations of families' blood, sweat, tears and memories and countless hours of missed dinners and events because farming does not stop. The land, crops and livestock need to be tended to, and no-one knows how to do that quite like a farmer.

Let me be clear: we are not anti-progress. We are anti being ignored. We are anti-communism. Rural Victorians have always done their part. We feed the state, we manage the land, and we have already hosted more than our fair share of energy infrastructure. But we expect respect, transparency and the right to be consulted, not overridden. Renewable energy is turning out to be one of the most unreliable and expensive forms of energy since electricity was invented. The *Australian* newspaper reported on

31 July this year that the Australian Energy Market Operator has released a report stating the cost of the VNI West interconnector will likely be upwards of \$11.4 billion. This increase in costs will be passed on to consumers – so much for lower power bills. This bill turns landholders into obstacles instead of partners. It pushes development through without fair process. It ignores biosecurity measures put in place to protect our precious productive agricultural land. It defecates all over the Victorian human rights charter, and it leaves communities divided and disillusioned. If we want a fair energy transition, it must be built with communities, not on top of them. I would like to circulate my amendments now.

My amendments seek to protect the rights of landowners when it comes to who is allowed onto their properties and what their land is used for. These landholders are not being deliberately difficult when it comes to these proposed new laws. They are simply trying to protect their rights. They want to decide their future and the future of the land they have worked so long and hard on. My amendments seek to remove the power of VicGrid officers to force their way onto people's properties and into their homes and to fine them for simply saying no. Without these amendments, a dangerous precedent is set. What if the government's next bright idea is taking over farmland for fracking or oil exploration? Let us be honest: Victoria is broke, and these are very real possibilities, as I have already been approached by lobbyists in these areas. Almost anything the government desires is on the table with the precedent this bill seeks to set.

I urge this house to reject this bill and stand up for the rights of landholders for fair process and for a future where energy justice includes everyone, not just those holding the levers of power.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (14:42): I rise today in the strongest possible support of the National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Bill 2025. This is not just a technical bill. It is not a matter of shifting functions from one body to another. It is a landmark reform, a reform that will determine how Victoria builds the infrastructure required to deliver a future powered by renewable energy, a future where every household and every business has access to clean, affordable and reliable power. This bill is about ensuring public accountability in energy planning and restoring power to the Victorian people through their government. It is about fairness and making sure that communities, landholders and traditional owners are not left behind but instead are active participants in and beneficiaries of the renewable energy transformation. Above all, it is about security – the security of keeping the lights on, of lowering bills and of guaranteeing that, as we leave behind polluting coal, Victoria remains a leader in clean energy.

Victoria is experiencing one of the fastest energy transitions in the world. Since 2014 our renewables share has quadrupled, and by the end of this year we will meet our 2025 target of 40 per cent renewables. We are on track to achieve 65 per cent by 2030 and a remarkable 95 per cent by 2035. This is extraordinary progress, but it also brings extraordinary challenges. To reach those targets, Victoria must unlock around 27 gigawatts of new capacity, nearly double the generation currently available on our grid. At the same time we face the retirement of almost 5 gigawatts of coal-fired generation before 2035 and a forecast 40 per cent increase in electricity demand as homes, cars, buses, trains and indeed entire industries electrify. This is the single biggest technological and industrial transformation of our lifetimes.

But the system we inherited from privatisation, simply put, was not built for it. The last major transmission line built in Victoria was more than 30 years ago, before the Liberal Party sold off our energy systems to private corporations. That privatisation left our communities with soaring prices, fewer protections and a system where transmission planning was outsourced to a market operator rather than a government body accountable to Victorians. That old framework is not fit for purpose. It does not allow for necessary planning and it does not properly account for land use and community consent. It does not hold private transmission companies accountable. This bill fixes that. It gives VicGrid the tools it needs to ensure that we build the right lines in the right places at the right time. It transfers transmission planning from the Australian Energy Market Operator, AEMO, to VicGrid. It establishes the Victorian access scheme, a new framework for connecting renewable energy and

storage to the grid in an orderly way. And I have got to say it creates a community and traditional owner benefits framework, including new funds, to ensure fairness. Furthermore, the bill introduces a respectful, enforceable land access framework with clear safeguards and accountability. It enables VicGrid to conduct early works and streamlines procurement to speed up delivery of critical projects.

For decades planning Victoria's transmission system was outsourced, and that meant decisions were made without proper accountability to Victorian communities. By giving VicGrid this responsibility, we are bringing accountability back to government. VicGrid is a public body. It is answerable to this Parliament and to the people of Victoria. VicGrid is already active. It is administering the \$480 million renewable energy zone (REZ) fund. It is supporting 12 projects that modernise the grid. It is engaged in planning for offshore wind connections, and it is working on major interconnectors, such as Western Renewables Link and the Victoria to New South Wales Interconnector West. This bill formalises VicGrid's role and ensures that as we electrify our state the planning is led by Victorians for Victorians, importantly.

Right now the national grid operates under what is known as open access. That means that anyone can connect, regardless of whether they cause congestion or further challenges on the grid. The result has caused uncertainty and indeed wasted investment. This bill replaces that failed model with the Victorian access regime. Under the changes in this bill VicGrid will set a cap on the generation that can be developed within each renewable energy zone. Generators will have the certainty that if they are approved their power can reach the market, and communities will have confidence about the scale of development in their area. This is about better coordination, more certainty and less disruption. It will deliver renewable projects in a way that is planned, not piecemeal. For too long communities and landholders have been treated as obstacles to be overcome rather than as partners in the energy transition. This bill changes that. Landholders hosting transmission lines will receive payments of around \$200,000 per kilometre, paid over a period of 25 years and indexed to inflation. This is in recognition of the role they play in hosting infrastructure critical to the future of our state. This is in addition to the compensation package they negotiate with the transmission company that will cover any loss of land value, and it will provide many landowners with the reassurance that they are seeking.

You see, communities are going to benefit from the new REZ community energy fund investing in local projects that improve affordability and improve reliability. Traditional owners will for the first time share directly in the benefits through a traditional owners fund, supporting self-determination. These funds will be paid for by the developers and operators of renewable projects. That means the benefits of the transition will not only be shared broadly across the state but also flow directly to those regions that host vital state infrastructure.

Let me be clear: this government's preference is always negotiation and always cooperation. But at times critical infrastructure can be held hostage by an individual's refusal. We know it to be the case. Under current law the only option for enforcing land access is for the transmission company to seek an injunction from the Supreme Court. This is an expensive, slow and really inaccessible tool. The bill before us introduces a balanced enforcement framework. Companies must first negotiate in good faith. Under the Land Access Code of Practice, written notice must be given 30 business days in advance and again 48 hours before entry. If negotiations fail, only as a last resort – only as a last resort – an authorised officer appointed by the minister may apply to the Magistrates' Court for an order. There are strict safeguards: no entry to homes, identification requirements, limits on powers and accountability to VicGrid. This ensures that landholders are respected while guaranteeing the infrastructure Victoria needs can actually be delivered.

Transmission projects are complex. They are often delayed by process, and this bill enables VicGrid to take on a streamlined procurement role, including with the power to conduct early works. It modernises contestability rules, ensuring procurement can be fast and efficient, while still maintaining competition and value for money. It allows Victoria to cut through the red tape and deliver critical projects when they are needed, not years too late. These reforms are not abstract. They translate directly into benefits for Victorians. You see, by 2040 our renewables transition will create

67,000 jobs. Billions of dollars will flow into regional communities, revitalising towns across the state. Households will benefit from some of the cheapest wholesale power in the world, building on the fact that today Victoria already has the lowest wholesale prices in the nation. Just as importantly, these reforms ensure that the benefits are shared fairly and that the families hosting transmission lines, the traditional owners caring for country and the communities living alongside infrastructure see tangible outcomes.

Those opposite and their record, I have got to talk about it – their so-called plan B – because Victorians know the record of those opposite. When they were last in government electricity prices soared by 34 per cent over four years, disconnections doubled and their planning restrictions killed off 14 wind farms, costing our state an extraordinary \$4 billion in investment. They gutted renewables jobs, slashed confidence and set our state back. Now, all these years later, what is their offer? What is their so-called plan B? Let me be clear: there is no plan B. Two independent reviews, one by AEMO and one commissioned by VicGrid, found that to have no plan B would deliver less renewable energy and more disruption and even force the acquisition of people's homes. It does not stand up to scrutiny. Those opposite love the distractions and talking up nuclear reactors and all sorts of rubbish ideas. They have called batteries renewable rubbish and dismissed solar and wind as insane beliefs. Victorians deserve better than denial, delay and division.

This bill is more than poles and wires. It is about a vision for Victoria – a state that leads the nation on climate action; a state where public accountability guides planning, not private profit; a state where communities and traditional owners are recognised, respected and fairly compensated; and a state that delivers jobs, investment and fairness in the clean energy future. Victoria is once again showing what leadership looks like. While others hesitate, we act. While others seek division, we are on the side of Victorians. We are building the infrastructure that will power our homes, drive our industries and create regional jobs for Victorians.

I must say the National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Bill 2025 is not just legislation; it is a firm commitment to fairness, accountability and leadership in the greatest energy transformation of our lifetimes. It ensures that Victoria's energy future is clean, reliable, affordable and fair; it restores accountability through VicGrid; it ensures that communities and traditional owners share in the benefits; and it builds the infrastructure we need to meet our ambitious climate targets. It rejects the failed anti-renewables approach of those opposite and it rejects the division those opposite seek to create in our communities, our industries and our future. For all those reasons and so many more, I am very proud to stand here today and commend to the chamber the National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Bill 2025.

Joe McCracken (Western Victoria) (14:54): This has to be the most cruel, callous and calculated piece of legislation that punches down on country communities. I actually cannot believe that we are here today debating this legislation that impacts on farmers given all the platitudes that we hear from the Premier. Need I remind everyone the Premier is supposed to be a regional Victorian? Yet she continually turns her back on the very people that got her elected. The establishment of this compliance and enforcement regime in this legislation is nothing short of an absolute disgrace. This bill attempts to bring many powers under the remit of VicGrid that were formerly with the Australian Energy Market Operator and Transmission Company Victoria, but in doing so it ignores the very same people that give legitimacy and power to the government to act in a fair and reasonable way.

This bill is about power – taking away power from regional and rural communities that have already been clobbered and beaten by this Labor government. Need I mention the drought that many regional Victorians have gone through? Need I mention the emergency services tax, which is forcing farming families to consider whether they remain farming families or not? Here is a newsflash: no farmers, no food. If those opposite continue to support policies that destroy regional and rural communities, we will all be buying food from overseas in just a few short years. Is that what those opposite really want – to destroy the agricultural sector in this state? That is exactly what is happening. Now there is another kick in the guts – the VicGrid legislation before us today. Why does the government hate farmers so

much? Why do they hate rural and regional Victorians? Are they seriously that repulsive that the government does this sort of thing to them through legislation?

You even want to financially penalise them as well. These are some of the penalties that are contained in this very legislation. In new section 68B the penalty for providing false or misleading information to VicGrid in purported compliance with a market information instrument is \$12,210.60 for an individual and for a corporation \$48,842.40 – for a company. That is a hell of a lot of money. In new section 93BQ(2) the penalty for failure to provide identification is \$407.02, and in new section 93BQ(5) failure to comply with a direction to produce evidence of identification – \$407.02. I mean, do farmers need to carry around a passport just to get on their own land? Is that seriously what this government thinks? That is what your fines say. The third one, new section 93BS(2) – for hindering, obstructing or delaying authorised activity the penalty is \$12,210.60. I can understand why a farmer would not want someone from outside the farm to come on their land – it is called biosecurity. I do not know if the government has heard of that let alone understands how a farm actually runs. To put that at risk is really quite despicable.

The irony here is that you all want farmers to pay much, much more despite the fact that the government cannot even manage the cost of transmission infrastructure in this state. Just in July this year the Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) issued a warning to the government in their press release dated 31 July. I am very happy to read it to the house:

The Victorian Farmers Federation ... says the Victorian Government must rethink the viability of the VNI West Transmission Project after the Australian Energy Market Operator (AEMO) revealed huge cost blowouts to the project in a report released overnight.

AEMO's 2025 Electricity Network Options Report estimated the project's cost had more than doubled from estimates in May –

just May –

of \$3.6bn to \$7.6bn in their latest report. The report warns that number may climb as high as \$11.4bn, prompting warnings from AEMO that it may need to reconsider its support for some projects.

Even they are saying some of these reports are just complete rubbish. It states:

VFF President Brett Hosking said the estimated cost blowout adds further weight to calls for the project to be scrapped.

“We know this is a failed project and this report only adds to calls for the government to scrap it entirely.”

“To date the energy transition has been a failure and the Victorian Government is risking smooth and reliable energy transmission by continuing to force the VNI West project through,” Mr Hosking said.

Mr Hosking said the Victorian Government's handling of the energy transition has been incredibly clumsy, particularly in how they engage and partner with rural communities along both VNI West and WRL projects and it was time for an urgent rethink and change of approach.

“Owning their mistakes and starting again with landholders and community as partners is the only way to deliver a smooth and timely transition.”

That is what he said. But yet again, we hear nothing from those opposite – just ignoring it.

“Farmers know we need deep, economy wide cuts to emissions.

That is not in question.

We know the world is changing and we're part of that change, but we won't cop being steamrolled in the process.”

That comes from the VFF. But why does the government choose to ignore that? The government continues to punch down on rural and regional communities. There is no integrity. There is no principle behind this. It is mean, nasty and cruel. The party that supposedly puts people first actually throws them under the bus. They do not care about people, they only care about power.

In a recent survey conducted by the VFF, released only a few days ago on 25 August, it was found that farmers are frustrated and finding they continually have no voice in this Labor government. This is the press release that they sent out:

Nine in ten farmers don't believe the Victorian Government understands local issues or has a positive plan to grow the industry ...

nine out of 10 farmers. It states:

Farmers have outlined increases to the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund –
well, we all know that is going to be a complete disaster –

... the state of regional roads –

the government know that too, but they do not care –

... maintaining our biosecurity safety net –

they would not even know what that was –

and steamrolling of renewable energy infrastructure developments as the top issues across the state.

VFF president Bruce Hosking once again said:

Farmers and our regional communities have sent a blunt message that they aren't being listened to and have lost faith that our Victorian Government has their back.

From massive increases to the Emergency Services and Volunteers Fund, roads literally falling apart and communities being steamrolled in the face of renewable energy infrastructure, farmers have a lot to worry about.

More than 92 per cent of farmers don't believe the Victorian Government understands or is even listening to the concerns of farming communities. That's a massive indictment and it must change, because they've lost the trust of these farming communities ...

That is what the VFF are saying. It is not us, it is the VFF. How can the government live with themselves knowing they are crucifying regional communities? How can they honestly look at themselves in the mirror and say, 'We're doing what matters most'? Doing what matters most – dot, dot, dot – except for everyone outside of Melbourne or except for anyone who stands against the government or might even disagree with them. The government's approach to consultation is: government talks, you listen.

The VFF sent us all a letter yesterday pleading for the government to come to their senses. This is the letter that they sent, which says:

Good morning,

...

On behalf of the Victorian Farmers Federation ..., I am writing to raise serious concerns about the proposed VicGrid Bill and the flawed transmission projects it seeks to enable, most notably the Western Renewables Link ... and the Victoria to New South Wales Interconnector West (VNI West)

The VFF strongly supports serious, economy wide reduction in ... emissions, but this must be delivered with fairness, transparency, and community consent. Instead, these projects have been defined by poor planning, inadequate consultation, and coercive powers that erode trust, inflame opposition and result in delay after delay.

...

We urge you to:

- **Oppose the coercive elements of the VicGrid Bill;**
- **Call for the WRL and VNI West to be scrapped;**
- **Demand that transmission planning be restarted with genuine consultation and transparent processes –**

obviously that is not happening at the moment –

- **Advocate for fair and consistent compensation frameworks and community benefit schemes that deliver lasting improvements for regional Victoria.**

That is not what we have got in front of us today. I do not know how anyone could not get the message. The whole process of VNI West and the Western Renewables Link has been a complete and utter failure, a disaster in genuine engagement where the community should have been brought along but instead have been left behind in the dust. We have people like the member for Ripon in the other place. She attends public meetings and she says she is fighting for farmers and fighting for rural communities. When it comes time to make a difference and when it comes time to put your hand up and vote, she votes for this sort of legislation in the other place, just like she voted for the emergency services tax. Nobody can trust a government that is so blatantly two-faced.

Then there is the Premier, somebody who claims to be a regional Victorian and someone who says she understands regional communities. But time after time the Premier continues to throw regional communities under the bus. To this Labor government regional Victorians are completely and utterly irrelevant. On this side of the chamber we will never, ever apologise for standing with regional communities. We will never ever, apologise for standing with farmers, and you should be apologising for doing this to farmers. It is just despicable. We will never, ever abandon our communities, who produce some of the best food and fibre on the planet. The government should hang their heads in shame for even bringing this legislation to the chamber, because it is a total disgrace.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:07): Libertarians have an interesting knack of being able to predict the future, so I will predict a bit of the future here. When this project gets rolled out, some of the farmers will cooperate, as the government hopes. Some of the communities will be convinced through these community funds – effectively the government is buying social licence. But there will be some that will hold out, and the ones that will hold out are exactly who the coercive powers contained in this bill are for – the ones that hold out and resist. They will say they do not want people coming onto their property, and what will happen is they will get the support of other locals, because other people will be upset about the idea of people being forced to let people come onto their properties.

I note that one of the things I thought was interesting when I spoke to many of these farmers, when they were out in front of Parliament not long ago, is that many of them see this as part of a wider campaign against their property rights. In fact one of the things they are concerned about is mining in the area. I know that they feel they will see exactly the same sort of coercion we are seeing for the electricity transmission infrastructure if they do not want mines on their property, or exploration and that sort of thing. They will see this as an issue that they can join together on and resist, and they will get the support of lots of Victorians I think because Victorians tend to like farmers. They like visiting farms. Whenever anyone goes on holiday and they go past one of those farmers markets or something, they always think it is wonderful buying fresh produce and food and this sort of thing. My family does the same thing. They like farmers and they will resist, and this will be an absolute optics nightmare for the government. And then people will ask, as many are starting to ask, why we are doing this in the first place. Why are we doing this? The government and many of the people that promote renewables say that they are cheap, that we have to lower our carbon emissions and we have to go towards net zero, as if Victoria and Australia are anything more than a rounding error in the global scheme of things, as if Victoria is going to change the weather and make the weather better. The fact of the matter is: we are not. India does not care about net zero, China does not care about net zero, the United States does not care about net zero – in fact most of the world's population does not care about it.

Victoria and Australia are going and doing this on their own. What we are really doing is tying our hands behind our backs for no particular benefit that is measurable by science. It is to please international pressure from the UN and from other countries. The United States is not pressuring us anymore. In fact they are looking at us and scratching their heads and wondering what we are doing.

The United States has actually done something quite interesting recently. They have ramped up their energy production because they have realised that the country that is going to lead the world is the country that controls AI, and the limiting factor for AI is energy. So the United States – and Argentina, for that matter – are ramping up their nuclear programs to run AI server farms. Australia will never do this, because server farms require really, really reliable energy 24/7, and large amounts of it – which is why they are all using nuclear. I do not see any solar farms powering data centres any time soon – not the type that you would need for this type of large-scale infrastructure.

The government here and the federal government – and even the Liberal Party, I think – think they are on safe ground with this net zero because they see the polling and the polling says most people support net zero. The polls may as well ask them, ‘Do you like nice things?’ and everyone would say, ‘Well, yes, I like nice things.’ What the polls should ask is: do you like net zero and at what price would you like it at? They do not know the price yet. Once they find out the price, maybe those polls will change a lot. When they start seeing the prices change and when they start seeing the farmer resisting, making a lot of noise, being upset and not allowing people onto his property – he gets a lot of sympathy from Australians, because Australians like farmers; any patriotic Australian likes farmers – it is going to be a big problem for the government.

This government, the federal government and the entire renewables industry that has captured these governments say that it is cheap. One of the things that they rely on is the GenCost report. Everyone talks about the GenCost report. The CSIRO are really keen not to intervene in this debate and not actually point out the ways that the GenCost report is misused. The GenCost report is for a specific purpose, and it is around the costing of new electricity capacity. It assumes that all of the infrastructure is already built. It assumes that the costs are free. No-one actually knows what the infrastructure costs are going to be, but the bill that we are debating today is part of the costs. The costs are not just financial; the costs are people’s rights, the costs are trampling on farmers’ property rights. These are the costs that we are talking about. Again I ask: why are we paying these costs? Well, for net zero, because we want to say that we are nice people and we want to send a signal to the world, even though it is totally pointless and Victoria is not going to change the weather.

If you look at the GenCost report – this analysis was actually done by the Centre for Independent Studies – and if you take into account system infrastructure costs and then look at what is the cheapest, guess what it is? It is the one thing that we have got lots of in Victoria: it is coal. Coal is actually the cheapest, but no-one wants to build coal because we have developed this religious belief that we should not burn coal, even though India is burning coal, America is burning coal and China is burning crazy amounts of coal. Everyone is burning coal except for us. We do not want to burn coal because, rather than think about what is best for Victoria or what is best for Australia, we think about what is best for everyone else. Rather than burn the coal that we have got here – we have got a lot; it is no good for exporting, because brown coal has got such a low energy content and it does not make sense to transport much – what we have decided to do is make ourselves perpetually dependent on China, because this renewable energy infrastructure has to be replaced every 15 to 30 years, depending on what it is. What we are signing up for is not a transition to a new energy system. What we are signing up for is a perpetual transition forever. That is what we are signing up for. The Libertarians say that is a bad idea.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (15:15): I am pleased to rise to speak on the National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Bill 2025. Listening to Mr Limbrick’s contribution and those of Mr McCracken and others in the debate, we have really got two issues that confront us. One is that we have a changing climate. We know that a huge driver of climate change is the amount of carbon pollution that we push into our atmosphere and that our energy sector is a big driver of that pollution. And climate change, as the recent report that the Environment and Planning Committee of the Legislative Council produced and tabled in this Parliament shows, is having significant and serious effects on the way we live as Victorians. The second big motivating factor about needing to do something in this policy area is that the sources of energy that we have as

a state relied upon for many years, our coal-fired power stations, are ageing and failing, which means that we need to replace them – not because of an ideological agenda but for technical reasons.

Bev McArthur interjected.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Sometimes, Mrs McArthur, things get too old and you have to replace them because they do not function anymore – not all things, but some things, and sometimes we need to.

Bev McArthur: Keep going, Mr Batchelor; you might dig your hole deeper.

Ryan BATCHELOR: No, I am fine. We have a choice before us, and that is essentially at the heart of what this bill is about. It is about providing an opportunity to answer both of those policy questions and to resolve both of those policy issues that our state faces – that of dealing with the reality of climate change and doing our part to deal with the reality of climate change, and that of making sure that we have got an energy generation sector for when the coal-fired power stations reach the end of their lives, which they are rapidly approaching.

Victoria has made a commitment, to the Victorian people but also in legislation, that we want to achieve net zero emissions by 2045, a target that we have legislated. We are a leader on climate action, and that is something that we should be proud of and something that we should celebrate. Certainly the Labor government celebrates the fact that Victoria is a leader on acting on climate change. We are doing our bit too. Not only do we have ambition, we have got results. Since 2014 Victoria has cut emissions by more than any other state in the country. With our emissions reduction targets, not only did we hit our 2020 target, which was a 15 to 20 per cent reduction in emissions from 2005 levels, we absolutely smashed it, with a 30 per cent reduction in our emissions in 2020 compared to 2005. We are doing that by making significant investments in renewable energy, because renewable energy is cheaper, is cleaner and is delivering on our commitment to reducing carbon emissions, to decarbonising our electricity generation sector and to bringing all of the benefits both for households and for our climate.

We have also, as part of our energy transition, as part of our push to make renewables the centrepiece of our energy transition, brought back the SEC, returning Victoria's electricity back into the hands of Victorians – to power our schools, our hospitals, our zoos and museums and the trains running on the Metro Tunnel when it opens later this year. To support that shift from failing and ageing coal-fired power stations to modern, cleaner, renewable energy, we have got to make sure we have got the transmission infrastructure in place so that we can get the energy from where it is generated to where it is consumed, the same way that we have had to get the energy from where it has been generated to where it has been consumed since we started with an electricity network in this state. There is nothing fundamentally different or new about what we are trying to do, which is get electricity from where it is generated to where it is used. That is what these changes to the legislative framework that supports the transmission network in this state do.

To put the needs of our energy generation into context, we need to not only meet the additional demand that we are likely to see through the growing economy that we have here in Victoria and the growing population that we have here in Victoria, but also offset the losses that we are going to have from the retirement of the ageing fossil fuel generation here in Victoria. We are going to need to unlock additional electricity – we think about 27 gigawatts, and we have currently got about 15 gigawatts of capacity. As those coal-fired power stations go offline, we are going to need to replace them alongside the additional demand.

What the transition does is not only meet our current and future demand but also create economic opportunity, which is what we are seeing. We are seeing the jobs that are being driven by the investment in renewable technologies in this state. We are seeing the jobs that are being created, the training opportunities that are being created and the apprentices that are being put on – the jobs that are being created through the entirety of the renewables sector. What that is doing is locking in the next wave of employment that we want to see across this state and that the energy transition can do.

What we do not have, and what this bill is seeking to address, is a legislative framework that surrounds these issues that is modern and fit for purpose, because we need to have a legislative framework to support the energy transition, particularly to support the transmission infrastructure to connect the generation to where it is needed to be consumed. The problem that we have with the current system is that it is not fit for purpose, it is not meeting the needs of our energy generation and transmission network and it is not going to help effectively facilitate the transition that is underway and we need to continue to make.

The bill is going to address those issues by implementing the Victorian transmission investment framework, the second stage of an entirely new way to plan and to develop transmission and renewable energy zones here in Victoria. The framework will be implemented by VicGrid, which will be a new governing body that will be more accountable and more responsive to the needs of Victorians and the wishes of the community. Under the current framework, which has its flaws, we have assessments made by AEMO, the Australian Energy Market Operator, deciding whether or not it wants to upgrade a network. They conduct a financial assessment and procurement processes, and then, and only then, do they do a full environmental assessment and the community starts to be fully engaged in the process. We think that is the wrong way around. It does not meet modern standards for community engagement and consultation. The new framework seeks to address this by completely reforming the way that we plan and develop transmission infrastructure here in Victoria. It sets out an approach that creates investment certainty, fosters renewable energy investment and ensures a coordinated development of electricity transmission and renewable energy generation infrastructure to deliver energy affordability, reliability and security for Victorians. It puts community engagement and traditional owner engagement at the very beginning of the process, before major decisions or arrangements are made, and provides for the creation of the economic opportunities that we have before us. It will help us seize the economic opportunities that the renewable energy transition will create. The bill will transfer the existing transmission planning functions from the Australian Energy Market Operator to VicGrid, increasing accountability for our electricity assets. AEMO was created and given functions following the privatisation of our electricity infrastructure.

We saw the problems that we had with retailers running riot and regulation which was bad for consumers and bad for communities and had a significant effect on increasing retail electricity prices. As a response this government has unashamedly been taking action to make sure that we clean up this mess. We have increased the utility relief grant and made it easier to apply. We have forced retailers to let customers know if they can get a better deal. We have introduced the Victorian default offer to provide clear, easy-to-understand benchmark prices to ensure that retailers can change prices only once a year. We have banned sneaky marketing tactics like bait-and-switch offers, cold calling and door-to-door sales. And we have had multiple rounds of the power saving bonus. The latest round of the power saving bonus, for those who need it most, opened on Monday and has already been exceptionally popular.

This bill tackles the transmission issues by bringing the planning function into VicGrid, the body that this government has created. It is accountable to this government and accountable to the people of Victoria, unlike the current arrangements. The legislation also introduces a new access regime. Under the model VicGrid will provide certainty to both investors and communities by setting a cap on renewable energy within a particular renewable energy zone, based on the amount of capacity that is available on the network. It allows local communities to know how much new capacity will be built in their zone, it gives certainty to generators by understanding their ability to deliver power to the network in their zone and it provides stability for the market in allowing consumers and businesses the confidence to operate in the state – a new approach, improving coordination, reducing social and environmental impacts and giving investors certainty to support investment in the renewables we need for Victoria's energy future.

As part of each of the zones we will have community energy funds. This bill establishes the framework for those funds to operate. Community energy funds will be funded by fees paid by generation

developers who develop projects within the renewable energy zones and contributions from transmission companies. These funds will be directly invested into local energy projects to help improve energy infrastructure in the regions that host this infrastructure. That will ensure communities benefit in a meaningful and lasting way, based on their vision of energy priorities for their region. There are also supports for traditional owners. This bill will provide Victorians with economic opportunities to take advantage of the transition that is occurring in the renewable energy sector, provide certainty to the market and give consumers and investors confidence in our renewable energy system. It gets the planning process the right way around – from the way it has operated in the past – it provides accountability and allows a smooth transition to renewables, helping to create jobs, drive investment and bring much-needed reliability to our energy supply. It will help us meet our renewable energy targets, providing a cleaner energy system for Victoria's future. It is going to help solve the problems with the need to find alternatives to the ageing and polluting coal-fired power stations that are reaching the end of their lives. It provides a certain framework for the electricity age-old principle of needing to get power from where it is generated to where it is consumed, and makes sure that that framework is fundamentally and fully in the hands of Victorians through Victoria's new entity VicGrid. It is an important bill, and I commend it to the house.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (15:30): I am rising today to speak on behalf of the Nationals on the National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Bill 2025. This bill is anything but reform. This bill is once again reform in the form of regression, reform in the form of suppression of people's rights and reform in the form of running roughshod over farmers, our farming communities and regional communities. Some of the loudest people to spruik this reform are of course people living in metropolitan Melbourne.

Bev McArthur interjected.

Melina BATH: Inside the tram tracks indeed. We saw people on our steps of Parliament only a few weeks ago. We have seen people rallying out of pure frustration at the lack of respect that this government has displayed to our farmers, to our regional people, for the past decade. They have rallied in Bendigo, they have rallied in your patch and they have rallied all over. Their frustration is palpable.

You have to respect these people. These are the people that get up early. They have got rough hands. They get up in the middle of the night quite often. They get up early, and they produce some of the best food and fibre in the world. We are blessed to have them in our communities, and we are blessed to have their productivity bump up our gross state product. They produce around \$20 billion worth of value annually, and they produce around 27 per cent of our total productivity in the agricultural and horticultural sector. And what does this government do? It slaps them over the face. It is going to give them \$12,000 fines if they want to try and protect their castle, if they want to try and put a padlock on their farm, the property that they own, and say no. They can be put under huge stress. We have seen it in the lines on their faces.

The Victorian Farmers Federation is a fantastic organisation. It has been going for around the same length of time as the Nationals; I think it is over 100 years in a different incarnation. They have been interviewing their farmers only recently, and here are the top one, two, three, four, five, six things. Let me read them out, because they have relevance to this bill. The new emergency services levy is the new tax on this Victorian population – everybody who owns a home or a business; rents out a home, because it will be on the top of their rental value; owns an industry; or owns a farming property – a primary producer. They will be slapped with this tax. And it is so much around propping up the bottom line for this government, who are tired, who can just rip their hands into Victorians' pockets and take money out to prop up their ever-widening black hole.

On the emergency services levy, over 95 per cent of farmers said that they are highly concerned or concerned. New taxes and regulations: well, we have seen 60-odd new and increased taxes in the last 11 years. On enhancing Victoria's road and freight network, you only need to go out into the country to see how poor our roads are. On maintaining Victoria's biosecurity, this bill, if it is passed today with

the help of some of the crossbench, will actually compromise that further. I have been in this place where we have had inquiries that the Nationals and Liberals have led on protecting farmers and enabling them to say, 'Stop.' You cannot have these activists come onto your property to wilfully destroy property, to steal goats, to kill various livestock. They are concerned about that. Farmers are still concerned. It is the fourth-top issue that is uppermost in their concern. This bill is only going to add to that concern, because they have got people who can come onto their property, cut the bolts and give them a \$12,000 fine for their trouble.

The next part that they are concerned about is a transition to renewable energy. They want to see this Victorian government get it right. Indeed we know that the farmers federation has written to all members of Parliament – so it should not be a shock to people – stating very clearly, 'You must vote no to this bill.' We are faced with a wicked problem. We have got a growing population, we have got growing energy needs and in my time in this Parliament we saw the trebling of the coal royalties tax when the Andrews government came in, which forced, I would say, an early closure of Hazelwood. There was a lot of hoo-ha about what they would do for people, but as things stand now, Morwell has got one of the highest unemployment rates in this state and probably in the nation. That community is still in a state of flux, and there are still no accurate answers. From across the benches on the other side, the government benches, we hear them rave about the SEC. What an indictment it is. If you were around at the time just after the election or around the election, you could have got a tote bag with the SEC, you could have got a cap and you could have got some cookies with the SEC. This is the sort of gimmick that goes with that gimmick. The Premier at the time talked about 59,000 jobs that would be created. Last time I looked, there was a handful, and they are working from home somewhere, because they are certainly not hanging out in the Morwell office very often. They are right to work, there is no doubt about that, but this is not the silver bullet that we were once led to believe.

We also know that this bill concentrates power. It concentrates power with the government, it strips rights away and it entrenches secrecy and undermines democracy in this energy transition. I have been around a little while, and back when my kids were little there was a thing called the Toora wind farm. It was developed almost 25 years ago, and people would go and have a look. They were only about 70 metres tall, and they were a fascination. They were actually a bit of a tourist destination. They are still going. They are ageing, but they are going. We also have Bald Hills down near Tarwin Lower, and past the desal plant in Bass Coast we have wind turbines. They are chugging along when there is wind, but there is not too much of it. We also have a significant amount of solar, and we see solar developments and where they are going to be put. There is a great one being put right near the substation below Morwell, an excellent place for it. It is not highly exotic agricultural land, it has gone through hundreds of hoops and regulations and it has got the green light. This is private investment – how fantastic is that? It is right near the substation, which can therefore be used.

Then we talk about offshore wind. We are not opposed to offshore wind at all. The likelihood of it occurring seems to be getting more and more constrained. There are issues around Hastings. There was this fight once upon a time between the minister at the time, Minister Plibersek, and Minister D'Ambrosio. You would think they would have a conversation about this, but where and how that is going to happen is more and more concerning. Then into the bargain we have these renewable energy zones for the transmission, and this is what this bill really speaks to today – those transmission zones. Certainly I have one in Gippsland, and I have got many farmers who have written to me highlighting their concerns. It hands power to this VicGrid, or it hands power again to the minister. It grants the minister sweeping powers to use special orders without consultation or explanation. It is not governance; it is rule by decree. It erodes our property rights and authorises forced entry onto private land without consent and allows for reasonable force. I have said this: \$12,000 if you defend your own property. It strips regional Victorians' right to appeal at VCAT on renewable and transmission projects.

Let me provide an example of one that has happened. The fact is that people power from our communities actually found the flaws with the then Andrews government, the Labor government's own minister, and the proponent. This will strip this away further. In South Gippsland back in 2017–18

there was a location down near the Alberton wind farm, and a great deal of people were very concerned. It was going to have 34 turbines, 200-metres tall, at a project cost of around \$450 million and covering over 3000 hectares. At the time the Minister for Planning Richard Wynne issued a notice and granted the permit back in December 2019. But the community response was well organised. They were forensic with the community response, and over a hundred individuals logged 17 separate applications to VCAT challenging the approval. What happened? The wind company at the time failed to obtain consent from all the dwellings within that 1-kilometre area of the proposed turbines. VCAT actually said these people had done their homework and ruled that the minister and the proponent were noncompliant and removed the entire permit application, and the whole scenario was withdrawn.

What this particular bill will do is to stop that entirely. That will not be able to occur. We are losing safeguards and are losing our autonomy as individuals with rights. The other thing that it will do is reduce your abilities. This bill defines broad categories of protected information. It will exempt people from accessing freedom-of-information requests. One thing that provides confidence in communities is the ability to access information to seek to understand what has gone on with the minister, what has gone on between the proponents and what has gone on with the department. This restricts that from occurring. This is an infringement of our rights as individuals and as people in society, where the government is more and more leading us to an autocratic environment. It provides unchecked ministerial powers, and this, as I have said, is a hallmark of authoritarian governance. It also impacts human rights. As we have discussed, \$12,000 for denying access, over \$4000 for refusing to provide identification and \$1000 for removing a notice – \$1000 for taking some secateurs out and cutting the sign off your fence. This is absolutely outrageous.

Let us look at some of these problems, and they are significant. I know others will comment about things in their area. We understand VNI West is a huge concern to farmers in that space, and they have been rallying against it. But what does this government do? It does not look wholesomely at other opportunities. We have got Bruce Mountain, director of the Victoria Energy Policy Centre, who has made comments only recently about the Victorian transition plan. He said:

Drastic changes to private property rights, as the Victorian government is proposing to enforce a poorly founded transmission plan, are unlikely to achieve its objectives and will poison the water for other renewables and transmission developments ...

This government is poisoning the water, poisoning social licence and ultimately not solving the problem in our energy space.

Finally, in my last few minutes, let me speak from some of the people in my space. One of my constituents has said that farmland is not only their home, it is their workplace, and in some areas it is protected by conservation covenants because of its biodiversity values. They said that these expanded powers to VicGrid will have immeasurable consequences that will change landholder rights in Victoria. Another one said that over the past 18 months they have been overwhelmed by the speculative activity of the renewable energy companies, along with VicGrid, in their district. They feel under siege, and that is an understatement. Finally, one of my constituents in Gippsland said that Victoria's renewable energy transition must be founded on fairness, accountability, community trust and long-term sustainability. How would this be – fairness, accountability, community trust and longstanding sustainability? The Nationals oppose this bill. We want to see our amendments get up, but this reflects none of those things that my fantastic constituents are speaking about. There is no fairness, accountability or community trust, and we cannot see it being long term in its sustainability.

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (15:45): I rise to speak on behalf of the Victorian Greens on the National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Bill 2025. The bill establishes VicGrid as the authority overseeing the regulation of Victoria's new renewable energy zones and related functions. This bill represents the second stage of the government's legislation to facilitate the transition to renewable energy in Victoria. I am pleased to see the government has included in this legislation some of the improvements I called for when I spoke on their VicGrid

stage 1 bill last year. This includes ensuring that regional communities hosting transmission infrastructure will benefit from the cheap, clean energy that they are helping to bring about for all of us. As I said at the time, a truly just transition to renewables includes recognising the essential role our communities are playing in hosting this infrastructure to enable our whole state to benefit from renewable energy. I am glad to see this is now reflected in the new community energy fund set up by this legislation. I also noted at the time that we heard from traditional owners who wanted their land rights considered, including the potential for community ownership models that would deliver ongoing benefits. It is good to see that this legislation also lays out a distinct traditional owners fund that will provide support and benefits to the traditional owners of these lands.

Climate change is the biggest threat facing our communities and our ecosystems, and it is not some distant future threat; it is here now. We see it in fiercer and more frequent bushfires, droughts, floods and deadly heatwaves. Year after year we are breaking heat records and doing our best to adjust to new, unpredictable seasonal changes. My electorate of Western Victoria is still in the grips of a terrible drought which is devastating farmers and rural communities. While we all continue to hope for an end to the drought, farmers know that conditions are changing over the long term. They are having to adapt their practices to recognise these drier conditions and greater frequency of extreme weather events.

Our beautifully unique animals are at increasing risk of extinction as their ever-decreasing habitat becomes impossible for them to live in, and our native plants are not faring any better. Just last week the *Guardian* reported that under current global heating projections, we are likely to lose a quarter of Victoria's ancient mountain ash trees. As more trees die and decompose, these carbon-storing giants will instead turn into a source of emissions, speeding up the process even further. Just imagine what that will do to precious places like the Otways, again in my electorate. I have been down there a couple of times over the past year and walked through areas that are usually temperate rainforest but are tinder dry with trees browning in ways that I have never seen before. Luckily, we have a solution. We have tools to get off fossil fuels to start slowing down the progression of climate change. We must kick our fossil fuel habit immediately. This legislation is one more step towards finally doing that in Victoria, so the Greens will be supporting this bill.

I would like to thank the many stakeholders and community members who got in touch to share their perspectives and concerns about this bill. The Greens and I were able to represent these concerns to the government. I would also like to thank the minister's office and VicGrid for listening and responding to the issues that we raised. My Greens colleague Tim Read flagged in the other place that we intended to bring amendments to address some of these concerns, and I will speak to those now.

One of our initial concerns was that the community energy fund was too limited in deciding which projects this scheme would fund for communities hosting renewable energy. I am very pleased that the government has said that they will back our amendment, allowing the community energy fund to support not only renewable energy projects, but also projects that support biodiversity outcomes, including biodiversity programs and research in local communities.

Another concern was that this legislation, as written, would allow the Treasurer to appropriate funds from the community energy fund into consolidated revenue. This was never likely to be a significant source of revenue for the government, but its inclusion in the bill makes it easy for people to be suspicious of the intentions of this legislation. Again, to their credit, the government has heard this criticism and agreed to support our amendments, removing this power from the legislation. If I could ask the clerks to circulate our amendments now.

I hear from so many of my constituents who are concerned about whether building renewable infrastructure could impact negatively on local flora and fauna. This change will show that renewables and nature do not have to be at odds with each other. In fact the single best thing we can do for our local ecosystems is to protect them by getting off coal and gas as quickly as possible.

I would like to note that we have heard a number of concerns from western Victorian residents about the land access provisions in this legislation, particularly the steep fines if landholders refuse access to their property. The Greens and I brought these concerns to the government. Based on those conversations, we understand that the penalty is seen as a last resort and would only be reached after a number of preceding steps were taken, certainly long after making initial attempts to negotiate a voluntary access agreement. I understand that this fine can only be imposed by a court. The government tells us it is their hope and intention that these negotiations will be successful and mutually beneficial for all parties and that no court ever has to issue a single one of these fines. However, I will have more questions about these aspects of the bill during the committee stage. I understand that there could be amendments regarding this part of the bill, and we will have more to say about those as they are spoken about and circulated. I have not seen all parties' amendments at this stage.

Noting that the government has engaged with us in good faith on our many questions around this bill and has agreed to support our amendments, we are supportive of this legislation. I will note that, being in an electorate that has been on the forefront of the renewable energy transition, there are extremely high levels of anxiety, stress and confusion about many of the transition projects. I have been out to rural communities. I have sat with many people who are absolutely understandably worried about what these projects are going to do to their farms and their townships. They have been left with an information void a lot of the time and empty so-called consultations where they are being asked for their opinion on things that have already been decided, which has disempowered people. It has created fear and, in some cases, allowed misinformation to spread. So much of this distress could have been avoided if there had been genuine, honest, up-front engagement with them from the outset. I appreciate that part of the reason for establishing VicGrid was to try and address some of the failures in proper community engagement that had occurred under federal oversight. I understand, though, why there is scepticism from the communities about the prospect of any significant improvement with a shift to state government oversight. These are communities that are continually experiencing really poor engagement from this state government on everything from mining projects to health care.

Failure to involve communities in shaping key decisions before they are made and then a lack of up-front honesty and information about decisions that have already been made has left many feeling like they have been treated with contempt. The worst part is that so many of the farmers I talked to understand the need for renewable energy. They started out being really keen to play a role in supporting the transition, but now there are many parts of Victoria where getting back to that position is going to be a tough journey for this government. It is also going to be very tough to get on with this important work if the quality of the engagements with these communities does not drastically improve.

We are supporting this bill because we know that the renewable energy transition has to happen and because establishment of community benefits funding is long overdue recognition of some of the concerns of rural communities. But there is a whole lot of stuff that has to happen that is not outlined in any laws that are ever going to pass through this Parliament, and that particularly relates to engagement with affected communities. That is not something that we can write into law. It is something about how the government goes out and does their day-to-day operational business. If the government really wants to get on with the transition, as we would like to see them do, it is in their own interest to start really, really investing in proper community engagement, because the reality is we do need to get on with this transition and time is absolutely against us. We should have done most of this work decades ago. The best way to shut down persistent rumours that Yallourn might be extended is to finally get Victoria's renewables going. The best way to reduce power prices is to get off expensive coal and gas and onto renewables. But the longer we wait, the more expensive all forms of power will get. And the best way to protect communities, especially rural communities, from the ongoing impacts of climate change that they are already living is to rapidly reduce emissions by getting off fossil fuels and onto renewables. We have the resources and the technology. If this bill passes, we will also have the legislation. So let us get off coal once and for all and make sure we are looking after regional communities while we do it.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (15:56): I rise to speak on the National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Bill 2025 currently before the chamber. This bill is the second in a series of bills amending a number of existing pieces of legislation which relate to energy production, energy infrastructure and the grid in Victoria. Right now all governments have two big jobs when it comes to energy. The first is to ensure that we can provide consumers and industry with the reliable and affordable energy that they all need and good infrastructure that will last decades into the future. We are going to need 27 gigawatts of new energy in the next decade or so. You cannot just wish it into existence, you have to build it. The other is to help drive and facilitate change to the make-up of our energy grid in a way that will reduce our dependence on fossil fuels so that we can reduce our carbon emissions without sacrificing any of the industries or quality of life. The Allan Labor government has taken a range of existing measures to ensure that we can achieve both of these aims. Perhaps the most eye-catching of these would be bringing back the SEC, which since 1 July this year has been providing government buildings with government-owned renewable energy, including all public schools, all hospitals and zoos, as well as providing energy to the public sector.

The SEC is also helping Victorian families put solar panels on their roofs and transition towards cheaper-to-run, more energy efficient electrical appliances in their homes. While the SEC is already providing information and resources to help families to navigate this process, this will be the main objective of the SEC one-stop shop when it launches next year. The one-stop shop will organise a network of reliable, professional, accredited and SEC-endorsed installers who the public can trust with installations of their new systems. While this bill does not directly relate to the SEC itself, it is an important part of building the energy infrastructure that we are going to need to support our state over the next few decades and achieve our emissions target of net zero by 2045.

The changes made in this bill will assist in the transition taking place at VicGrid from being considered a state body to being a state business corporation. VicGrid is a public body which was established so that it could oversee the changes in, restructuring and expansion of Victoria's energy grid. This includes building new transmission and infrastructure to get energy from where it is produced to where it is consumed, upgrading existing infrastructure, working with communities to ensure that projects can be delivered in a way that benefits their local areas and of course planning and developing Victoria's new renewable energy zones. The changes made to VicGrid in this bill will include restructuring it as a state business corporation as well as transferring functions and powers to VicGrid from the energy market operator. This transition and these changes will allow VicGrid to implement the *2025 Victorian Transmission Plan* and enable it to create Victoria's new renewable energy zones.

As part of this restructuring, the bill will also create a new framework for funding benefits for local communities who are affected by the development of new infrastructure. This could be new transmission, new generation or new storage. This framework will focus on benefits for individual landholders, for local communities and for traditional owners in areas which are to be affected. There will be two separate funds being created: one for local communities and one for traditional owners. It is important that we fund projects like these because communities deserve consultation on these sorts of projects, and they deserve help that will make these changes more manageable. Public opinion matters, especially in areas which are directly affected, and it is important that we bring people along with us when we propose new projects in their local area. Obviously these projects will bring benefits on their own, including well-paying, high-skilled, secure jobs, as well as many of the other ripple effects that these sorts of projects bring to communities. Nevertheless it remains important that the government actively engages with communities and takes their issues, their concerns and their worries seriously, because while benefits will be felt statewide, the potential for temporary disruption and change within the community would make things difficult for people in the immediate area.

The simple principle of the renewable energy zone community energy funds and traditional owners fund is that when the community hosts infrastructure that benefits the entire state, there should be direct benefits to their local area as well. These benefits, which this bill is bringing in, are in addition to the benefits for landholders which we introduced last year. We introduced those because we wanted

to ensure that nobody was left worse off by the disruptions caused by these vital projects. Compensating for disruptions is important but it is also expensive, which is why this bill focuses so much on building a system which gets planning right.

This is why we are shifting responsibility for transmission network planning from the Australian Energy Market Operator to VicGrid. This is so that VicGrid can make sure that we are building the infrastructure we need in the places most suitable to host it. It will also enable VicGrid to implement the *2025 Victorian Transmission Plan*. This is a plan which sets out how much wind and solar energy this state will need to build over the next 15 years. To replace our ageing coal-fired power stations, which are rapidly approaching the end of their natural life cycles, it sets out seven new renewable energy zones covering roughly 7 per cent of the state in the locations most suited to generating renewable energy. The plan estimates that less than 1 per cent of the state's landmass will be needed for renewable energy projects. The draft plan further emphasises that only a small amount of the land in each renewable energy zone will be needed to host new projects and that locals will be consulted about planning decisions. This is because we on this side of the chamber recognise that you get better outcomes when you work with landholders and farmers. Of course not every piece of land is suitable for renewable energy and not every existing land use is compatible with renewable energy generation. In most cases nobody knows each piece of land better than the landholders themselves. That is why energy developers in the renewable energy zones will negotiate directly with the landholders on how the projects will be built and how much compensation will be given. This is not just to ensure fairness in the process, but also in many cases we expect it will actually lead to a better outcome. A landholder hosting a typical project can expect compensation of \$8000 per square kilometre per year. This comes on top of the full and fair compensation mandated by the Land Acquisition and Compensation Act 1986. The draft plan received feedback from stakeholders in the public process, which finished in June, and the final plan will be released later this year.

The reason why this bill is so crucial to realising the *2025 Victorian Transmission Plan* is because it gives VicGrid the grid planning and grid access powers which are necessary for implementing the plan. By laying out and implementing a clear plan that works with stakeholders, not against them, we can give certainty to industry and certainty to investors. There are a lot of firms looking to make investments in the renewable energy sector – this is understandable. There happens to be quite a lot of money to be made out of producing the cheapest form of new energy available to us here in Australia. Demand for energy will only go up in the coming years as the population grows and the energy-intensive industries continue to move here, so it is vital that we give investors the security and the knowledge that we are going to back them in when they say they want to come and build more energy. We are not just laying out the rules and regulations for them, we are helping them by setting out specific renewable energy zones in some of the locations in the state most favourable to renewable energy generation. By giving the powers contained in this bill directly to VicGrid, it will allow for clear and centralised implementation and will give investors the certainty and support that they need. That is what this bill is all about. It is about certainty, fairness and strengthening our energy system – certainty and fairness for investors, with clear rules and a favourable regulatory environment, and certainty and fairness for landholders, with a generous compensation scheme that pays out in addition to any other compensation to which they would be entitled. Landholders and traditional owners can also look forward to a mechanism to deliver community benefits to the areas which host new energy production and transmission infrastructure. Additionally, we will be providing certainty and fairness for all those Victorians who rely on our energy grid, which is all Victorians.

Having an energy system that is reliable and that is affordable for consumers and for the industry benefits everyone, so it is important that we make these investments in transmission and generation in renewables. It is the cheapest form of new energy, and in a few years – soon – it will be the most abundant source of energy in Victoria, because it is no good creating all this new renewable energy if there is no transmission infrastructure to take it where it can be used.

Further to the point, I am very glad to see that the minister in the other place is treating the issue with the urgency that it deserves. It takes years to reshape an energy grid. Our local coal-fired power stations are going to reach the end of their natural life spans and go offline in a few years, and we need to make these investments in new energy now. It is no good waiting for them to go offline before we bother looking into what will replace them. Planning ahead is always the most important thing the government can do to ensure that we have reliable, affordable and clean energy into the second half of this decade. But it is not just that. We also need to be planning ahead for the next decade and the decade after that. Any member of this chamber who has been paying close attention to the field of energy policy over the last decade would know this. They would also know that it is exactly what the Allan Labor government and the Andrews Labor government have done before, that this year we are expecting to reach our target of 40 per cent of our total electricity being renewable and that by 2035 we are aiming for 95 per cent of our electricity being renewable. This took a decade of work for the government and the minister, and it will take another decade to finish it off. It just goes to show why VicGrid is so important and why giving it powers, which are being transferred by this bill, is also important.

This bill is one part of the plan for VicGrid. In fact it is only the second in a series of bills relating to creating a more powerful and more impactful VicGrid. Further, our plans for VicGrid, the *2025 Victorian Transmission Plan* and the renewable energy zones are only one part of a broader energy strategy. These policies help to facilitate private development in renewable energy, while at the same time the SEC is producing publicly owned renewable energy and using it to power our public schools, hospitals and transport infrastructure.

Our rebates and our subsidies for rooftop solar and energy-efficient appliances are enabling individuals and families to produce their own energy and use it more efficiently. Our power saving bonuses have helped Victorians save money and helped with the cost of living while also encouraging them to switch to a more competitive energy deal through the Victorian Energy Compare website. Helping people to navigate what can often be a difficult and confusing market not only helps people with the costs of energy but also promotes competitiveness between energy companies. Of course the power saving bonus is making its return this year, offering households with a concession card \$100 off their power bills, as was announced in the budget in May.

The Allan Labor government understands how important the price of energy is. When energy bills go up, it can be one of the most viscerally difficult aspects of the cost of living. In the modern age in Victoria there are not too many households or businesses left who can choose to live without using electricity, which is why our long-term plans for the security and supply of electricity in this state are so important. VicGrid and its new powers and responsibilities are going to be a big part of that, and so are our renewable energy zones and our transmission infrastructure projects. Some people look to the challenges facing our energy system and see only negatives. Those of us on this side of the chamber see the opportunities to transform the grid to be cleaner, more affordable and more secure and to create more jobs. It would be completely irresponsible for any government to let those opportunities slip for no other reason than because the work involved would be too difficult and long. Our government has been working towards seizing these opportunities for a decade and in doing so have made important and irreversible changes to the make-up of the grid already. With bills like this one and the plans we have for renewable energy generation and transmission, we will be able to continue to have the work done and to take it even further. That is why this bill matters, and that is why we are pushing on with producing the energy that the state needs. I commend the bill to the house.

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (16:09): I rise to contribute to the debate on the National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Bill 2025. Divisions 1 and 2 of this bill will amend the new law relating to the statutory body corporate VicGrid and transfer the powers and responsibilities of the CEO of VicGrid to the body corporate VicGrid. The bill will also transfer certain functions of the Australian Energy Market Operator to VicGrid so that planning and decisions about the Victorian transmission and energy network are made in Victoria and not by the national operator.

The Liberals do not oppose these changes, and in fact we support moving decision-making from AEMO to Victorian agencies. However, the useful parts of this bill are completely overshadowed by the outrageous and totally unacceptable parts of this bill. That is why the Liberals will be strongly opposing this bill, and I urge all members of this house to reject it.

The bill is the end result of a decades-long failure to consult properly with regional and rural communities and a failure to plan comprehensively for large-scale energy transition. The Labor government have totally lost control of the energy system in Victoria, and now they are trying to make up for the lack of planning and engagement with heavy-handed coercion. They want to use coercive powers to give contractors access to private land and force massive transmission lines onto rural communities that do not want them. The government thinks that this bill will allow it to intimidate and control rural communities, but in fact it will only inflame opposition and create even more delays to the energy transition.

The rotten core at the heart of this bill is an attack on the fundamental rights of Victorians. Under this new legislation authorised officers can enter land without consent by simply providing notice, leaving the landholder with no right to refuse. If the landholder tries to protect their property by denying access to the land, the legislation will allow contractors to use force to break open locks and smash down gates. If any landholder tries to get in the way of a contractor who is forcing his way onto the property, that landholder can be slapped with fines of up to \$12,000 for an individual or \$48,000 for a corporate body. These provisions are an outrageous violation of basic property rights and fundamental values in our country. The right to decide what happens on your own property is one of the most fundamental rights in our political system. The right to lawfully enjoy your land and use it how you wish and the right to stop other people from encroaching on your land are basic to the functioning of a liberal democracy. This right should never be violated.

Farmers have good reason to care deeply about maintaining the security of their property and particularly their animals. An energy contractor could breach that security by leaving gates open or maybe even damage a recently sown field because it looks like an empty paddock that they think they can drive over. Farms also have strict biosecurity requirements. In my electorate we have recently had several agricultural businesses quarantined due to viral or fungal outbreaks, and farmers cannot afford to risk a biosecurity breach from a truck or shoe bringing contaminated soil or faeces onto the farm.

Farms are not just workplaces, they are also homes for families, with pets and children running around freely. It is unacceptable for contractors to force their way onto a farm with trucks, equipment and materials that may create a real safety risk for the children who live and play on their family's farm. There is also a serious concern for child safety if contractors have unsupervised access to farms where children might be moving around out of sight of their parents. This raises serious questions about the screening of workers and whether the contractors and workers will have working with children checks before they go onto the farms.

The government should not violate your right to secure your own property unless there is a very strong justification. If there is unlawful or dangerous activity taking place, even then it must be done through a proper legal process. But when I look at this bill and I hear the government speeches defending it, I cannot find good justification for the draconian overreach contained in this legislation. This bill had a one-page second-reading speech but a 10-page statement of compatibility with the human rights charter, which details all the ways in which this bill infringes on human rights.

Ultimately the government cannot justify this legislation because the rapid and forced transition to renewables is not actually an urgent necessity. The government has other options to ensure reliability in the energy network, but it has chosen to ban gas and force the renewables transition when it does not have to. It has chosen ideology over outcomes, and that will never be enough to justify the violation of basic property rights that this legislation will allow. The member for Albert Park in the other place said there is nothing to see here and there is nothing to worry about. There is already a provision under section 93 of the Electricity Industry Act 2000 for enabling access to land. If that is true, then what is

the need for this bill? As the member noted, the only way to enforce access against an unwilling landholder is to obtain an injunction from the Supreme Court, and the member laments that this process is expensive and time consuming – and so it should be. When we are talking about violating someone's basic right to decide what happens on their property, there should be a very high bar for using the state's powers to override that decision.

This bill will lower the standard and only require an order from a Magistrates' Court. The protections in this bill are very weak. Clause 65, new section 93BK, says that when magistrates make their decisions about giving an entry order they:

... must have regard to –

- (a) the need for the expeditious development of electricity transmission ...

This is telling the magistrate to rubberstamp entry orders. There is no real legal protection here for landholders who are having their basic property rights violated. Just as there is no moral justification for the draconian laws in this bill, there is also no economic justification. The member for Thomastown in the other place said that she is looking forward to power prices going down because of the government's renewable energy policies. The minister also told us that prices will go down, down, down, but under her watch all they have done is go up, up, up. I am sorry to say, but the member for Thomastown will be waiting a very long time for prices to go down. Power prices are only going up, and they are going up because the Labor government has completely bungled the energy transition.

AEMO's recent report shows that the cost of the VNI West transmission line will blow out from \$3.9 billion to \$7.6 billion and possibly even up to \$11.4 billion. Respected energy expert Bruce Mountain has said that the government's transmission plan will cost \$28 billion over the coming decade. Who is going to wear that cost? The consumers will wear that cost and, more importantly, it will be Victorian consumers who will wear that cost. Professor Mountain says household electricity bills will go up by about 50 per cent and power bills for industrial electricity users will explode by between 250 and 350 per cent. This will kill industry in Victoria and destroy regional economies, where businesses are already struggling with rising costs and many have decided to move to other Australian states that have better business conditions. We have seen that with Bega recently in my electorate.

What really worries me is the effect that this will have on my constituents in Northern Victoria. My constituents are already hurting after years of inflation, the cost of living going up and then recently the devastating effects of the drought. Now they have to worry about the Allan Labor government forcing electricity companies onto their land to put up massive transmission lines that will blight the beautiful scenery of the country that they have grown up in. The Allan Labor government seems hell-bent on hurting the whole of regional Victoria, and this bill is just the latest in a long line of attacks on regional Victorians. Regional roads are falling apart, and the government is totally ignoring its duty to provide safe driving conditions for Victorians. State parks and forests will soon be locked away, despite the Premier promising she would not. Massive housing projects are being approved for small country towns that do not have the infrastructure to handle them. Labor reacted too slowly on drought support and had to be dragged to the table to listen to farmers and provide assistance and relief. They have totally failed to offer any real opposition to Commonwealth buybacks for irrigation water that our agricultural industry and regional economies rely on. They failed to properly consult when drawing up the renewable energy zones (REZ). They have imposed a big new tax on Victorians, the so-called emergency services tax, most of which will not actually go to improving the capabilities of frontline responders.

On top of that, Labor are bringing in this bill, which will give energy companies the right to force their way onto private land without consent and hit you with a massive fine if you resist. It is hard to believe how much worse it can get for regional Victorians, but never underestimate the ability of the Allan Labor government to find new ways to hurt rural communities in order to chase green votes in the city. The Minister for Energy and Resources claims that this bill will establish a framework for funding and

payment of benefits to landholders, local communities and traditional owners impacted by the new renewable generation and battery storage infrastructure. But Labor will only pretend to help rural and regional communities impacted by their disastrous energy policies. In reality, the promise of any benefit for communities is just a fig leaf. Benefit funds are a cover under which Labor will use payments from energy companies to fill the government coffers and offset their spending in metropolitan Melbourne. They are doing the same thing with the so-called emergency services levy, most of which will not actually help frontline emergency services, and they will do it with this bill as well.

Clause 50 inserts new section 92 to provide for payments into and out of the REZ community energy fund. Subsection 4 states:

The Treasurer, after consulting the Minister and VicGrid, may direct VicGrid to pay out of the REZ Community Energy Fund a specified amount of money to be paid into the Consolidated Fund.

I knew this Labor government was sneaky, but this takes it to another level. It is country Victorians who have to carry the burden of the renewable energy transition. Labor is not building solar farms or putting wind turbines in safe Labor metropolitan seats – it is country Victorians who suffer while their beautiful and scenic landscape is covered with the industrial infrastructure of renewable energy projects. Therefore it should be country Victorians that are generously compensated by energy companies who make use of country farmland. And yet when we look at this bill, we see Labor's real plan to create a so-called community benefit fund that the Treasurer can dip into whenever she wants to to pay for pet Labor projects in metropolitan seats.

This bill will actually have the opposite effect of what the government intends. The government thinks the transition to renewables is taking too long and that bothersome local communities are getting in the way. The purpose of this bill is to threaten and intimidate them, shut them up, scare them into agreement so the government can speed up its rollout of renewables. But in fact this bill will do the opposite; this draconian overreach by a Labor government obsessed with wielding power will actually in fact backfire. Country people are generous and cooperative, but when you threaten their livelihoods, their land, their basic property rights and their families, they will not take it lying down. Every new transmission project will become a battleground, a face-off between angry landholders and energy companies. Farmers desperate to protect their land will be arrested at the farm gate. There will be conflict and delays and then more cost blowouts that will flow through into the electricity bills of every Victorian, making the cost of living even higher.

This bill is a recipe for failure that will inflame opposition and totally destroy all trust in the government and ultimately make the energy transition even more difficult. This bill must be opposed because it violates basic property rights, it does not afford sufficient legal protections for Victorians, it will make electricity prices go up for everyone, it will delay the energy transition and it will not produce any real long-term benefits for country Victorians, who will be the most impacted by the industrial infrastructure being forced onto their productive land.

Jeff BOURMAN (Eastern Victoria) (16:24): I rise in opposition to this bill. Despite some wags from the opposition in the other place trying to make out like I was not going to oppose it, I most certainly am. This is a monster of a bill for what seems fairly simple. I have been through it, and there are questions one must have. In fact I might refer to Mr Limbrick's contribution earlier. There is a lot that I agree with him about that, about the net zero we are doing here while the places that are really bad and that really need to work on their emissions are doing diddly. From that perspective I wonder just how morally right it is to be able to have the government, in this case the contractors, force their way onto your land, whether you want it or not. There was the use of the term 'reasonable force'. I know under section 462A of the Crimes Act 1958 reasonable force is a pretty serious thing. I would like to hope that when entering your property reasonable force does not end up meaning the same thing, because to some people the powers that this bill gives to contractors and the affront that that causes means it feels that big to them. Whether you believe in renewables as the next saviour or not is immaterial to a large degree. This is about what is happening to the communities out there.

I went for a drive out to Lexton and Stuart Mill, which is where these things are going. As it happens, when I came to Victoria a long time ago I lived outside of Stuart Mill, so I know the area pretty well – the Kara Kara National Park, or state forest as it was back then, and that area. There are some powerlines that go through there, but they are relatively small in the scheme of things. At the place I visited they are probably about 10 metres above the tree line, which I suppose you can get used to – but they are not going. What is going to happen is we have other powerlines much higher going for much longer. I have got to say that part of the attraction of those areas – Lexton, St Arnaud, Natte Yallock and all those sorts of places – is the bucolic feel. You feel like you are out in the country. The last thing you want are dirty, great powerlines.

I feel that this bill is giving life to people's fears. People do not trust governments. People should not trust governments; I am starting to sound a bit like a Libertarian. There are some things you have to do as a government, but I feel that this has been attacked in the wrong way. A lot of farmers are doing well out of this. They will get some recompense for their problems, but the ones that do not want a part of it I think are being given the raw prawn. When I was out at Lexton, I was talking to someone affected by this, and they were talking about the consultation meeting, the town hall – whatever they called it – that was going to be happening the evening I was there. They had got an email about it the previous evening. That is not a lot of time, particularly for people who may not be there or may not see their email. I am not saying it was in a conspiratorial way, I am not saying that it was deliberate, but it was done very poorly, hence why we have a lot of unhappy people.

It was mentioned – I cannot remember by who – that we could have put these things underground, or at least some of them. That still is a possibility. Should this bill get through in its current form, that is not going to happen. What is going to happen is some poor guy that does not want his farm desecrated, for want of a better term, with a great big 80-metre tower – someone can correct me if I am wrong – someone is going to come in with a truck, cut the locks, drive onto his property. Even presuming they do the right thing with biosecurity, they are going to erect a dirty big tower in his yard, and he will just have to suck it up. That is not how I feel governments should go. That is not how I feel life should be. Australia was built on a fair go. I feel that the fair go has fled from this issue.

The last comment I will make before I take my seat again is that we keep on getting told about renewables being cheaper. One of the things I learned very early on in the scheme of this place was that all power forms are subsidised to a degree, whether by state government or federal government. I would be truly interested to see what the unsubsidised amounts are. I know there is a lot of opposition to nuclear, and it is going to be expensive and yadda yadda yadda. From a data point of view, there is no level playing field. I cannot say that nuclear costs this per megawatt. I cannot say that renewables cost that, gas is that. At this stage you have got everyone doing a little bit of something in the pie, and the numbers are everywhere. I would love just to see them. Maybe I am right, maybe I am wrong. At this stage all we get is, let us call them, figures that have been chosen. Until we really know what is going on, we will just have to accept them.

I am going to sit down. I know Mr McIntosh loves his renewable power. We have had discussions about this at length. I am salivating to hear what he has to say.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (16:30): Thank you, Mr Bourman, for the segue. I might put down my notes and I might put down my phone, which is ringing very inappropriately, and why don't we pick up on a couple of points that Mr Bourman has raised and Mr Limbrick has raised as a starting point. I think a starting point is one of a point of values. There have been questions raised at a high-level value point: do we need to decarbonise our economy? I would say yes. Now, it might be correct that we are 1 per cent of global emissions. In World War I and World War II we were probably 1 per cent or 2 per cent, whatever it might be, of the fighting effort, but we contributed. We turned up because it was important, and it is incredibly important that we reduce our emissions not only to people around the globe who are living in far greater poverty than most of us here in Australia but also to ourselves. When we look at the landmass that we are able to use for agricultural production, as our climate dries, as the band of land from the coast that is available for productive agriculture shrinks and

as soil temperatures dry up, we know that if the ambient temperature of the soil is warmer it is harder to grow things at the same time as you are having lower rainfall.

We know farmers are getting smashed, whether it is by wind events, by fire, by flood or by whatever is happening out of a more unstable climate. When we have more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and the sun's rays come in they get trapped, things heat up and we get more moisture in the atmosphere, and when that moisture moves around at a higher pace and at a more ferocious level, bad things happen – it is not good – and that hits us economically. For our farmers, when they get hit and smashed, then that flows on to everybody in the prices at the supermarket. It hits us from an economic perspective, because we have got \$20 billion worth of ag product in this state, so if we are losing swathes of that due to any one of those storm, fire, flood and drought events et cetera, then we are less economically productive and our cost of living goes up as we are paying more at the supermarket.

From an agricultural perspective we should be striving to be more productive. We should be striving to be more productive in every way. So when our conditions to grow disable farmers from being more productive, when it gets harder and harder to be productive, it is bad for our economy. And it is bad for those farmers, because we want to see those farms being passed down from generation to generation. That is something that we should absolutely strive for. I would love to hear from somebody from the coalition. We know that their policies are driven out of Queensland and they struggle to ever present policies, let alone have independent policies of their own making. They are a powerful group up in Queensland, and I know that the Liberal–Nationals here quiver in their boots when the Queenslanders tell them to pull their heads in.

But farmers' interests should be first – farmers, not multinational mining companies. If we do not want to see the corporatisation of farming in this state, if we do not want to see the corporatisation of farming in this nation, if we want to see mums and dads and families on farms – and over there they are shaking their heads because they do not actually care about who owns the farms – and if we want to see family farms being passed down from generation to generation, then we have to ensure that the conditions are there for farmers to be able to do so. I will come back to the point I made about starting with a position of values. I am very proud to have a value of decarbonising our economy and reducing our emissions so we are all not getting smashed economically, whether that is the farmer or our entire society, from lower agricultural outputs. I have not even touched on the 16 per cent jump in insurance bills last year because of severe weather events year on year on year on year. And it does not matter – anyone can say whatever science they want. If you come down to the hard dollars of what insurers are doing to all of us collectively, I think we have got to get a little bit away from 'them, them, us'. We are all Victorian, we are all in this together, we all suffer the costs. When in doubt, look at the insurance bills and look at what the insurance councils have been saying for a very long time about the impacts of climate change. So as a starting point we need to reduce our emissions.

Secondly, there has been doubt and assertion put over this. Mr Bourman was just saying this, and we have actually sat down and started this discussion in the past, and I will have it now. It will be great, because he will not be able to talk back to me; I can say whatever I want and get away with it scot-free. But when we talk about cost, I think an important starting point is that our entire energy system here in Victoria was a public asset. Public funds established our generators, public funds established our transmission lines, public funds established our distribution networks and public funds retailed energy here in this state. When we sold those assets, we sold them without any private investment, without any private skills, without a private workforce having created those networks. So when people say coal is cheaper, of course it is, because we have assets that are 20, 30, 40 years old that were funded and established by the state. They were sold, but they are existing assets. I think we can get that as a starting point. And then we look at: what is the cost of new assets? Mr Bourman raised the point that there are varying subsidies, as there are for multiple sectors, for multiple industries, whether we are talking mining, whether we are talking diesel subsidies – whatever we are talking about. But even if we strip all that away and we are looking at solar, off the top of my head – and I hope I get this roughly right – let us say broadly solar costs \$60 or \$80 a megawatt, depending on whether it has got battery

on it or not. We have got wind – we start going into \$100, \$120 per megawatt for onshore wind. Perhaps offshore gets a little bit more. And then we get to gas, and gas is into the 200-and-something dollars for generation.

Even if you leave aside the fact that gas supplies are finite and that gas rigs are being pulled out of the Bass Strait to be decommissioned because there is simply no more gas there, to order and construct and commission a gas turbine takes years, then you have got to get the gas, and then, if you actually do not start with the underlying principle that we want to decarbonise our economy – it does not fit the plan, but even if you leave that aside and you say, ‘We don’t care. Whatever – drill, baby, drill’ – economically it does not make any sense. Why would you go for a more expensive form of generation?

And then what about other nations? ‘They’re not doing anything; other nations are not doing anything.’ Anyone who is following China knows they are installing incredible amounts of renewables, and they are electrifying their transmission. The other thing we should talk about is our energy security. I love the idea of electrifying our transmission, of generating our electricity here, of having a closed loop of Victorian jobs, a decentralised generation model where many people are profiting and benefiting and gaining income from the generation of electricity, which is what a decentralised renewable model offers. Then we are giving ourselves energy security for when a flare-up happens around the world, a geopolitical whatever – war breaks out – or someone decides at some point they want to get in the way of oil being shipped to Australia or anywhere along that long route.

I love the idea that the value, the profits, the jobs and everything are right here – that we are sustainable. And that is exactly what China are doing. They are taking a strategic approach. Last year their car show – it was not an electric car show – was 95 per cent EVs, because they understand that they do not want to have to buy their fuel from elsewhere. They are decarbonising their generation because they understand they do not want to have to buy their coal from elsewhere. So on a climate perspective, on a cost perspective and on a geopolitical strategic perspective it makes sense to electrify along the whole way, and that does not even talk about air quality and pollution and the hundreds or thousands of people even here in Victoria, in Australia, that lose their lives every year off the back end of air pollution, not to mention other places around the world. Economically it makes sense. Subsequently there is not further investment in coal, because a new coal generator is not economically competitive with the renewable forms of generation I have just gone through. If you get to that point, then it is about saying, ‘Well, how are we going to power this state?’ I am proud that the Labor Party has laid out over the years and has met and beaten our targets. We are now at 42 per cent renewables in this state annually generated here in Victoria. When it was 5 per cent and when it was 10 per cent and when it was 20 per cent, ‘Oh, it can’t be done. Oh, this, it can’t be that, it can’t be that.’ Why do one in three households have solar panels on their roof? Because it makes sense. Have a bit of sun, hit a bit of panel, get a bit of electricity. Not bad, is it? You can generate it yourself. Why are businesses doing it? Have a bit of sun, hit a bit of panel, get some electricity, save money. It is good.

Another point: through decentralising that – and I love the home battery program of the feds – we are giving energy security to households. Just like I was talking about with electric vehicles, we give energy security to households, to businesses, through community batteries, through any sort of storage that is decentralised, that is more localised in place. We are giving more autonomy and more security to homes and to businesses in their place. I will tell you what, when these storm events hit – and even though I have only been in Parliament for three years, in my time I have already seen a number of these events – where powerlines are down, whether that is through wind or fire or whatever may happen, to be able to have that resilience in community, whether that is in a community hub or within a home, is incredibly valuable.

I was asking Mr Davis in his contribution; he says he believes in action on climate change. I think he might have spoke a little bit out of the side of his mouth on the angle he was on. But I think a lot of farmers want to see their productivity continue. They want to be able to hand their farms over to their children. If that is the goal and we want to reduce emissions and we want to keep farmland productive, how are they going to generate their energy? If it is gas – because Mr Davis is always talking about

gas – there is only one place they are going to get gas from, and that is from underneath the farmland. We know that they have pushed fracking in the past. I believe Mr Battin made a tweet. The leader of the Liberal Party made a tweet recently that they are open to lifting that moratorium on fracking. To farmers, ask yourself why the Liberals cannot define their values and what they believe in, why they cannot define policies about how they will generate energy for Victoria and why they cannot present a plan about how they will provide affordable, reliable electricity to this state. If it is gas and the only way they can source that is through fracking, ask yourself. The Liberal–Nationals have done it before. They will go back to frack our pristine agricultural land. If the Liberals can present an energy plan to this place, to the public of Victoria, then we can debate that. We can debate exactly the merits, the pros and cons.

I said in a contribution yesterday we should not be afraid to bring policies to this place and debate them vigorously. But at the moment you have one side bringing clear, decade-long plans and policies that actually see us move forward as a state, and you see another side that comes and says no – no, no, no, no. If you ask them: what is their plan? The answer: we do not have one.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (16:45): I have to take issue with Mr McIntosh to start with. What a disgrace – suggesting we are proposing fracking. We are definitely not. But what we are proposing is onshore conventional gas exploration, which is what you should be embracing wholeheartedly and getting on with. As for talking about insurance bills, I will tell you what, Mr McIntosh, insurance bills are going through the roof – if you can get it on a property that might have transmission lines on it. Insurance companies do not want to go near anybody that has got transmission lines. That is what is happening to farmers in this state. You talk about farmers getting smashed. They absolutely are – by you, by that government across there – getting smashed. If it is not an emergency services tax, it is transmission lines running roughshod over their property, affecting fabulous environmental areas and destroying the land that feeds and clothes and houses you. You are all a disgrace over there.

I want to thank Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell from One Nation, I want to thank David Limbrick from the Libertarians and I want to thank Jeff Bourman from the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party, because these crossbenchers are standing up for the farmers and the country people in this state. Any other crossbenchers and Labor MPs from regional Victoria should hang their heads in shame for supporting this outrageous piece of legislation. It is absolutely outrageous. I want to say I often stand in this place and point out the habit of this Labor government to govern by media release. At the first hint of a problem, real or imagined, they rush out some shiny announcement: a new commissioner, a new body, a new law with a glossy title. It is government by sound bite, by headline, vacuous and content free. I have to admit that today that criticism would be far from valid – very far. The National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Bill 2025 is not meaningless fluff. It is not some token gesture that will vanish with the next press cycle. This bill will have real and lasting consequences. It overturns longstanding traditions, rewrites fundamental rights and equips this government and its agencies with powers that could harm the people it is meant to serve. What it contains is an assault on the property rights of Victorians, a dangerous erosion of democratic oversight and a heavy-handed intrusion into the livelihoods of farming communities.

The only good thing I could say for the government is that this was not their original intention. This bill is not the triumph of strategy. It is a monument to failure. It exists not because the government won support but because they lost it. They could not make their case through consultation. They could not persuade those most directly affected. And so, having squandered trust, they turned to coercion. Here is a hint for the government: if your policies are truly sensible, you do not need to rewrite centuries of property law to make them work. Instead of fixing the real problem, the policy you are adopting is a scorched earth approach, blasting through reasonable and sensible opposition. The question the government should be asking is simple: what is wrong with this plan that it suddenly requires a bill like this, when no government before has needed such powers? The answer lies not in the law but in the failure of the policy itself. The government's whole approach to transmission lines

was wrongheaded in the first place, and it should be clear to everyone that this coercive attempt to fix it is doomed to failure too. One of Australia's leading energy experts, Professor Bruce Mountain, director of the Victoria Energy Policy Centre, has warned:

Drastic changes to private property rights, as the Victorian government is proposing to enforce a poorly founded transmission plan, are unlikely to achieve its objectives and will poison the water for other renewables and transmission developments that would otherwise be likely to find local community agreement.

This bill is the very definition of that drastic change, and it will not work. It will not build transmission faster. It will not win community acceptance. It will only harden opposition and deepen mistrust. You have no social licence to go down this path and you know it, so you have to introduce the most draconian laws that have ever happened in this place.

Speaking of fostering mistrust, it is not just forced entry to private property which is going to cause this. It comes also from the sham this government has dressed up as community benefits. They speak proudly of the renewable energy zone (REZ) community fund as if this were some great act of generosity towards the regions that will bear the brunt of transmission. But buried deep in the bill is the truth. New section 92(4) of the bill states:

The Treasurer, after consulting the Minister and VicGrid, may direct VicGrid to pay out of the REZ Community Energy Fund a specified amount of money to be paid into the Consolidated Fund.

Yes, this is what this is about: putting money back into the coffers of your debt-ridden Treasury. There it is in black and white: the Treasurer has the explicit power to rip money out of the so-called community fund and pull it back to Melbourne, inside the tram tracks, into consolidated revenue. This is not a community benefit. That is not a guarantee for farmers or regional towns. It is a giant hoax, as my lower house colleagues rightly dubbed it. Richard Riordan called it a lie and a deception and code for 'We're going to take your community money, put it into the Treasury, and we'll spend it on tunnels in Melbourne, overblown projects here in Melbourne,' and every other wanton cause this government is failing to pay for through a mismanaged and poorly funded budget.

The way this bill has been handled only reinforces the anger. It is a 160-page bill with sweeping implications for property rights, energy planning and community trust, yet the government gave members in the Assembly barely an hour and a half to debate it. If the bill were defensible, the government would welcome open debate. If it were sound, they would invite scrutiny. Instead, they ram it through, embarrassed by their own legislation, afraid of what the public might learn if this Parliament were given the time to pull it apart. At its core this bill is a land grab unprecedented in modern Victorian history. It empowers so-called authorised officers to enter private land without the consent of the owner. It allows them to use reasonable force to cut locks, break gates and dismantle fences. What was once a civil planning issue is transformed into quasi-criminal enforcement on private farmland. Bruce Mountain is right; this is a drastic change to private property rights. It tears up centuries of principle that a man's home is his castle, that a farmer's land is his livelihood. Katherine Myers, a farmer from Tourello, near Ballarat, expressed it in personal terms, saying:

The connection farmers have to their land is incredibly strong, and it goes far beyond the economic – and even beyond social – it's quite a spiritual connection to do with history and future. Promises of the past and the hope for the future.

This bill violates that connection. It tells farmers their history counts for nothing, their future counts for nothing. The government can enter, occupy and disrupt without consent. And if they resist, they will be crushed with fines. For individuals, those fines may be \$12,210. For companies, which includes countless family farms run as partnerships or trusts, the fines leap to \$48,842. This is a cash grab and a land grab. Ross Johns, president of the Wimmera Mallee Environmental and Agricultural Protection Association, has been pretty blunt: 'The Victorian government is just a bunch of liars.' Farmers do not use those words lightly. They use them when they have been deceived, when consultation has been promised but never delivered, when trust has been broken time and time again.

The bill even drags Victoria Police into this coercive regime. It authorises police officers to accompany VicGrid staff as they force their way onto private farmland. Let me be clear: police exist to protect communities, not to act as the private army of VicGrid or other transmission proponents or this government. They are not your army to run roughshod over private property and individuals. Their neutrality and their trust with local communities will be undermined if they are seen as enforcers of energy policy rather than protectors of public safety.

To remind you, all of this comes not from a position of strength but of failure. The government has lost control of energy planning, and it is ordinary Victorians who are paying the price. Take VNI West: forecast at \$1.6 billion in 2023, revised to \$3.3 billion, then \$3.9 billion. Now it stands at \$7.6 billion, and independent experts warn it could blow out to \$11 billion. The Western Renewables Link – from \$370 million to \$3 billion. These are not minor overruns, they are the direct result of ideology over competence, of arrogance over planning.

Meanwhile so-called compensation for landowners is \$8000 per kilometre of transmission line annually – a pittance. It is insulting when compared to the lifetime loss of productivity, the disruption to farm operations and the mental stress on families. Brett Hosking, president of the Victorian Farmers Federation, said:

If we truly want to reduce emissions this decade, we must start by respecting the people who manage and care for the land ... Farmers already protect biodiversity, steward water resources, and produce the food and fibre our society relies on.

This bill does the opposite. It disrespects them, coerces them and undermines the very people who feed our state. That is the legacy of this government's heavy-handedness – a broken relationship that will take years to rebuild. Social licence is not a box to tick. It is not something to buy with a slush fund. It is earned carefully over time through respect and negotiation. This bill obliterates social licence. It replaces negotiation with coercion, persuasion with penalties, trust with force.

The government also ignores serious warnings about safety. CFA brigades have declared they will not fight fires under 500-kilovolt transmission lines due to the risk and hazards. They forge ahead with overhead towers across fire-prone country. The Western Renewables Link threatens to destroy Victoria's food bowl, undermining, among other things, potato growers and processors around Ballarat. Sensitive ecosystems are put at risk, from eagles to endangered orchids. This is not a green plan, it is ecological vandalism.

There are better ways forward: plan B, designed by Professor Mountain and Simon Bartlett, using existing easements. It is cheaper, more resilient and less invasive, yet the government dismisses it out of hand. Other proposals, like underground cables along existing corridors, are ignored, because this government is not interested in negotiation, it is only interested in control. This bill is a blueprint for authoritarianism. It trashes property rights, it drags police into civil disputes, it hides documents from scrutiny, it hoaxes community with false benefits and it ignores experts and alternatives. Above all, it betrays the people of regional Victoria – the farmers who feed and clothe us, who care for the land and carry the burden of this government's ideology. Our democracy has always rested on a simple truth: governments govern with the people, not against them. From Federation onwards Australians have trusted that the rule of law protects their homes, their farms and their livelihoods. The opposition will fight this bill every step of the way. We will vote against it here, and if elected we will repeal it. We will restore property rights –

The ACTING PRESIDENT (John Berger): Mrs McArthur, your time has expired.

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) (17:00): I rise to make a contribution on behalf of Legalise Cannabis Victoria on the National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Bill 2025. From the outset, I want to make it crystal clear that Legalise Cannabis Victoria (LCV) are 100 per cent supportive of Victoria's switch to renewable energy. We recognise the absolute necessity of transitioning from coal-powered energy, of establishing transmission

infrastructure and of creating certainty for renewable investors. It has to happen, but we have been deeply concerned by the way the government has gone about it, particularly around seeking social licence from the community and the encroachment upon people's property rights. As members have noted, regional communities have not been treated with appropriate respect or provided with an appropriate suite of consultative services. Further, we believe that certain basic civil liberties have been eroded by this bill – for example, with regard to restricting the ability of magistrates to consider compliance with applications for access orders. Our colleague Georgie Purcell from the Animal Justice Party (AJP) shares our concerns, and these are reflected in the position we put to the chamber today.

Labor has been in government for a long time in Victoria. In the past 25 years there has only been one term when Victoria has not been governed by the Labor Party. It is almost hard to remember a time when they were not in power. But governments do change and governments' time in power will inevitably end, and that applies to the present government as it has to every other elected government. And what happens then? The old government will have left behind a legacy of precedents of residual powers that new governments can use, as they will. While oppositions may argue vociferously against the government's adoption of increased powers, those same opponents, when they find themselves on the other side of the chamber, rarely unwind those laws. Nobody likes to cede power. We cannot say how these questionable or even dangerous precedents will be used by future governments, so it is incumbent on us as lawmakers to proceed with caution when governments introduce laws that set these kinds of precedents.

The proposed land access amendment in the bill represents exactly the sort of precedent I am talking about. For this reason, LCV and the Animal Justice Party have negotiated amendments to try to ameliorate some of the concerns of our regional constituents. So I would like to circulate the amendments, and I ask that these amendments be distributed now. In relation to the appointment of authorised officers in the bill, these officers have broad powers to access private land, but there is no definition of eligibility criteria for appointing these officers, and we had concerns that private contractors were being given broad powers to enter private land, issue fines and even use reasonable force to access land. I must say, the image of the sheriff swearing in the deputies – 'Let's go get 'em' – was rather in our mind, given that lack of discipline or definition.

Our amendment 1 inserts new clause 62A, adding a definition into the Electricity Industry Act 2000 that 'public sector employee' has the same meaning as it does in the Public Administration Act 2004, and further amendments to clauses 63 and 65 ensure that only a public sector employee can be appointed as an authorised officer. This ensures that the authorised officers are bound by the Victorian public sector code of conduct, have undergone the necessary pre-employment checks and are subject to the relevant performance management or misconduct processes. It also guarantees that private contractors cannot be appointed and given those broad powers to enter private property without consent. The stakeholders we consulted with were alarmed by provisions in clause 65 relating to an authorised officer's ability to apply to the Magistrates' Court for an entry order to gain access to land where access to that land had previously been hindered, delayed or obstructed. Our stakeholders felt that the requirements for the issuing of an entry order were too narrow, with the magistrate directed only to have regard to the need for the expeditious development of electricity transmission infrastructure and not required to consider the proportionality or necessity of the officer's intended actions or any concerns of the landholder, only whether the statutory criteria was satisfied. There is no way that that sort of approach can be justified.

Our proposed amendment 8 ensures that the magistrate must have regard to whether the authorised officer has complied with the relevant obligations under the essential services code of practice in relation to entering onto the applicable land, the circumstances of entry and the purpose of entry. This code of practice has been in place since 2015, and I guess we draw some comfort that since it has been in place for that length of time it is probably a pretty safe bet. Importantly, the code requires that all necessary steps to ensure access are taken before – not during, not after – entry onto the land and before an access order can be applied for, and that step must be undertaken before seeking an access order.

The penalties for noncompliance across these provisions were in our view excessive – and I know a number of speakers have referred to this.

Our proposed amendments 6, 7, 9, 10 and 11 halve the penalty units for landholders' breaches under the act. Our proposed amendments 12 to 14 reduce those penalties by one-third. Our proposed amendment 16 inserts a new provision to restrict the creation of an entry order to a magistrate and removes the power of the VicGrid CEO to make such an order. These are things which are appropriately dealt with in the realm of magistrates within a jurisdictional framework, not by the appointed executive of VicGrid.

As I said at the beginning of my contribution, LCV are 100 per cent supportive of the transition to renewable energy. The installation of transmission lines is necessary, and it just has to happen. We enter the debate on this bill primarily through the lens of what constitutes reasonable powers and how those powers might be exercised. There are a lot of worthwhile provisions in this bill that have been overshadowed by the clumsy way the government has gone about achieving the social licence to undertake necessary works, including the provisions around extending the benefits of funds collected by VicGrid to traditional owners.

While far from perfect, we believe our proposed amendments go some way to ameliorating the concerns expressed around the broad powers that this bill grants to government agents to enter land where landholder consent has been withheld and other areas of potential administrative overreach. We will continue to be vigilant in ensuring that the government does not misapply the broad powers conferred under this act.

On behalf of both LCV and AJP I would like to thank Minister Lily D'Ambrosio and her staff, including Nick Parry, for the assistance provided to us in getting our heads around the bill and working through these changes in a productive manner. I would indicate that we will also be supporting the amendments proposed by the Greens. I commend the bill, as amended, to the chamber.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (17:09): Have we ever seen anything like this bill in the history of this chamber – a bill that permits authorised officers to use reasonable force to access private property and fines the landowner up to \$12,000 if they refuse. This is not the first time I have been shocked. I was shocked when I attended a community information session a couple of years ago about the transmission lines in Charlton and a security guard was there. It set the tone adopted by this government, which is reflected in this bill before us today.

Energy production is crucial. It is critical for every household, for every business, for our future. But this government has made a mess of energy production in this state. We used to export energy to other states; now we need lines built so we can import energy from other states. There is an inquiry by the Economy and Infrastructure Committee due to commence on the impact of wires and renewable energy zones in country areas, and hopefully it will unravel some of these issues. But where are we at now? The Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) have issued media releases on these issues, and they have written to members of Parliament from all sides. They have made it clear that this government has sold us a message, a plan that is needed to keep the lights on, but it still leaves farmers in the dark, and they have questions that do need to be answered. How much power will actually be built? What protections do farmers get? What benefits will flow back to communities? What are the rules on compensation and fair consultation? How much will the transmission project cost?

We have heard other members talk about that today. Initially VNI West was estimated to cost just over \$3 billion, shared with New South Wales. Now that figure, according to AEMO, has blown out to \$7.6 billion, and they have warned that the cost could even hit over \$11 billion. Eventually these costs will hit consumers. But I am very concerned about this government's ability to manage projects, because we have seen costs blow out again and again. We have heard reports and we have heard Bruce

Mountain mentioned. The *Weekly Times* included reference to this about the regions and the impact. I will quote from the article:

Victoria Energy Policy Centre director Professor Bruce Mountain estimated the true cost of the blueprint to connect renewables to the grid would be more than \$28bn.

“Leaving other factors unchanged, this means household electricity bills will go up by about 50 per cent,” he said. “Power bills for large power users will rise by between 250 per cent and 350 per cent.”

There is a cost to these projects and not just the cost of construction. There is a cost to agricultural land, to the environment and to regional communities who will bear the burden of these infrastructure projects. And today, as we have heard, there is another cost with the removal of private property rights.

We have seen power bills continue to rise under this government, but they have said power bills will come down. To help, they offer the power saving bonus. The first stage was \$250 off your power bills. Now it is \$100 off for some, but it is a bandaid on a bigger issue. As I speak with families and businesses, they are concerned that costs keep going up and up, and they wonder how they can continue to make ends meet. And who is listening to these issues? When I have spoken to farmers, most feel as if the government does not care. People have come from across the state to voice their concerns. They have protested on the steps of Parliament, and there have been protests in towns across the region.

I grew up on a farm. I understand the hard work, the commitment and the connection that you have with the land, and farmers deserve our respect. The VFF have put it simply: the government needs to stop leaving farmers guessing and be transparent. They did a survey recently of 700 members. More than 92 per cent of farmers do not believe the Victorian government understands or even listens to the concerns of farming communities. I received a letter from a shire, which I know the government has been in receipt of as well, and it talks about the impact. It says:

As the level of Government that is closest to the people affected by the VTP and the energy transition, the Council has a critical role to play in engaging with and representing our citizens.

I urge you to support Council’s request that all Government agencies engage with Buloke Shire Council in a genuine, open and constructive manner. Such engagement is essential to ensure our community’s views and concerns are fully understood and considered in decision-making on energy projects in the Shire.

I think that is representative of how many feel. But the fact is that regional areas face the biggest burden when it comes to transmission lines and renewable energy projects. It does impact their land, it increases fire risk and when infrastructure is placed on their property it restricts how they can use it. Instead of working with communities to address these issues, this government has sought to silence regional Victorians by removing the right to appeal to VCAT if they oppose or challenge renewable energy projects. We have also seen the reduction of the buffer zone for wind turbines to 1 kilometre.

I do support the concept of renewable energy. The sun is powerful. It is wonderful that we can harness the energy from the sun and turn it into electricity – and the same with wind. Windmills have been around for a very long time, and it is great that we can generate power from wind, but it is about balance and getting the balance right. And right now this government – we heard it from Ms Watt – are leading the world and transitioning faster than anywhere else. But the change is rapid, and regional communities, who are asking questions, are being ignored. Basic questions are being ignored that need to be urgently addressed. We do have millions of solar panels being installed across the state and hundreds and hundreds of massive wind turbines that are up to 300 metres tall, like the Eureka Tower. I mean, if you think of that, the size is incredible. They are expected to last up to 20 years. I have seen it in their documentation. I have not long turned 50, and 20 years does not feel like it was that long ago. But what plans are in place now for 20 years time when all this infrastructure needs to be replaced? What will it cost to replace all this infrastructure? What will it cost our environment? How will we manage the waste? The Legislative Council’s Environment and Planning Committee considered these issues, and I am a member of that committee, along with Labor members, Greens

members and crossbench members. In the final report that was tabled earlier this month there are recommendations 30 and 31. Recommendation 30 states:

That the Victorian Government investigate and report to Parliament on the end of life of renewable energy products including wind turbines, solar panels and batteries and opportunities for recycling within Australia.

Recommendation 31 says:

That the Victorian Government undertake a review of the resilience and sustainability of Victoria's energy generation and associated transmission, distribution and storage networks, including an assessment of impacts on agriculture and manufacturing.

The government does have six months to respond to those recommendations, so I look forward to that response. Victorian farmers produce 25 per cent of Australia's food and fibre, using just 3 per cent of Australia's farmland. They employ more than 150,000 people and contribute more than \$20 billion to Victoria's and Australia's economy. Just yesterday I was hearing about an exciting new project near Shepparton. It is about 10 MCGs worth of work going on there to grow tomatoes, and there are also new manufacturing plants and robotic dairies. They were speaking about the industry and innovation in the agricultural sector, how advanced it is and the technologies that are in use. I am reminded of the importance of reliable energy supply, because just a flicker – if the power goes off just for a second if you work in an office, you may not notice. It does not matter; the power comes back on. But they were talking about this particular dairy and the robotic dairies. Even with a flicker of the power going off they will be offline for about 7 hours, having to clean all their lines. That is the impact that is being felt that is holding back manufacturing in this state.

I visited Bendigo Woollen Mills recently, a very successful business in Bendigo. It has been around for a long time, and I was amazed to see their machines. They had so many machines there producing beautiful wool that is sold across Australia and overseas, and they need reliable energy. There are so many exciting opportunities to grow and expand in manufacturing. There are many companies that are struggling to grow because of distribution issues, and that is an important conversation that we do need to have, because it is not just about transmission, it is about the distribution as well. For many businesses, the power supply to their business is not sufficient, and they are now looking to graphite batteries to create their own energy supply. We are a resource-rich state. We have what the world wants, but we are not managing the resources we have been given. Labor has been in government now for years. They have had plenty of time to get it right, but they have made an absolute mess of it. We need more energy. We need to think beyond the next election to 2050 and well beyond that. There is a better way, and this bill is certainly not it.

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (17:19): I rise to speak on the bill before us today and want to begin by resolutely saying Victoria must transition to renewable energy, and we must do so as quickly as possible. But the way that we do so has real repercussions. The urgency is real. Around 48 per cent of Victoria's net greenhouse gas emissions is from burning fossil fuels for electricity. It is abundantly clear to most people in this chamber and most people that we represent that we are in a climate emergency. Victoria also hosts the most unreliable coal-burning power stations in our country. Our transition to renewable energy and the development of more transmission projects not only fights the ever-growing threat of the climate crisis but also significantly improves the reliability and cost of our energy network.

Regional communities like mine host the vast majority of energy-related infrastructure: energy generation, batteries and, yes, transmission lines. To some extent this is understandable. Our state is large, and certain parts of regional Victoria are particularly suited for hosting renewable energy projects. In particular, certain parts of my electorate of Northern Victoria have high average daily solar exposure.

With ambition, Melbourne itself can be a renewable energy zone. The government has made great strides in encouraging the uptake of personal residential solar panels, but there is more that can be done to unlock Melbourne's full potential for generating energy. More local generation means fewer

transmission lines and less energy lost to transmission. There is more and more research emerging on how to accomplish this, and to quote the Committee for Sydney's *Sydney as a Renewable Energy Zone* policy paper:

Imagine a city where the sun powers not just our homes, but our buses, our businesses, and our neighbourhoods ...

With Melbourne accounting for almost 90 per cent of Victoria's total electricity usage, it is an undeniable fact that to meet its needs we must construct more transmission infrastructure. This is an issue that many are frustrated by, but I do accept that we cannot connect new solar, wind and storage projects to the grid without upgrading the poles and wires that underpin our energy system. Where this frustration, which I wholeheartedly share, stems from is this government's long-term and consistent failure to do the work which earns a genuine social licence. Many of the affected communities are not inherently opposed to renewable energy, but they are opposed to being sidelined and ignored in the process and fail to see any of the benefits. I accept this is a long-term failing of AEMO, and it cannot be solved overnight. It does appear the government is aware of its trust deficit, and VicGrid planning and engagement processes are significantly better than they were under AEMO. Social licences cannot be legislated; they are earned and built through respect, trust and fair negotiation.

The real sense of frustration and fear amongst members of the community has not been helped at all by the expansion of land access provisions in section 93 of the act. I completely understand why. In order to comply with planning requirements, land must be accessed. The amendments moved in Mr Ettershank's name create greater safeguards for the use of authorised officers and their requirements to comply with the Land Access Code of Practice. I also welcome the addition of more detail for consideration when magistrates are making an entry order.

A key part of creating this social licence is for regional communities to receive direct tangible benefits from hosting these projects, both through local, good green jobs and – importantly for today's debate – through direct financial benefits. I welcome the government's attempt to do something about this through the newly created community energy fund and the traditional owners fund. The traditional owners fund will be poured right into the Self-Determination Fund, controlled by First Peoples for First Peoples. This is truly wonderful and acknowledges that First Nations people know the needs of their own communities and how to address them better than anyone. This is exactly what I would have liked to see happen with the community fund as well.

The essence of what the government is trying to do in this area is a great improvement and clearly well intentioned. However, the community energy fund is to be distributed by VicGrid through grants for very specific energy-related projects. The government have said that they heard that communities want it spent on this through their consultation on the fund, and I do not reject this for a moment. But for the community fund to truly live up to its name it must allow the community to decide how it is spent and what on. Regional communities are not monolithic; they do not have all the same needs. If the government's consultation is 100 per cent reflective of every community hosting energy projects, then they should have no concern with allowing them to decide how it is spent.

This bill includes a mandatory public review on the community energy fund after its second anniversary, and I am looking forward to seeing how it considers improvements and how the fund evolves to best serve the needs of regional communities. It will also be able to consider the findings from the ongoing inquiry into community consultation practices, as well as the New South Wales inquiry into the impact of renewable energy zones on rural and regional communities and industries. The amendments also moved by the Greens make welcome improvements to the fund. Removing the frankly outrageous ability for the Treasurer to move money from the community fund into consolidated revenue is something I know all of my colleagues will support. Unsurprisingly, I also welcome the additional ability for the fund to be spent on biodiversity programs and biodiversity research. The office of the Minister for Energy and Resources has clarified to us privately that this will likely still be specifically on energy-related projects, which still serves an important purpose.

I have spoken before in this place about the ways that the impacts of wind turbines on our bird population can be mitigated, and I have also heard from many in my electorate who have raised concerns about the bushfire risk associated with hosting energy projects. There are a range of measures which can mitigate harm to bird species, some complex, like the IdentiFlight bird detection system, and some simple, like the painting of turbine blades, which was found to reduce bird casualties by 70 per cent. Funding mitigation is important, particularly considering our incredibly flawed Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988 and Planning and Environment Act 1987.

I, alongside my crossbench colleagues, particularly those in the Legalise Cannabis Party, have considered this bill incredibly cautiously. As I have said several times in my contribution, our renewable energy transition is both essential and urgent, but it also needs to be done in the right way. There have been incredibly legitimate concerns raised with this bill and more broadly with the way energy projects are planned in this state. We have all worked with the government on improving this, and I am now confident that we have landed in a place that is far better than when we started. The amendments moved by Mr Ettershank alleviate many of the genuine civil liability concerns we have heard from our communities, and although I do still strongly believe the community fund could be managed significantly better, I also welcome the amendments proposed by the Greens. They are both areas my office have also engaged with the government on improving.

Bills like this demonstrate the importance of a strong and united crossbench. What we have finished with is a significantly better version of what was first introduced into this house, and I am glad I am now in a position to say that I can commend the bill to the house.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:28): I rise today to speak on the National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Bill 2025. This is a bill that needs urgent attention because it is arguably one of the most egregious pieces of legislation, threatening to destroy private property rights along with extreme risks to energy and food security. The scale of land that is required for these reforms is founded on Victoria's net zero targets, and the huge carbon and largely foreign manufactured physical infrastructure footprint it leaves will have a profound and most certainly irreversible impact on our farming communities and areas, including regional landscapes. This is going to particularly affect the areas that I represent.

This bill enables mass industrialisation of landscapes that were previously marked as protected, including remnant forests, prime farmland, wetlands and marine zones. Victoria is projected to host 45 gigawatts of renewable energy capacity by 2050, including 30 of solar and 15 of wind, and a vast expansion of transmission infrastructure, but what is overlooked often is the amount of land that it will consume. According to the very conservative model by Net Zero Australia, this infrastructure will require nearly 80,000 hectares of land, so that is almost 200,000 acres – and that is just for solar, wind and transmission towers. It excludes the land that is needed for batteries, offshore wind, hydrogen production and the transmission corridors that obviously connect it all. But that is still not including the federal government's national targets to lock up and conserve 30 per cent of Australia's land mass and 30 per cent of its marine areas by 2030.

Let us go through some of the modelling that does concern me, particularly as a representative of Eastern Victoria Region. Net Zero Australia modelling takes a careful and reserved approach, and it significantly underestimates the land footprint that is required. Their own report admits that there has been no comprehensive spatial assessment of biodiversity protection. That is actually unbelievable – no comprehensive spatial assessment. The model does not constrain development on farmland, and it falls short of safeguarding biodiversity. This means the real land required for the transmission rollout will be far greater, and we are already seeing the consequences of that.

Analysis from this government's *Offshore Wind: Policy Directions Paper* from March 2022 stated that to meet net zero targets using onshore renewables, it could require up to 70 per cent of Victoria's agricultural land to host wind and solar farms. Seventy per cent is an absolutely astronomical amount. One of my concerns is that often when we make bills in this place, there is not that mindset from

people that are from farming and agricultural backgrounds. If we look at all the space that we have in Australia, we can fall into the trap, if we are not careful, of looking at that land as land that has not yet been subdivided for housing builds, but it is so much more than that. Agricultural and farming areas are the areas that feed the state, feed the nation, feed people in other nations and also build the nation. This does not even include the vast amount of land for fast-tracked mineral extraction projects under the government's strategic extractive resource areas project, which I have spoken about quite a bit here, that has also been gaining some community pushback.

The newly released Victorian transmission process proposes seven renewable energy zones and four new transmission lines. These zones only cover around 7 per cent of Victoria's land area, but even within them the footprint of solar and wind projects is growing rapidly. We know that this will cover the vast majority of farming land. It includes big new transmission lines for huge agricultural areas in South Gippsland and the Latrobe Valley that will be linked to offshore wind farms. It is the infrastructure needed to connect these zones, like the VNI West transmission line, that are proving deeply controversial, with massive regional community pushback. This is something that I do not believe the community consultation has even touched. Here are some examples. A permit for a wind farm in Gelliondale, Gippsland, was granted despite ongoing community opposition. This site is nestled between two state forests along a critical migratory path within striking distance of the Corner Inlet Ramsar wetland. This is a textbook case of ecological greenwashing. Surveys downplay the presence of endangered birds like the swift parrot and the white-bellied sea eagle. Past failures to predict eagle deaths at nearby Bald Hills are completely ignored, and the consultants that are involved are repeat players. They are the same ones used over and over again, yet their assessments are the ones that are used to justify what risk is coming up. The more you look into it, the more it actually is very worrying. Because this has been classed as something that has to be pushed through as an emergency, rather than these meeting the general planning requirements around bird kill and the impact on wildlife, rather than meeting the standards – because they did not – they just changed the guidelines. These are things that we are just not hearing and we are not talking about.

But right across Victoria farmers are being forced to accept transmission lines for solar and wind farms across productive farmland. The VNI West line, originally estimated to cost \$3.9 billion, has now blown out to \$11.4 billion. Its completion has been delayed until 2030, and hundreds of farmers have rallied against it in regional towns and even here on the steps of Parliament. In Colbinabbin a 700,000-panel solar farm was fast-tracked despite community opposition in the thousands, including documented threats to the environment and farming lands and increased bushfire risk. The government process was labelled as a whitewash.

The proposed lithium battery farm in Little River here in Victoria triggered strong community opposition due to concerns over transparency, safety and the environmental impact. Developers were accused of misleading planning submissions, while warnings of damage to the landscape and tourism were completely ignored. You would have known and seen that lots of locals, including Catriona Rowntree, the TV presenter, were unaware of the project until it was lodged. It bypassed council scrutiny because it was classified as a green energy initiative, a fact acknowledged even by the town's mayor. You cannot have that and then say that you have adequately consulted the community.

This is the part that should really worry you if none of the other things have: the site is located in a bushfire-prone area with a history of deadly fires. It now is going to host 372 lithium freight containers, which will take up the space of approximately 44 or 45 acres near the You Yangs Regional Park, which is a major tourism destination. It is a huge fire risk, and it is something that is really distressing the community that has called the area home for a very long time. This is despite the government blatantly making the false claim:

We established VicGrid to make sure communities have a real say on the way transmission and renewable energy projects are planned across the state, and to ensure certainty for industry.

I do not even need to highlight any of that. Just think about that for a minute. It is just absolutely astonishing doublespeak.

There seems to be this pattern of deception that happens. It starts off with a pre-prepared plan that is a foregone conclusion, like what Ms Bath says. She says it is not called ‘consultation’, it is called ‘consultold’. It is like that. There is a foregone conclusion without genuine community consultation outside the elite consultants that they pay tens of millions of dollars to every year. That is step one. Step two is where they sell it as a win for the public good. Haven’t we seen it this year? It is always ‘Oh, but it’s for the greater public good.’ Anyone who has any concerns gets guilted into it because it is like ‘How can you put yourself above everyone else?’ But it leaves huge chunks of relevant information completely outside of the whole consultation process. Number three: once the public see that they were told a lie, it uses the weight of the law to crush them into submission. We are seeing this with astronomical fines, which I will go through. In this case it wants to force access to private land with the threat of huge crushing fines. Just to solidify my submission: some of these people have been on this land for generations and generations, and their lives are about to change. Landholders who obstruct access to authorised officers face fines in excess of \$12,000. That is huge. Refusing identification and proof of ownership – that could cost you up to \$4000. Who was it? It was one of my colleagues here. It might have been Mr McCracken who said, ‘Are you going to have to carry your passport around?’

A member interjected.

Renee HEATH: Yes, show your papers. It is astronomical. Interfering with notices of entry – that is going to cost you over a grand, about \$1200. And corporations can be hit with fines of just shy of \$50,000. This is unbelievable. This makes sense of why the government’s second reading for this bill was not even a page long. I heard Ms Lovell talk about this. It was not even a page long, but the statement of compatibility filled almost 10 pages.

I want to read you something that I love. One of the reasons that I became a Liberal was I started to read about the values and what the basis of liberalism was. Something our founder really spoke about was the importance of home ownership. He said:

The material home represents the concrete expression of the habits of frugality and saving “for a home of our own.” Your advanced socialist –

This is amazing. Just tune into this bit – talk about foresight.

Your advanced socialist may rave against private property even while he acquires it; but one of the best instincts in us is that which induces us to have one little piece of earth with a house and a garden which is ours; to which we can withdraw, in which we can be among our friends, into which no stranger may come against our will.

That is pretty incredible. But that is not a reality in a Jacinta Allan Victoria. I cannot help but bring in a quick comparison of the madness that passes for government policy under this government. In Victoria serious criminals are allowed to run riot. It has made this place into a criminal paradise. But private property owners and farmers wanting to secure their land – so, literally the opposite – and secure their rights to withstand the government’s forceful push will face the fury of the law. That is absolutely unbelievable. Whose interest is this government really representing? These are not isolated incidents, but they are a very early warning sign of the land use crisis unfolding under various banners of public good, including this push to net zero.

Once again I have probably read too much, so I am just going to jump to my conclusion. I am energy agnostic. I believe one of the things that made Victoria a place where people could come and prosper, where manufacturing could thrive, where people could break through and have good farm businesses and really get ahead in life was actually our cheap, accessible energy. I look at the entirety of the data and its impact in real world consequences, and this one has some that are absolutely serious. This will be at a huge cost to the very land that sustains us. It will drive energy costs and food through the roof,

and this is something that we absolutely should worry about. Mr Bourman said, and he was absolutely correct, that the only way that these renewables can be sustainable is when they are the recipient of government funding. So I think that we have to look at this really carefully, and I certainly will not be voting for this bill.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (17:43): I thank all members for their contribution on the National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Bill 2025. We are at a critical stage of the transition to renewable energy. Our coal-fired generators are increasingly unreliable and are set to close. We must deliver the replacement capacity to allow our industries to grow, to ensure reliability and to keep bills as low as possible. The CSIRO tells us that the cheapest form of new build power generation is renewables backed by storage and transmission. The scale of the transmission is unprecedented, but we know that we have to get on with it and build the infrastructure that Victoria needs. Through the creation of VicGrid and the implementation of the Victorian transmission investment framework we are creating the mechanisms to ensure that we build the right infrastructure at the right time and in the right places to ensure our state's prosperity for decades to come.

The bill does several important things. Firstly, it transfers the existing transmission planning functions from the Australian Energy Market Operator to VicGrid. This ensures that the network planner is accountable to the Victorian government and operating in the interests of all Victorians. Second, it establishes the renewable energy zone scheme's framework, commonly referred to as the Victorian access regime. The Victorian access regime is a new way of managing and connecting the energy generation and storage projects to the grid. Under this regime, VicGrid will set a cap on capacity of renewable generation that can be developed within a REZ based on the amount of capacity that is available in the network. This provides certainty for both investors and the community. Communities will know how much new capacity will be built within a REZ. The generators will have greater certainty of their ability to get their energy to market. The new Victorian access regime will replace the existing open-access regime that currently operates in the national electricity market and that gives new generators access to the grid regardless of the curtailment impact they may have on existing operators. This new approach will improve coordination, reduce social and environmental impacts, give investors certainty and support investment in the renewables we need for Victoria's energy future.

It will also create a mechanism to generate funds for the third important element of the bill, which is the establishment of a framework for the funding and payment of benefits to landholders, local communities and traditional owners that host new energy infrastructure. The stage 1 legislation last year established additional payments to landholders who host new transmission infrastructure. The payments of \$8000 per kilometre of new transmission hosted per year and indexed for 25 years – nominally \$200,000 per kilometre – recognise the important role that host landholders play in the energy transition. The payments are in addition to any compensation that landholders are entitled to under the Land Acquisition and Compensation Act 1986, which covers any loss of land value and often runs into the millions of dollars.

At the same time our government also publicly committed to developing renewable energy zone development funds for host communities and traditional owner funds. Having engaged in consultation, we are now creating a framework for the establishment of these funds through this bill. First, the REZ community energy fund is an opportunity to invest directly in projects that improve local energy outcomes and create other benefits for communities in regions hosting energy infrastructure. The REZ community energy fund will be funded by REZ scheme fees paid by generation developers who develop projects within renewable energy zones and contributions from transmission companies. The aim is to ensure communities benefit in a meaningful and lasting way, based on their vision of the energy priorities for their region. The bill also establishes a traditional owners fund that will support self-determination and the broader aspirations of traditional owners that host new energy infrastructure. This will ensure that for the first time traditional owners will share directly in the benefits of energy infrastructure hosted on country.

Fourth, the bill will establish a new compliance and enforcement framework for land access and REZ schemes to support the performance of VicGrid's functions. There is already – and this is an important point – a provision for enabling access to land by transmission companies under section 93 of the Electricity Industry Act 2000. These provisions are common across large infrastructure projects such as transport and in other states. However, under the existing regime the only legal option to enforce land access is for a transmission network service provider to seek an injunction from the Supreme Court to enforce the right to access land under section 93 of the EIA, which is expensive, time consuming and not fit for purpose. It also means that there is no direct accountability to government, as the private transmission companies are responsible for accessing the land.

This bill does two things to improve the land access provisions. First, it creates an enforcement mechanism for the access provisions. Of course the preference is always that energy corporations work cooperatively with landholders to agree access to land. VicGrid has already worked with the Essential Services Commission and the Australian energy infrastructure commissioner to create an enforceable Land Access Code of Practice. Before energy corporations access land they must ensure that they first attempt to negotiate a landholder's access agreement and consult with the potential landholder in accordance with the Land Access Code of Practice. Where agreement cannot be reached with a landowner and it is essential that access be obtained, compulsory access will be triggered.

The second thing the bill does in relation to land access is introduce an authorised officer regime. Authorised officers will be appointed by the Minister for Energy and Resources from public sector entities, ensuring that they are accountable to the government. An authorised officer may issue an infringement notice for these offences, other than impersonating an authorised officer, but does not otherwise have prosecutorial powers. An authorised officer may also apply to the Magistrates' Court for a court order, including where entry to that land or the exercise of section 93 of the EIA powers have previously been refused, hindered, delayed or obstructed or where it has not been practicable to give a warning or direction, provided that the required written notice has been provided. This is a last-resort measure, and the bill includes numerous protections. It will help ensure that critical infrastructure can be built to keep the lights on. Finally, the bill will enable VicGrid to conduct early works and enhance the procurement approach to augmentations to the declared shared network. This will help projects get built and ensure value for Victorians.

The government has accepted a number of amendments to this bill, and I am going to just run through which ones these are. In relation to the Greens amendment 1, to expand the REZ community energy fund to encompass supporting biodiversity outcomes and biodiversity research in Victoria, we will be supporting that Greens amendment, and similarly Greens amendment 2, which prevents funds from the REZ community energy fund being paid into the Consolidated Fund. In relation to Legalise Cannabis Victoria's amendment 1, to reduce the maximum fines issuable by an authorised officer and the Magistrates' Court, we will be supporting that amendment. We will also be supporting LCV amendment 2, which clarifies that authorised officers may only be public sector employees. We will be supporting LCV amendment 3, which requires that VicGrid comply with the Essential Services Commission's Land Access Code of Practice before exercising the powers provided to the Magistrates' Court to issue penalties up to the maximum amount prescribed in the bill. I would just like to acknowledge the constructive way in which the crossbench has worked with the government in relation to this bill. It has been very collaborative, and I want to thank the Legalise Cannabis Victoria party, the Animal Justice Party and the Greens.

This bill, alongside the stage 1 legislation that passed last year, completely reforms the way that we plan and develop energy infrastructure in Victoria. All of these changes are about making sure that we can build the new energy infrastructure that we need efficiently, while ensuring that regional communities, traditional owners, landholders and others are considered in the process and benefit. I commend the bill to the house.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (21): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Noes (17): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Adem Somyurek, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Motion agreed to.**Read second time.****Committed.***Committee***Clause 1 (18:01)**

David DAVIS: Minister, concurrent with this there has been a Victorian transmission plan (VTP) released – the *2025 Victorian Transmission Plan*. That transmission plan lays out the government’s future ideas for so-called renewable energy zones (REZ) and transmission infrastructure, including that long-distance transmission infrastructure and other –

Members interjecting.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: The continuous chatter from about five different conversations is really distracting for the minister and for the person asking the question. Can we please have some quiet in the chamber. If you want to have conversations, take them outside.

David DAVIS: One of the key aspects is the overall cost of the transmission network and the cost going on to bills. In the *Herald Sun* about a week ago – I think last Friday – there was an article by Bruce Mountain, who is well known to many of us, from the Victoria Energy Policy Centre at Victoria University. Professor Mountain is a well-respected commentator but also academic who understands many of these aspects around energy infrastructure. He looked closely at the government’s costings, and he came up with quite a different figure. He says:

The government’s transmission plan entails capital outlays including interest during construction, of more than \$28bn over the coming decade.

He says:

The government and its recently established transmission planning agency, VicGrid, has not been truthful in the development of its plan.

They have tried to suggest that their plan only entails expenditure of about \$6bn.

But there is another \$22bn in five projects in their “Base Case” that are briefly listed ... in an appendix to their plan.

His commentary goes a little further, and he says:

In fact, even worse than attempting to hide this hole, the government counts the “benefits” of the \$22bn of “Base Case” expenditure but they ... fail to count the \$22bn of expenditure in their calculation of ... net benefit.

Had they done their sums honestly, their claimed benefits would fall far short of costs.

The government hides the \$22bn cost because they say it is “sunk”.

But –

in fact, and I would like the minister to confirm this –

the expenditure is yet to be made and the decision to spend it is the government’s to make.

Can the minister explain to me the actual cost of the transmission plan with those costs included, or is Professor Mountain wrong?

Ingrid STITT: Thank you, Mr Davis, for your question and that preamble. We would respectfully reject the proposition that has been put. The revised estimated cost associated with the transmission plan is \$8 billion. This remains an estimate and the reason it remains an estimate is because this is a plan over a long period of time, and like with any infrastructure plan of this nature, it is obviously not possible to forecast too far down the line accurately. These are significant projects that will be delivered over a very long period of time, and we know that circumstances and market conditions will continue to change. We cannot possibly predict what those could be. But what I will say is that since the draft plan was released, the Australian Energy Market Operator has released its *Draft 2025 Electricity Network Options Report*, which updated its transmission cost database. VicGrid has taken on board the latest available information. It has carried out robust industry benchmarking, and that reflects changes to the scope of the plan to update the cost estimate.

David DAVIS: Minister, that is just not really quite good enough. You say \$8 billion is the cost, but when I look at appendix A to the transmission plan ‘Candidate development pathways’ and look at page 49, ‘A.4.3 Baseline project assumptions’, this is a list of baseline projects assumed across all the candidate development pathways. These are projects and the assumed benefits, and the costs are not included. We know the costs are not included – for example, the list has the RDP stage 1 projects, Marinus Link stage 1, Marinus Link stage 2, Western Renewables Link (WRL), VNI West and Gippsland offshore wind transmission. We know from AEMO’s document that you have referred to that AEMO now says that, far from VNI West costing \$3.2 billion or \$3.4 billion, it is now going to cost \$7 billion on their estimate and \$7.6 billion on the proponent’s estimate, and both have a headline or an out cost of up to 50 per cent greater, which means a range up over \$11 billion, perhaps to \$11.4 billion. So with this one project here, that is assumed, thus it cannot have the cost reflected in the project. If you say it is \$8 billion, how can it be that all these other projects could be built for that? Let us just suppose the \$7 billion that AEMO estimates for VNI West is correct. How can all of those other projects be built for just \$1 billion? I mean, it is absurd.

Ingrid STITT: I think in my previous answer I indicated that these were revised cost estimates. We could spend a lot of time back and forth tonight on your hypothesis about costs, but the bottom line is that this is a long-term transmission plan and each individual transmission project has to pass a cost-benefit test to be approved for construction.

David DAVIS: With respect, Minister, that does not answer it. If I take you to another section of your documents, appendix D, the economic appraisal, also dated August 2025, and I take you to page 17 and the base case transmission capital expenditure.

Some VTP projects are also expected to occur in the Base Case as they are critical to replace end-of-life assets or relate to offshore wind (which is assumed to occur in both the Base Case and the Project Case) ...

‘It is assumed to occur.’ Well, the costings are not there. There are eight such transmission projects shown in table D-3. They are in addition to the baseline projects outlined in appendix A. We go down and we see in D:

Install a second Gippsland 500 kV double circuit radial line ...

So there is Woodside to Driffield, Woodside to Giffard.

Increase the rating of the Portland to Heywood 500 kV double circuit lines

Replace the H1 and H2 South Morang 330/220 kV transformers.

Then they go:

... Projects delivered earlier in the Project Case compared to the Base Case ...

And they run down the transformer Cranbourne and tie in the existing Hazelwood to Rowville, and there is \$90 million in that. I could go on, but the truth of the matter is the government has said it will

cost \$8 billion, and that is patently a lie. It is flatly a lie. How can we proceed when the government is not even remotely truthful? And I do not hold you personally responsible, Minister. You are not the minister who is the proponent on all of this. But it is just extraordinary that the government has not produced proper costings for this. Please explain.

Ingrid STITT: It is extraordinary that we are about 12 minutes into the committee stage and you have already accused the government of lying about four times. But let us just go back to the nub of this: this Victorian transmission plan is a 15-year strategic plan to facilitate the development of the renewable energy zone so that Victoria's energy system can transition out of its current unpredictable and costly base into cheaper and more reliable renewables, and this is the framework that will allow that to happen. Your questions around costings, Mr Davis, are not even within the scope of the bill. We are not debating individual project costings, because frankly this bill does not approve any projects. It is a bill that facilitates construction of projects that get approved.

David DAVIS: But it is all within the purview of the transmission plan. That is what the bill seeks to do. It seeks to do this within the purview of the transmission plan, and yet the costing on the transmission plan is wrong. Are you saying there is no linkage to the transmission plan? I do not think you are actually saying that. Do you want to tell me that?

Ingrid STITT: What I am saying, Mr Davis, is that we are arguing about the way in which we will arrive at the outcome, and what the bill is about is facilitating the transition of our energy system in Victoria. It is a 15-year strategic plan. That is why the figures that I have given you, I have been very clear they are revised cost estimates, and they can only be an estimate because we cannot possibly be expected to predict what will happen over such a long period of time with such a complex transition.

David DAVIS: But with respect, Minister – and again, I understand that you are not the responsible minister, these are weasel words – the Vic transmission plan is intimately connected with this bill, and the aim of the bill is to facilitate that plan, as you have indicated. But actually, the plan is based on this set of costings, and the set of costings is frankly not credible. It is not just me saying this; others have concluded the same thing. Professor Mountain is a very respected academic, and he says the actual cost is \$28,000 million – \$28 billion. But that cost is not what the government says. The government says it will be \$8 billion, as you have outlined. But how can that be when the AEMO estimate for just one project is near the cost of your \$8 billion? How can that possibly add up in a plausible way? Please explain.

Ingrid STITT: I refer you to my previous answer, and in addition to that I would just point out to you that these are regulated assets that we are facilitating through this bill. They only get built if they pass a regulated cost–benefit test, and that is administered by AEMO.

David DAVIS: Let me just put on the record that I am far from assured by a cost–benefit analysis put out by AEMO, which is given a whole series of assumptions that it must presume whether it agrees with them or not. It is required to take the state government's assumption.

Ingrid STITT: Well, you like to quote AEMO whenever they issue a report, Mr Davis.

David DAVIS: No, I do not. I actually think AEMO's reports are often very, very weak and unsatisfactory. That does not mean there is nothing in them, but it means that the reports are weak and unsatisfactory. However, let me just record that I think your answers are deeply unsatisfactory, and I will move to another area.

One of the aspects of this is that the costs for the new transmission infrastructure will be sheeted home to those who pay power bills – that is, businesses and households – and the increases to pay for that will be significant. Can you tell me how much the increase will be for households and businesses due to this infrastructure cost over the next decade?

Ingrid STITT: As you would appreciate, Mr Davis, we cannot crystal-ball 10 years ahead, but what we do know is that the cost of renewable energy is far cheaper than coal-fired energy and the

grid that we have relied on historically. I would point you to the fact that Victoria's power prices are consistently lower than other states. That is because of our record investment in renewables. Our retail power prices are lower. In June 2025 the median household bill in Victoria was lower than most other states in the national energy market, and our wholesale power prices are lower. They are consistently the lowest in the country and are projected to remain the lowest in the future. Of course that is not an accident. We have done a lot of work on making sure that our default offer prices are lower. Households on the Victorian default offer will pay \$431 per annum less than the default market offer equivalent, and small business will pay \$1542 less. We are absolutely focused on making sure that Victorians pay lower power prices, and that is because of our record investment and our continued investment in renewable energy.

David DAVIS: Minister, the problem with what you have just said is you have missed the fact that I asked about the future. You responded –

Ingrid STITT: I answered that, Mr Davis.

David DAVIS: Not really. You talked about the costs now, and you said that Victoria in some way was advantaged, but actually our power prices have gone up and up and up and they are not in the same position compared to other jurisdictions as they were. But leaving that aside, this is about the future. Professor Mountain estimates that the transmission cost component for households on the supply spot on their bill will increase by 50 per cent through this plan. Do you accept that figure, or do you have an alternate figure, and will you explain, if you do, how you arrived at it?

Ingrid STITT: Mr Davis, with respect to the eminent individual that you have been quoting from, they will not necessarily have access to all of the data and information that AEMO has. As you know, AEMO do significant planning around the cost–benefits to consumers of particular energy investment, and the plan is renewables to deliver on that cost–benefit to consumers.

David DAVIS: Minister, you say you do not accept Professor Mountain's figure?

Ingrid STITT: No. I did not say that. Mr Davis, what I said was, with the greatest of respect to that individual's work, they may not necessarily have – and they probably would not have – access to all of the data and information that other entities and agencies have.

David DAVIS: So you are suggesting there is an alternate calculation? If so, would you provide that with the background figure work?

Ingrid STITT: Mr Davis, I am advised that it is publicly available.

David DAVIS: I am not sure that is right, because not all of AEMO's material is publicly available, and that is contrary to what you just said – that Professor Mountain might not have access to all of the material. So you are saying that he does have access to all the material, and he has calculated a 50 per cent increase. Now you are telling me – well, you just said that he would not have access to all the material because AEMO would not release all the material, but now you have told me it is all –

Ingrid STITT: No, I did not say anything about releasing it.

David DAVIS: Well, that is what you did say, actually.

Ingrid STITT: No. That is not what I said.

David DAVIS: So is the material all available or not?

Ingrid STITT: The report is available, Mr Davis.

David DAVIS: It is the calculation that I am seeking and all of the calculation materials.

Ingrid STITT: I am going to answer it in this way. It is publicly available, the work of AEMO, and the government has responded in detail to Professor Mountain in relation to his work. I think that is as far as we can take this line of questioning.

David DAVIS: With respect, I do not believe all the material is available. AEMO does not release everything, and many of the assumptions that AEMO makes are assumptions that they are required to make because they are required to accept the state government's position on a number of capital projects and the state government's costings. So I just put that as a side fact.

Professor Mountain has said:

The government hides the \$22bn cost because they say it is "sunk".

But the expenditure is yet to be made and the decision to spend it is the government's to make.

The Minister has told parliament she rejects my estimate of the Base Case cost, but has refused to provide her own estimate.

That is one side of it. That is the capital side of it. On the estimate of the cost increases side, Professor Mountain has estimated a 50 per cent increase for power bills, and large power users, businesses primarily, will rise between 250 and 350 per cent. I am just looking for careful figure work that refutes these figures. If you do not have that careful figure work, we can just move on.

Ingrid STITT: Professor Mountain has published his report called plan B. We are aware of that obviously. We do not agree with the findings of that report, and we have provided a detailed response to Professor Mountain that is publicly available.

David DAVIS: Sadly, though, Professor Mountain basically indicated that the response by the government does not actually answer many of the questions around presumptions and costings that he has sought assistance on. I think we will just move on at this point to some other matters. In this bill, Minister, there are a series of new penalty provisions, a series of new matters that look at the use of authorised officers, a series of – I call them – additional and draconian provisions. Why did the government feel it necessary to do this? Where did this come from? Did somebody request these powers? Where did this push for powers of entry and various powers for authorised officers come from? Why is the government proceeding with this?

Ingrid STITT: I think that this point has been made by a number of my colleagues in the second-reading debate, but essentially at present if an electricity corporation is unable to access land under section 93 of the Electricity Industry Act 2000 (EIA), the only means of addressing this situation is to make an application to the Supreme Court and to obtain a court declaration under that provision. This is a significant body of work, the transition plan that the government is implementing. Of course the government's very strong preference is always that energy companies work cooperatively with landholders to reach voluntary agreements for access. However, it is important to balance the rights of landholders with the need to deliver these projects in a timely way for the benefit of all Victorians. These updates to land-access provisions will introduce more consistency, structure and oversight of activities of energy corporations in the way that they access land, and they are designed to provide a compliance and enforcement framework that supports existing powers to ensure progress of critical projects. The bill that is before the house today is in response to the need to continue the energy transition here in Victoria.

David DAVIS: Who said that it was necessary for that? Who said that?

Ingrid STITT: Basically in planning for delivery of the WRL it became apparent that appropriate land-access provisions similar to what is in place for things like telecommunications were not in place in respect of energy infrastructure, and that is the reason why the bill is before the house today.

Sitting suspended 6:30 pm until 7:32 pm.

Melina BATH: Minister, you have seen that the Victorian Farmers Federation have come out very strongly opposed to this bill and have asked specifically to have the egregious sections taken out of this bill. What conversations and interactions have you had with the VFF and, say, the president Brett Hosking?

Ingrid STITT: Personally, I have not had any. I am not the minister – I am representing the minister. But I am happy to get some advice from the box for you, Ms Bath.

The minister and VicGrid meet regularly with local MPs, local councils, the CEOs of AEMO and AusNet, the VFF community groups and landowners. VicGrid staff are on the ground attending community information sessions, meeting landowners and holding regular meetings with important stakeholders, including the VFF.

Melina BATH: I do not know whether the department have seen that their newly minted 718 survey has this issue – VicGrid and the transition – ranked at the fifth level of concern, very concerned or concerned. Sadly, this bill is likely to go through tonight by virtue of crossbench members. How are the government and the Minister for Energy and Resources going to support farmers and reconcile the fact that many of them are still doing it incredibly tough with drought conditions and trying to save their farms at the moment? In relation to the stress related to having these new charges and new onerous impositions on them, what is the government going to do?

Ingrid STITT: In terms of additional consultation that is expected on the Victorian access regime and renewable energy zone access schemes, prior to declaring REZs and REZ schemes, VicGrid will further consult on design and implementation details in 2025, specifically through the upcoming release of an access and connections consultation paper and draft grid impact assessment guidelines, which will inform an access and connections handbook and final GIA guidelines. VicGrid will also consult on draft REZ schemes before declaring final REZ schemes. It is anticipated that VicGrid will also consult on draft regulations for REZ schemes and REZ scheme fees. I appreciate that there has possibly been a fair bit of misinformation around the community about this bill and the transmission plan, and that is certainly having an impact on people's sentiment about these matters, but there is every intention for that further consultation to occur.

Melina BATH: I just want to drill down. You said 'misinformation'. What do you mean by misinformation? I am seeking clarity on that comment.

Ingrid STITT: I think generally – and I am speaking generally – there has been some conflation by some in respect to different elements of the bill. We certainly respect the fact that there are many people who have strong feelings about the bill and many who oppose the bill, including yourselves opposite. But importantly, beyond the passage of the bill this evening, subject to what happens in this place, I have just gone through some of the further consultation that will occur with the community in 2025.

Melina BATH: This will be my last question for this section. Now that we are investigating consultation, one of the comments from a farmer in the central area of this state on renewable energy transmission is – and this is from the Victorian Farmers Federation:

The biggest issue facing our operation at the moment is the proposed greenfield development of overhead transmission lines with a lack of consultation with the communities let alone the land holder.

Clearly this farmer, who is a member of the farmers federation, feels that there is a lack of consultation with communities and landholders. How can the government say that it is consulting enough when clearly this is one of the biggest issues facing this person and their business?

Ingrid STITT: You are asking me for an opinion about the consultation, and what I have tried to do, Ms Bath, is outline factually for you what further consultation will occur. The bill will be building in the use of the code of practice for land access. But really, I would draw you back to the main purposes of the bill, which are – as we have indicated in committee this evening – about managing the

transition of the energy sector and doing so in a way that provides a framework for how that might occur, including on private land.

Melina BATH: Biosecurity is something that the farmers federation has also raised as a significant concern. What is the government going to do to address this? Clearly, there are going to be authorised officers who are going to seek to access property to investigate and potentially move on to land. Only a few years ago we had amendments to the biosecurity act to ensure that there are penalties for people who break those biosecurity provisions. What will the government do to ensure that biosecurity is not compromised by these new powers and people entering onto farming properties where livestock and horticulture operate?

Ingrid STITT: Indeed biosecurity is everyone's responsibility, including property owners, visitors and workers, and certainly transmission network service providers must engage early and genuinely with landholders in accordance with the Land Access Code of Practice. Under that code of practice, transmission network service providers are required to consult with affected parties to understand site-specific biosecurity needs, including any applicable biosecurity management plans, property-specific needs associated with fire risk, property-specific needs associated with health risks and property-specific needs associated with cultural heritage protection. They have to take the following actions in relation to biosecurity risks associated with access to private land: they need to develop and implement biosecurity policies and procedures that minimise impacts consistent with 'come clean, stay clean, go clean' practices; provide affected parties with details of any applicable biosecurity policies; and document and communicate biosecurity incidents, including how they have been managed, to affected parties immediately. And authorised officers will be required to take into account the biosecurity obligations when accessing land for the purposes of section 93 of the Electricity Industry Act 2000 to undertake works.

Melina BATH: You mentioned in there, in relation to biosecurity, that they are required to consult and to provide details. Can you please provide to the house how that consultation will occur and how those details will be communicated to the landholder? What is the process there?

Ingrid STITT: Essentially the process is contained in the Land Access Code of Practice. Authorised officers and electricity corporations will only be able to enter land under the proposed provisions if either – sorry, just one moment, please, Ms Bath.

Authorised officers must follow several procedural safeguards, including doing or causing to be done no more than is reasonably believed necessary to facilitate electricity corporations powers. I further advise that authorised officers will be required to undertake specific training on biosecurity, and I think in my previous answer I just outlined the fact that biosecurity has to form part of the planning whenever accessing land.

Melina BATH: In relation to the communications, noting that sometimes in our regions we do not have good internet, what is the designed pathway for communication? Is it a written letter, is it internet communications, is it telephone calls? Could you just provide a bit of context there, please?

Ingrid STITT: Are you talking about general access, Ms Bath, or specifically in relation to biosecurity? I mean, the provisions in the bill around notice requirements I think are probably where I would point you to. They require, for an authorised officer to enter land under statutory authorised officer provisions, that at least 30 days notice must be given, with a reminder notice at least 48 hours before the first date of proposed entry. These notices can be provided by either an authorised officer or a transmission network service provider. They may be delivered personally. They may be left at the usual or last known place of business of the person, with a person who is over 16 and apparently in charge of or employed at that place. It can be sent by prepaid ordinary post, addressed to the person at the usual or last known place of residence or business of the person; if the person has given an alternate address for this purpose by sending it by prepaid ordinary post to that address; or if the person has

given an email address for this purpose by sending it to that email address. So there are a number of different ways in which it can be communicated.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, one of the concerns of landholders is the issue of insurance. What compensation – what modelling have you done to establish what the insurance impacts to landholders are going to be with a transmission line on their property?

Ingrid STITT: I will just get some advice about whether we do have anything on that matter for you, Mrs McArthur.

I will just take that on notice while the advisers seek an answer for you in relation to that question. I am happy to take a different question from you in the meantime.

Bev McARTHUR: I look forward to the response. Minister, as you know, we have had a bit of an issue with working with children checks of late. Contractors and workers who enter farms where families live therefore may have unsupervised interactions with children. Will these contractors and their workers be subject to screening and holding working with children checks?

Ingrid STITT: You mean authorised officers?

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, basically anybody who is working on these transmission projects – authorised officers may have to go onto the properties, but there will be surely workmen engaged in building these transmission lines. What oversight are you going to ensure –

Ingrid STITT: So you are asking more broadly, once access is provided, either voluntarily or under the access regime?

Bev McARTHUR: Yes.

Ingrid STITT: One moment.

Relevant workers, including authorised officers, would be required to get a police check. I am taking on notice your question specifically around working with children, because I suppose when access is being provided once work is commencing on land, then there are some sometimes pretty serious health and safety issues. You would not want children around those sorts of works in the first instance, so let us take that on notice. We may be able to get something for you this evening, or we may not.

Bev McARTHUR: On the issue of the community energy fund and the traditional owners fund, how is that going to play out? What percentage of the fund would go to the community energy fund and the traditional owners fund? How are we going to establish who gets what?

Ingrid STITT: In relation to the traditional owners fund I can give you some indication of when this will be established. The establishment of a traditional owners fund will, in our strong view, support self-determination and the broader aspirations of traditional owners who may be impacted by new critical energy infrastructure on their country. The traditional owners fund will be established when clause 50 of the bill commences, which is anticipated to be 1 November 2025. In terms of the implementation steps for the traditional owners fund, the Victorian government will be putting in place a dedicated approach to benefits from the energy transition for traditional owners in line with self-determination principles. Key aspects of implementation will be co-designed with traditional owners in the First Peoples' Assembly.

In relation to the general fund, the REZ community energy fund is an opportunity to invest directly in projects that improve local energy outcomes and create other benefits for communities in regions hosting energy infrastructure. The aim is to ensure communities benefit in a meaningful and lasting way based on their vision of the energy priorities for their region. It will have the same establishment timelines as the traditional owners fund. Again, it is important that in terms of implementation steps, we are proposing a process whereby the community reference groups specific to each REZ and with broad community and industry representation will be established to identify, review and recommend

appropriate funding opportunities. A cross-government reference group will provide decision-making guidance to the regional community reference groups. Broadly, the funds will support regionally significant projects and initiatives that improve energy supply, reliability, efficiency and affordability for businesses, communities and households and capture the benefit from the energy transition.

Bev McARTHUR: With great respect, Minister, that does not tell us much. If the proponent has to provide money for the community energy fund but also the traditional owners fund, how is that broken up? Is it 50–50 or 25–75? Also, for the land on which you will be basing the traditional owners fund, is that just on public land, or do you assume a transmission line on private property is also subject to a traditional owners fund application?

Ingrid STITT: In relation to how the funds will be allocated, it will be on a 50–50 basis between the funds. In respect to the traditional owner arrangements, just let me clarify one point for you, Mrs McArthur.

I just wanted to make sure I had this clear in my mind. It is not about the specific land. I think your question goes to how you determine that. On private land there would be no impact, because this is about the benefits generated by the investment being split 50–50 between the traditional owners fund and the community fund.

Bev McARTHUR: So when a landowner is forced to provide access to a transmission line, the company putting that infrastructure on their land has to pay a certain amount into a fund, from which the traditional owners, who are not necessarily the traditional owners of that land, are going to benefit.

Ingrid STITT: No, that is not what I said.

Bev McARTHUR: If the fund comes from every transmission line project, it comes from private land, doesn't it? There may be some transmission lines on public land, and they may be subject to the traditional owners area. But private land does not, as I understand it, have traditional owner oversight.

Ingrid STITT: I think that you are on the wrong path here. In respect to the traditional owners fund, part of the proceeds of REZ scheme fees paid by generation developers who develop projects within renewable energy zones and contributions from transmission companies will be contributed towards the traditional owners fund. That is no different to the way in which it would operate for the community energy fund. I think that what you are doing is conflating a little bit the way that this will operate.

Bev McARTHUR: Given that the community fund is going to provide benefits supposedly to the community, although we are suspicious about the make-up of your fund oversight people, are there any criteria for how the traditional owners fund will be spent? Where will that money go?

Ingrid STITT: I took you through earlier the implementation steps for the traditional owners fund. It will be based around the principles of self-determination, and it will be co-designed with traditional owners and the First Peoples' Assembly. In relation to the community fund, I have already taken you to the guidelines for expenditure. These funds will support regionally significant projects and initiatives that improve energy supply, reliability, efficiency and affordability for businesses. A cross-government reference group will provide decision-making guidance, but ultimately the regional community reference groups will be determining what the priority energy projects are in their area.

Bev McARTHUR: In effect, for the traditional owners fund, nobody will have any involvement in how they spend that money. That could just be distributed amongst that traditional owner grouping to individuals. Is that the case?

Ingrid STITT: It will be managed by the Self-Determination Fund, and we do not make any apology for providing that method for traditional owner groups.

Gaelle BROAD: On the Essential Services Commission (ESC) website they do have the Land Access Code of Practice. It was developed and implemented from 1 March 2024. I guess I am

interested in what impact this bill will have on that existing process with the Essential Services Commission.

Ingrid STITT: I think that this will get dealt with via one of the amendments that is going to be before the house during this committee stage. What I would say is that the code will apply, but there is an amendment that goes to these issues, Mrs Broad, that we will be dealing with soon.

Gaelle BROAD: The website states an affected party can ask questions and provide feedback, including feedback on their preferred dates for a transmission company to access land or the terms of any proposed access agreement. Will this standard still apply if this bill is passed?

Ingrid STITT: The entire code will apply. Furthermore, VicGrid will need to demonstrate compliance with it. But as I said, I do not want to pre-empt the house's consideration of an amendment before the house.

Gaelle BROAD: My understanding when I look at the ESC material is there are two options for transmission companies to access land. Option 1 is entering into an access agreement with individual landowners, and option 2 is to exercise their statutory right under section 93 of the act to enter land. The energy and water ombudsman of Victoria is the nominated dispute resolution body for option 2. Is that still the case once this bill passes, if it passes?

Ingrid STITT: It is the case under the code.

Gaelle BROAD: On the ESC website, under 'How do I lodge land access complaints or disputes?' it says to first contact the transmission company and lodge the complaint, and then, two, contact the energy and water ombudsman of Victoria. I just want to know, does that process still apply?

Ingrid STITT: The code will still apply, Mrs Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Okay. And you can request to reschedule land access if required?

Ingrid STITT: Under the voluntary access arrangements, do you mean? Obviously there is a desire to, as much as possible, reach agreement with landowners about access.

Gaelle BROAD: But if it is under the second option, under the statutory option, is it still possible for people to request to reschedule the land access if required?

Ingrid STITT: I think if I answer it this way, Mrs Broad – the code is not being changed by this bill. A requirement to comply with the code is being strengthened, but the actual code itself is not being changed by the bill.

Gaelle BROAD: Okay. So I guess, just to understand that, what is already outlined by the Essential Services Commission and the process for putting in a complaint or putting in a request to reschedule a date if it does not suit, that would still be relevant if the bill passes?

Ingrid STITT: Again, sorry; I am not being evasive in any way. It is just that this will be dealt with in an amendment that we will be dealing with this evening at some point, so it might be appropriate for us to come back to it if you have still got questions.

Gaelle BROAD: Minister, can you just define which amendment you are referring to?

Ingrid STITT: Yes. It is under Mr Ettershank's name. It is one of his amendments.

Gaelle BROAD: Mr Ettershank, just with the code of practice, currently under the Essential Services Commission, people can go to the energy and water ombudsman if there is an issue. There is also the ability to reschedule a date if land access is requested. Would that still apply with the changes that you have proposed?

David ETTERS HANK: I am sorry, I am not actually aware that I have an amendment that answers that question or that I have an answer in terms of that. We have certainly referenced the code of practice

under the essential services legislation, but I am afraid I am not in a position to respond any further than that.

Ingrid STITT: I am happy to take the question if Mr Ettershank has got no objection to that. The answer is yes.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Given that the purpose of this bill is to facilitate the transition to renewables, will you make a commitment on the record here today that you will not extend the life of any of Victoria's coal-fired power stations?

Ingrid STITT: Clearly the intent of the bill is to make sure that Victoria's transmission plans continue at pace. We do not have any time to waste. We know that as a result of the market forces, if you like, coal-fired power stations are of their own motion leaving the market. We are committed to the plan as outlined in the Victorian transmission plan, and this bill is just one of many which will facilitate that transition.

Further to those comments, Dr Mansfield, as you are aware, the government has a legislated target of achieving 95 per cent renewable energy by 2035, and we have structured transition agreements with the owners of Yallourn and Loy Yang A coal-fired power stations. Those commitments have not changed, and today's bill is a crucial element of delivering on those commitments.

Sarah MANSFIELD: One of the concerns we have heard a lot from different stakeholders is about how environmentally sensitive areas are going to be respected and dealt with during the rollout of transmission infrastructure. How is that being taken into account by the government? How are we going to ensure that environmentally sensitive areas are not being compromised by the transmission rollout?

Ingrid STITT: The Victorian transmission plan has introduced a new approach to planning transmission, which takes environmental impacts into consideration from the start of the process using the strategic land use assessment. This ensures that the most environmentally sensitive landscapes can be avoided, and all proposed projects will continue to be subject to the planning and environment approval processes under the Planning and Environment Act 1987 and also the Environment Effects Act 1978.

Sarah MANSFIELD: In the last VicGrid bill I asked about how the loss of value of productive land from transmission is being recognised from landholders. This is distinct from a per-kilometre compensation payment to landholders. I was told at the time that more work was being done on this, and maybe we would expect to hear more about it. I just want to understand what further work the government has been doing in this space.

Ingrid STITT: VicGrid has carried out further research and engagement with agricultural stakeholders to understand the potential compatibility of different types of farming with the co-location of renewable energy and transmission infrastructure, and this work has guided decisions about the most suitable places to develop new energy infrastructure, aiming to minimise the impact on agricultural production.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Another question that is raised is that we know that a lot of renewable infrastructure is likely to require significant supporting infrastructure to be built. We need improved roads, because there is a lot of heavy equipment that is going to be moved across them, accommodation for workers and suchlike. Will this be temporary, or will communities have the opportunity to benefit from these changes in the long term?

Ingrid STITT: The Victorian government is committed to delivering those meaningful long-term benefits for communities and regions hosting new energy infrastructure. We are working across departments to ensure the transition to renewables delivers lasting economic benefits and social value, and where possible that supporting infrastructure will be developed to enable legacy use.

Sarah MANSFIELD: I have got one more. Will the government make a commitment that these transmission lines will not be used to transmit energy derived from future waste incinerators?

Ingrid STITT: Today's bill does not refer to waste-to-energy facilities at all. But if such facilities are built, then they are subject to the same grid connection standards as any other electricity generator.

David ETTERSHANK: I would like to start out in new subdivision 4 'Entry in accordance with court order' and 93BF(g), which has this concept of reasonable steps being made by a farmer or a property owner to facilitate access to a site. The key concept here seems to be one of reasonable steps. Could I ask: how should we understand the meaning of 'reasonable steps' in the context of this clause?

Ingrid STITT: Obviously this is the subject of one of the amendments that we are going to be dealing with shortly – maybe shortly, maybe not so shortly, I am not sure. But of course the government was happy to commit that the code would specifically deal with these matters, that the code would be –

David Ettershank interjected.

Ingrid STITT: Yes, that is right.

David ETTERSHANK: If there is an emergency or unavoidable reason for not enabling access on the day, can the landholder still be penalised?

Ingrid STITT: That is the code of practice again. It is not intended for it to be a prescriptive system of notice without any flexibility; there are steps that can be taken and the code gives that guidance. So I think that, again, it comes back to demonstrating compliance with the code.

David ETTERSHANK: This may again come back to the code; I probably should have done more homework on this one. But given these properties are pretty big, if they have got to facilitate access, it could pretty much take up most of a day or a significant part of a day. What compensation does the landholder receive for enabling access if it takes a chunk out of their day and they are not able to do other productive work?

Ingrid STITT: There are payment schedules based on different types of access. I apologise for fluffing around with my book for a long time there, but I am just trying to put my fingers on the exact arrangements. I know they are in here, but there are compensation payments that landholders are eligible for depending on what type of access is being provided.

David ETTERSHANK: This may have been a question that was asked by my opposition or National Party colleagues, so forgive me if that is the case – I might have missed it. Minister, will authorised officers be required to implement protocols to maintain biosecurity when entering farms, and how will that be monitored?

Ingrid STITT: I did go into that in some detail with Ms Bath earlier. I am happy to do that again, if you wish. But in the meantime I found the land-access payments, if you are interested. The landholder participation fee – landholders facilitating field surveys and investigations can receive a one-off payment of \$20,000 recognising their cooperation. Survey access payments – for survey work on the property AusNet pays \$2000 per day beyond the initial five days, capped at \$50,000 per property.

David ETTERSHANK: I appreciate both of those responses, and I will find out about the biosecurity when I watch the video.

Ingrid STITT: I am happy to go to it again if you want.

David ETTERSHANK: No, it is fine, thank you. I am looking forward to watching the movie. Obviously we have got a proposed amendment that strikes to this question, but could I ask: whether the amendment is successful or not, what sort of training will authorised officers be required to undertake before they are deemed to be qualified for the job, and I mean specifically or in particular with regard to the right to exercise reasonable force?

Ingrid STITT: VicGrid is intending to appoint a Victorian public sector body that already has an existing authorised officer workforce. In addition to any existing training, authorised officers will be trained in their role under the new provisions of the Electricity Industry Act as well as in engagement and conflict avoidance skills and safe work practices. Authorised officers will follow standard operating procedures, which will require them to act respectfully and engage with the community in a professional and appropriate manner. Just to advise you of what I have already advised Ms Bath in relation to biosecurity matters, there will be training required for authorised officers in relation to biosecurity.

David ETTERS HANK: Last question from me: if a property owner commits a potential offence – say, for example, denying access to an area – and they do it over multiple days or they do it repeatedly in response to a request from an authorised officer for access, would the penalty payments apply for each instance in which access has been denied, or would it be wrapped up in one penalty?

Ingrid STITT: Just to clarify, there are maximum infringement penalties that authorised officers can issue. I am mindful that we have got an amendment before the house that deals with how many penalty unit points are associated with those penalties, so I will not go into the details of that and pre-empt that debate. But essentially the proposed provision as drafted is based on the existing land access and enforcement framework under various Victorian acts, and that includes the notice provisions in the telecommunications act and draws on similar arrangements in South Australia in terms of their Electricity Act 1996. It is only if the landholder refuses access after having been provided with two notices, followed by a warning and then a direction – only at that point – that a penalty can be issued.

David ETTERS HANK: Minister, thank you for the answer, but I would just like to clarify that slightly. Obviously there is a timeframe that would be associated with that process of getting the order from the magistrate, and that may well extend, presumably, beyond 24 hours. If there is a stand-off situation, where the property owner is denying that and it happens over successive days, do each of those days then become offences that could each be separately processed and penalised, or do they become cumulative?

Ingrid STITT: There is a land access process set out. There are notice period requirements for each step. I think that it would only be after that process is exhausted that you would then see penalties potentially issued by authorised officers. If you went through the whole voluntary access process without any agreement reached, then you would have to start the process for access denied, which is a further set of steps before infringements could be contemplated.

David ETTERS HANK: Sorry, I just want to be clear on this one, though.

Ingrid STITT: It is a maximum, but I am not going to say the amount because we are going to deal with an amendment that is the maximum.

David ETTERS HANK: I am definitely happy to leave the amounts and figures. Let us assume that that process of getting orders through the magistrate takes, let us say, a week, and during that week, access is denied on each day. Am I correct in understanding – and I am not being pedantic here; I really want to understand how this is going to work –

David Davis: Seven offences.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you, Mr Davis, but I guess the question is: would it be seven different offences that occurred within the one week, which all sit within the hearing window, or would it be dealt with as one offence and then the order would be given?

Ingrid STITT: It is a 10-step access process of notice, reminder, attempted entry, warning, direction for refusal, infringement notice – the final step being that you would have to seek further rulings from the court. But just hang on a sec, Mr Ettershank. The answer is no, you would not be penalised multiple times, because at that stage of the process the court process would be sought.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Can the minister tell me: if authorised officers damage crops yet to be harvested during the planning or building process, will farmers be compensated for their lost earnings?

Ingrid STITT: As we have been discussing a fair bit in committee, Ms Tyrrell, the authorised officers are required to comply with the code. That sets out a range of things, including appropriately accessing land. There are obviously compensation payments associated with providing access for certain works, as I was just talking to Mr Ettershank about – for example, \$20,000 as a one-off payment for facilitating field surveys and investigations and \$2000 per day for survey access payments. But if there was damage to a property beyond the works that were being undertaken, yes, they would be eligible for compensation, and that is already the case under the act. This bill does not change that. Basically it is already covered in the act and in this bill at clause 68.

Georgie PURCELL: Minister, can you please clarify that newly created section 16ZHA will only be able to be used to amend the existing orders made under section 16Y of the principal act during the transition from the AEMO to VicGrid?

Ingrid STITT: Correct. New section 16ZHA is limited to amending 16Y orders to give effect to the amendments in the stage 2 legislation, and the wording in section 16ZHA, which limits this ability, is to give effect to the amendments made by the National Electricity (Victoria) Amendment (VicGrid Stage 2 Reform) Bill 2025.

Georgie PURCELL: Could you also please confirm that the government will continue to fund both local communities' renewable energy projects and mitigation for potential impacts on biodiversity, alongside funding provided from the new community energy fund?

Ingrid STITT: The community energy fund will exist in addition to existing government programs.

Georgie PURCELL: Could you also provide some more detail on how the community energy fund grant decisions will be made and who will be making them?

Ingrid STITT: Yes. This is in relation to the work that community reference groups will identify and projects and initiatives that they identify to be funded. These will be ratified by an interdepartmental executive reference group, like for similar funds. Then the VicGrid board will provide the recommendations to the minister for approval.

Georgie PURCELL: Minister, a few of us in our second-reading contributions spoke about the impact of these projects on native wildlife. Is the minister aware or able to advise of how many nest sites of the endangered southern brolga have been disrupted by wind turbines?

Ingrid STITT: I do not have that immediately to hand. That information is not available, as I understand it, to the minister. However, it should be noted that the final Victorian transmission plan has avoided brolga flocking areas in light of information provided by Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA).

Georgie PURCELL: Could you confirm that the new transmission lines must avoid all national parks and protected areas, including nature conservation reserves and Trust for Nature sites?

Ingrid STITT: I am advised that all new transmission projects would be assessed under the relevant state and/or federal environment and planning legislation, which requires a demonstration of avoiding and minimising impacts on protected areas and other areas of ecological value.

Georgie PURCELL: Minister, do the boundaries of the Gippsland shoreline renewable energy zone enter the Ninety Mile Beach Marine National Park or the Corner Inlet Marine National Park, and is the government confident that the zone will not impact the parks' biodiversity?

Ingrid STITT: The Gippsland shoreline renewable energy zone does not extend into either of those parks. Infrastructure developed in the Gippsland shoreline renewable energy zone will be assessed under the relevant state and federal environmental and planning legislation, which of course again

requires a demonstration of avoiding and minimising impacts on protected areas and other areas of ecological value.

Sarah MANSFIELD: I have some questions on clause 50, but I might ask them now if everyone is okay with that. How will community consultation take place to determine which projects will be funded by the community energy fund?

Ingrid STITT: That local decision-making that responds to local needs and priorities will be a cornerstone of the delivery of these funds. It is proposed that community reference groups with broad community and industry representation will identify, review and recommend appropriate funding opportunities. The make-up of the groups is yet to be determined, but that is the purpose of the groups.

Sarah MANSFIELD: What process is going to be stepped through to determine which community members are included? I know you said it is yet to be determined which groups they will be, but what is the process that will be used to determine who gets to be on those reference groups?

Ingrid STITT: I am advised that – and I think I answered this question a bit earlier in relation to the timeframe for setting up the fund – with the local community groups there is an intention to consult about who would be on those groups, and then there will be guidelines, as I have gone through in answer to a couple of other questions earlier, about how funds or projects will be assessed and what steps they have to go through in order to be funded through the community fund.

Sarah MANSFIELD: One of the issues that has been raised by a number of my constituents and other members of the community who have concerns about the rollout of transmission is whether any kinds of community benefits could be used to support workforce development. I understand that the parameters around the community fund – and there will be more discussion with the amendments – are largely confined to energy-related projects as stated in the government's bill. Could it be used to fund, say, trade schools to help upskill the workforce to facilitate the energy transition? Could it be used for a purpose that is part of the energy transition but maybe not an energy project in and of itself?

Ingrid STITT: Yes. As you have indicated, these funds will support regionally significant projects and initiatives that improve energy outcomes, but they will also support projects that create benefits from the energy transition. Examples include projects that help upskill the workforce, build renewable energy supply chains, create jobs in the energy sector or promote renewable energy research and innovation. This could include the potential to support upskilling through trade schools.

Sarah MANSFIELD: I had a number of questions about authorised officers, but I think you have covered them off in a number of the answers to other questions, including around biosecurity and the steps that have to be followed, so I might just leave them and perhaps come back to them. But one question I want to ask is whether the powers that are prescribed in this bill could be used for purposes unrelated to transmission infrastructure – so to gain access to a property for any other reason?

Ingrid STITT: No.

Bev McARTHUR: Just in relation, Minister, to Ms Purcell's question in relation to the existing community investment fund, will that continue alongside your new REZ community energy fund or will the existing local community fund that has been in place up until now – or up until when you get this other one happening – be discontinued?

Ingrid STITT: The community energy fund will exist in addition to existing government programs.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, that actually does not answer the question. The existing community fund, where the local community have a say over where the money goes – it might be a football ground or, I do not know, a roadside or something: will that funding and that whole process be discontinued and replaced by the new community energy fund, which can only, you have just indicated, provide energy-related climate change outcomes and projects?

Ingrid STITT: That existing government program fund is not being changed by the bill.

Bev McARTHUR: Great. So that means the local community can still advocate for funds to go towards whatever local project they want?

Ingrid STITT: Within the guidelines of that particular government program. None of the provisions in the bill before us today change any of that. This community fund is an additional stream of funding.

Bev McARTHUR: If a landowner cannot or will not pay their \$12,210 fine – if they are a family with a trust in the property that you insist on entering, it will be a \$48,842 fine – if they cannot or will not pay those fines, are you going to institute action that might result in them going to jail?

Ingrid STITT: It would be treated the same as any other court-issued fine.

Bev McARTHUR: That is really reassuring. You said – I think it was in answer to Dr Mansfield's question – that you will define environmentally sensitive land areas. How will you do that?

Ingrid STITT: That is not exactly what I said to Dr Mansfield. What I said to Dr Mansfield was the Victorian transmission plan has introduced a new approach to planning transmission which takes environmental impacts into consideration from the start of the process using the strategic land use assessment. What I went on to say is that all proposed projects will continue to be the subject of planning and environment approval processes.

Bev McARTHUR: Every farmer could argue that their land is environmentally sensitive. Why wouldn't they? How are you going to respond to that?

Ingrid STITT: The environment effects statement (EES) will address that in the normal manner. That does not change.

Bev McARTHUR: You also mentioned that further research had been carried out by VicGrid in relation to farms. What further research has been carried out? Can you provide us with that?

Ingrid STITT: Mrs McArthur, because that is the subject of an amendment, perhaps it is better if we deal with that then. Let us deal with it in the amendment.

Bev McARTHUR: You also said, in an answer to a question from Ms Purcell, that the new authority, VicGrid, would be defining a protected area. How will you arrive at that definition?

Ingrid STITT: I am just not sure that I did say that, actually. What I referenced was that sensitive environmental areas would be – well, I am not going to verbal Ms Purcell. She is not in the chamber, but she asked me a question about a number of national parks and the answer went to the fact that the renewable energy zone does not extend into those parks. But again, it is the same answer – that state and federal environmental assessment legislation would apply and environmental assessments.

Bev McARTHUR: One of the road maps in the Western Renewables Link plan was to carve a swathe through a biolink connecting one forest to another in the Western Renewables Link area. Would that plan now be abandoned because that is a sensitive area and environmentally important?

Ingrid STITT: The bill sets out a process for how you might deal with such scenarios, but in that particular case that you have referenced the environment effects statement is already underway.

Bev McARTHUR: We understand you talk about end-of-life plans. You may not, but Mr Batchelor did in his speech earlier for coal stations. What end-of-life plans in this new scenario will there be for renewable infrastructure given its life span is about 20 to 25 years?

Ingrid STITT: That question is outside the scope of the bill, Mrs McArthur. Essentially, I would point you to the very detailed strategic plan that is the Victorian transmission plan. It is a 15-year strategic plan.

Bev McARTHUR: If you have got a 15-year strategic plan, surely you would have to include the end-of-life plans for your renewable farms, the infrastructure that is exhausted and how you are going to environmentally deal with the residue of a renewable energy project with wind towers et cetera. Surely that should be incorporated into your 15-year plan, probably you should have a 25-to-100-year plan, really. But how are you not addressing the issue of what happens at the end of life in renewable projects?

Ingrid STITT: Perhaps the way I will answer this, Mrs McArthur, is to indicate to you that individual generators have requirements built into their approvals, but that is again outside the scope of this bill. Really what we are doing here is managing an energy transition of unprecedented scale because we are seeking to achieve net zero emissions by 2045, and we want to ensure a reliable and clean energy source for all Victorians.

Bev McARTHUR: This might be a comment, Minister, but environmentally clean might mean how you deal with the residue from redundant renewable energy projects. But my question is: what emergency services levy tax will be applied to a wind farm?

Ingrid STITT: Again, that is outside the scope of the bill before the house, Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: It is a major issue at the moment, because you are applying a 150 per cent tax to a farmer who might be forced to have a transmission line on their farm to accommodate a renewable energy project. Basically we understand they will be paying a 5 per cent emergency services levy tax while the farmer will be paying 150. Is that fair?

Ingrid STITT: It is not in the bill before the house that we are in committee on.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, can you just describe what 'reasonable force' means?

Ingrid STITT: It is a common legal test that is well understood in the court system.

Melina BATH: Minister, in terms of Crown land leases for agricultural purposes – so where a farmer has an agricultural lease – my question is: does this bill capture agricultural leases?

Ingrid STITT: Capture them in what specific way, can I ask?

Melina BATH: First of all, if a farmer has an agricultural lease and is conducting their farming practices there – they have crops down or cows – and they deny access, will they be reprimanded and charged with infringement notices on agricultural leases?

Ingrid STITT: It is the occupier of the land that needs to comply.

Melina BATH: In relation to this particular issue, if the occupier of the land – meaning the farmer with the agricultural licence to operate on that land – occupies Crown land but the agricultural licence is operated by the farmer, who receives the compensation? Is it the Crown land holder – the government – or is it the licence-holder, the farmer with the agricultural licence?

Ingrid STITT: It is the landholder, but just let me get clarification for you from the box. The occupier would receive the compensation.

Melina BATH: By 'occupier', do you mean the Crown land owner, meaning the government, or do you mean the farmer?

Ingrid STITT: The leaseholder. The farmer. The leaseholder working that land. That should make you happy.

Melina BATH: Well, I am not happy with this bill at all, Minister. I am just trying to find some clarity for farmers, notwithstanding that I appreciate that you are answering the questions. I will give you another scenario: crop harvesting. A farmer is about to harvest their crops, and they actually say, 'No. This is dangerous. I need to fulfil my obligations to get these crops in and done,' but an authorised

officer still decides that they want to come on there and they provide an infringement notice. Is there any right of way or leniency for farmers who are actually trying to get their crops cut and in?

Ingrid STITT: As I have indicated in answer to a number of lines of questioning around land access, it is desirable that there is an agreement reached with the farmer, with the landholder. So we would expect that the process that is set out and clarified in the code would require flexibility around those sorts of issues. We always want to see, as far as possible, voluntary arrangements entered into. But there is a process set out in the bill for the steps that you need to go through when seeking to reach voluntary agreement in relation to access.

Melina BATH: Minister, with the greatest respect, I think there are farmers watching this and they are quite worried and concerned about making sure of their crops – and of course their crops equal their repayments, their mortgages, their payments back on their machinery, their livelihoods. So could you just expand on how that negotiation is going to take place, and if the ruling has come down, is there any form of request for leniency or challenge to that position that the government or its entity may take?

Ingrid STITT: There are reasonable excuses for noncompliance. That is why the 30-day notice is given – to give time to discuss what those reasonable excuses might be. I can give you a few of the details of what the proposed safeguards are in relation to issues around land access. So of course there is written notice before entry – that is, 30 business days prior to the initial entry and again 48 hours prior to entry; announcement and identification on entry; authorised officers must carry and produce for inspection an identification card on request; doing or causing to be done no more than is reasonably believed necessary to facilitate section 93 EIA powers; taking reasonable steps to minimise disruption and not staying longer than is reasonably necessary; prohibiting entry onto land contrary to the conditions of their authorisation; prohibiting entry into residential premises or buildings; ensuring the authorised officer provides a warning before giving any direction to stop interfering with land access powers; and having a reasonable excuse defence in relation to the infringement offences, as I have just touched on. And safeguards for any entry under the authority of an entry order from the Magistrates' Court include taking all reasonable efforts to serve a copy of the order on the owner or occupier of the land as soon as practicable after an entry order is made, and if an attempted service is unsuccessful the authorised officer must cause a copy of the entry order to be affixed to or in a conspicuous place near an entrance to the land. So there are those safeguards built into the bill. But as I indicated earlier, it is our absolute preference that sensible negotiated agreements are reached wherever possible.

Melina BATH: I am assuming that the authorised officer who is seeking to access the property would not necessarily have – I am not trying to be funny about this – knowledge with veterinarian understanding or an agricultural degree, because how will a reasonable excuse be validated if there is somebody who has no understanding of the farming operation onto which they are seeking to come?

Ingrid STITT: In answer to a question a little earlier around what training the authorised officers would be receiving and the fact that they will be drawn from a public sector entity and subject to the public sector code of conduct, we certainly expect that there will be training provided that would ensure that they were cognisant of some of the issues that would be relevant in farming communities, particularly in respect to the areas that will be part of the renewable energy zones. Can I just clarify, in relation to an answer I gave you earlier about reasonable excuse, that the court assesses that.

Melina BATH: Just on that, the court assesses a reasonable excuse –

Ingrid STITT: If there was a contested –

Melina BATH: Yes, sure. Thanks, Minister; I appreciate that. In terms of the FOI and the diminished capacity for people to access FOIs through this legislation, if someone was looking to challenge whether there was a reasonable excuse, might they not be able to actually access the information because of clauses in this bill about freedom of information?

Ingrid STITT: The magistrate would be assessing what the farmer says is a reasonable excuse. The issues in relation to FOI are really more about commercially sensitive information in terms of the rollout of the transmission projects. So I am not sure that that is a well-founded concern.

Melina BATH: You mentioned that, potentially, these transmission lines et cetera will not be going through national parks.

David Davis: She didn't quite say that.

Melina BATH: I know; that is right. I would challenge that; there is nothing specific in the bill to say that they will not actually go through national parks or sensitive areas.

David Davis: In answer to the Animal Justice Party, the answer was that they could.

Melina BATH: Technically, Minister, transmission lines could go through other public reserves. For example, it could go through the back end of – I am just using this as an example – a golf course. It could go through some other sort of public reserve. If it did, who receives that compensation?

Ingrid STITT: Again, I am not sure that is the correct reading, but perhaps if I can answer it this way: the bill does not deal with planning and environment requirements for a project; they are dealt with via existing environment and planning legislation. Just to clarify, there was a bit of conjecture going on about what I had said to Ms Purcell about national parks. The answer I gave in relation to Ms Purcell's question – she was asking about whether transmission lines must avoid all national parks and protected areas, including nature conservation reserves and Trust for Nature sites – was that all new transmission projects would be assessed under the relevant state and federal environment and planning legislation, which requires a demonstration of avoiding and minimising impacts on protected areas and other ecological values. The government will not receive any payments from this legislation, regardless of the example that you have given about a particular land tenure. Planning and environment considerations are not dealt with in this bill.

Melina BATH: Just finishing off on the infringements, the penalties, if the farmers are obstructing access, for example, with the WRL or the VNI West, through the process of an EES – let us pick the VNI West. If the planning and the processes are going here and a farmer or landholder has said no and it then entirely moves somewhere else – it is not feasible – does that farmer still have to pay those penalties on the infringement notice, despite the fact that there will no longer be any thought of the transmission lines going through their particular property?

Ingrid STITT: I think, Ms Bath, we want to give that certainty, and that is the purpose of the Victorian transmission plan and the renewable energy zones. Having that certainty is very important. Just let me get a little bit more advice from the box.

The whole purpose of the land access provisions of this bill is so assessments can be made about whether they are suitable locations for energy transmission projects. That is the purpose of the entry provisions of this bill.

Melina BATH: So across any cross-section of a particular renewable energy zone and corridor there could be multiple fines on the same, we will say, latitude or longitude if farmers are choosing not to enable access – that is my take on that.

Minister, in relation to VicGrid and the body that was set up for VicGrid and the rollout of this next tranche with VicGrid stage 2, why didn't the government investigate, think about and explore an independent body, not the statutory VicGrid body, to oversee the rollout of the renewables and transmission infrastructure? Why has it gone in-house? Why hasn't it sought to have an independent body make these sorts of assessments?

Ingrid STITT: Obviously subject to the passing of the legislation, we are the only state, Ms Bath, using AEMO as its transmission planner, so VicGrid, subject to this bill passing, will become a state business corporation, meaning it will be operated as a state-owned entity separate from DEECA, and

that will ensure an appropriate level of independence as it moves to take on the declared network functions for Victoria.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, why are you limiting the community infrastructure fund to, effectively, climate change-related projects and spending? What if a community needed a new community hub, or a mental health facility, a hospital – whatever. Why is it being limited to, effectively, climate change-related projects?

Ingrid STITT: I need to correct you there, Mrs McArthur: it is not climate change projects, it is energy-related projects that will be able to be funded through the community fund. The government has a whole budget process in relation to other investments across the state and they cover all manner of things; you have mentioned a couple in your question. But the bill before us deals specifically with energy projects for the community fund.

Bev McARTHUR: Are there any restrictions on a landowner or anybody else who wants to take VicGrid or the government to task, effectively, through the courts to challenge your accessing of private land?

Ingrid STITT: No.

Gaelle BROAD: There is a section in the bill on page 133 that refers to authorising ‘an authorised officer to use reasonable force to gain entry if it is reasonably necessary to do so, including by using reasonable force to remove any obstruction’. You referred earlier to reasonable force. When I look at Victoria Legal Aid, it talks about reasonable force as meaning ‘using enough physical force to arrest you, and no more’. Is that what you are saying applies in this bill, that reasonable force could be used to arrest a landholder?

Ingrid STITT: No. I said that it was a well-understood legal term.

Gaelle BROAD: It is also a legal term that is used in self-defence laws, deciding what is a reasonable amount of force in any situation. Do landholders have a right to use a reasonable amount of force in self-defence?

Ingrid STITT: They are matters that are outside the scope of this bill, and they are matters that would be subject to a court deliberation, if indeed such a matter made it to a court. They are matters for courts to determine.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you, Minister, but the bill does refer to reasonable force. I think it is very much a part of this bill, and it is of great concern to the communities that I represent. Given that authorised officers will be trained – I am assuming that there will be training – what advice will they be given before it even sees a court?

Ingrid STITT: Mrs Broad, you asked me about whether an individual would have self-defence provisions apply in these situations, and my answer to you was very clearly that it is not in the scope of this bill, and this bill does not impact on any of the existing self-defence provisions. Authorised officers will go through a range of training, which I have gone to a couple of times in answer to a few questions, in undertaking their duties.

Gaelle BROAD: Another paragraph in the bill refers to authorising ‘a person entering the land to bring with them any equipment or other things reasonably necessary for the purpose of the exercise of a power under section 93’. Can you clarify what is acceptable equipment? Are boltcutters acceptable? Is a bulldozer acceptable? If you can define.

Ingrid STITT: Acceptable equipment will depend on the circumstances, but the primary reason for seeking access will be to determine the suitability of the land for transmission purposes. There may be certain works that are carried out, and that would have to be in accordance with the access provisions of the bill. I cannot give you a specific answer. It is going to be dependent on what type of work is required on that particular land.

Gaelle BROAD: Would an authorised officer be able to cut locks or cut fences, for example?

Ingrid STITT: Perhaps the way I can answer this is to point you to how authorised officers will exercise their powers. The bill is very clear that authorised officers and electricity corporations will only be able to enter land under the proposed provisions if either an authorised officer or a relevant electricity corporation have advised a landholder that an authorised officer may attend the site and they have given the required notice as set out in the bill and they have followed all of the required identification steps contained in the bill. The legal right to access land relates to the purposes of facilitating access by an electricity company, which will include conferring temporary section 93 EIA powers on the CEO of VicGrid or the CEO of VicGrid's authorised representative until the transition date. Following the establishment of VicGrid as a state business corporation and the commencement of relevant provisions of the bill, an electricity corporation will include the new VicGrid state business corporation or exercise powers themselves under section 93, where they have been expressly authorised to do so.

I have gone to a couple of the safeguard provisions already in answer to some questions from Ms Bath, but there is a requirement for authorised officers to follow several procedures, including doing or causing to be done no more than is reasonably believed necessary to facilitate electricity corporation powers under the act, taking reasonable steps to minimise disruption and staying no longer than is reasonably necessary.

David DAVIS: Perhaps I can help the minister here. At the briefing the CEO of VicGrid indicated that those reasonable forces could include using boltcutters to cut locks. That might just be helpful, and the minister might like to confirm what the CEO told us on transcript here, that cutting locks would be one of the reasonable force steps that could be used.

Ingrid STITT: I am not sure there was a question in that.

David DAVIS: I am asking you to confirm it on the transcript.

Ingrid STITT: Confirm what – at a briefing that I was not at?

David DAVIS: That is right, and you can perhaps go and ask at the desk; some of these people might well have been there. But the CEO was quite clear that lock cutting was amongst the reasonable force that could be used.

Ingrid STITT: In terms of these issues, I have indicated that the authorised officer must follow several procedural safeguards, including doing or causing to be done no more than is reasonably believed necessary to facilitate electricity corporation powers, and that includes taking reasonable steps to minimise disruption and staying no longer than is reasonably necessary. I am not in a position to answer hypotheticals about how these authorised officer land access provisions will happen over the period of time, but what I will reiterate is that there are safeguards in the bill that require authorised officers to act in a way that is reasonable and necessary under the electricity corporation powers.

David DAVIS: I will just put on the record that the CEO did point to processes around it – yes, that is correct – but he did also indicate that locks could be cut. Let me ask you another question about reasonable force: could an officer use a headlock on somebody as part of reasonable force? Or let me put this another way: can you rule out an officer using a headlock as part of reasonable force?

Ingrid STITT: As you know, Mr Davis, we have got authorised officers across a range of different government departments, including DEECA, particularly in the public land and environment space. I have indicated in answer to a number of other questions the government's expectations around the training that will be provided for these authorised officers. Obviously I am not in a position to predict what a court might determine to be reasonable force or not, but what I will say is that there is an expectation that part of the training will include de-escalating situations. We do not want to have any confrontation associated with the access of land for these purposes under the bill.

David DAVIS: One of the other points that the CEO made in the briefing, and he indicated there was a process, is that moving machinery might be part of the role of some of these officers. They may need to move machinery where a landholder has left machinery strategically positioned. Will you confirm or rule out these officers using reasonable force to move machinery?

Ingrid STITT: I have already gone into a bit of detail about how authorised officers can exercise their powers. I am not going to get into different hypothetical scenarios that you are putting to me in the committee stage. I have responded in relation to the expectations around training of AOs in regard to this bill, and I think I have already answered this question a number of different ways.

David DAVIS: Again, I just say to the minister that the CEO did indicate at the briefing that it is entirely possible that officers might well move machinery. My question is: what training would they have in the start-up and operation of heavy machinery?

Ingrid STITT: In answer to a question – I think it was from Mr Ettershank – I have already answered the questions around the types of issues that the training would go to, so I refer you to my previous answer.

David DAVIS: Did that include heavy machinery operation?

Ingrid STITT: Again, you are asking me to respond to a hypothetical scenario. What I indicated in a broad sense was that the training that these authorised officers will receive will include making sure that they are cognisant of the issues that will be relevant in the land settings that they are required to access.

David DAVIS: I just want to record that this is deeply unsatisfactory of the minister. You may not want to say it, but the CEO was quite clear in the briefing that there may be occasions where moving machinery might be part of the role of these officers. The CEO also indicated cutting locks might well be part of the role of those officers to gain entry to a property. So it is trite, if I can put it that way, to say, 'It's only a hypothetical.' It is not a hypothetical. These officers are getting enormous powers to do these actions. I am concerned that those officers may well exceed their powers, may exceed their competence. I for one would be very worried if some of these officers were to try and start up or move pieces of heavy equipment – graders, big agricultural equipment, headers and others of that nature. So if you are able to tell me that they will not do that, I will be somewhat reassured on that count, but it does not seem you are able to say that to me. But I am interested to hear: can you rule out these officers initiating the moving of these large pieces of agricultural equipment?

Ingrid STITT: Again, you are presenting a scenario to me, but what I can say – and you will know this from your own reading of the bill before the house – is that the bill refers specifically to the use of reasonable force. That is a well-understood legal term, which the courts interpret – it is not for me to interpret, it is for the courts to interpret – and of course the bill refers specifically to the use of reasonable force to remove an obstruction.

Melina BATH: We discussed earlier in relation to denying access to an authorised officer to come onto somebody's land and that if a farmer has obstructed entry and there is a difference of opinion about why, there is a dispute resolution process, and part of that could end up being in a Magistrates' Court for a magistrate to make a ruling on this. That is how I heard it; is that correct?

Ingrid STITT: There is a process which initially encourages a voluntary agreement to be made around land access. Essentially the answer is yes, but there are a range of different steps before you would get to that point, Ms Bath. Our hope is that there will be many examples of where access can be via a voluntary agreement that has been reached and people taking a reasonable approach to what particular circumstances might be live on a particular farmer's land.

Melina BATH: If I can reflect some of the sentiments of people out on the steps over recent weeks and months, they are not feeling reasonable anymore. They are feeling quite frustrated and desperate. I will put it as a hypothetical, but there is a question at the end of it. Because farming communities are

feeling that the government is running roughshod over them and because they feel that they have lost their say and their right to operate their farms without people coming on to them, they could actually potentially slow the whole rollout of transmission lines and renewable energies because they could choose to end up in court when dispute resolution is not successful from the government's point of view. So rather than running roughshod over them, if there was a different way, a more conciliatory way, you actually may end up with a faster rollout in a better location than you have got now. That is a point. But noting my hypothetical, which could happen, is the government actually looking at more resources for our regional court systems and/or more magistrates if farmers en masse decide to oppose and seek courts to decide these outcomes?

Ingrid STITT: I have said more times than I can count that our preference is that voluntary agreements are entered into. I also would point out to you that, under the existing land access powers, if land is unable to be accessed, then the only way you can pursue that access is by making an application to the Supreme Court. So under the current system, you are into court almost straightaway. What we have proposed in this bill is a different, preferred approach when it comes to reaching voluntary agreements to access land. But then if access is blocked, the bill sets out a process for what steps have to be taken to access the land.

David DAVIS: Minister, would you explain to the chamber and the community why the government felt it necessary to invoke an FOI exemption for certain activities? Why did the government suppress the general FOI powers?

Ingrid STITT: You would know, Mr Davis, that alignment with AEMO, which we are transferring the functions from. Some commercially sensitive information needs to remain confidential in order for there to be confidence in investment in this transition plan. It is of an unprecedented scale and so the commercially sensitive information is exempt from FOI.

David DAVIS: I am already on the record indicating that AEMO is a body that is beyond the reach of normal scrutiny, normal examination. It is a publicly owned body, a private company, but it cannot be properly scrutinised with normal techniques. To document motions in the chamber, the government refuses to provide information. AEMO is exempt under FOI, so I do not think it is a model you would want to compare yourself to. You are creating a new statutory body, a normal body, so why would you not allow it to have the normal FOI rules? Section 34 of the FOI act provides exemptions for commercially sensitive information, so why not allow, subject to that, FOI to operate in the normal way?

Ingrid STITT: I will reiterate that AEMO as a non-government entity is not subject to FOI. This means that information provided to AEMO in their role as Victoria's declared shared network planner has not been subject to disclosure under the FOI act. Under the bill VicGrid is subject to a specific confidentiality and protected information regime that impacts its obligations under freedom-of-information laws. The bill introduces detailed provisions restricting the use and disclosure of protected information by VicGrid, which includes information given in confidence or related to VicGrid's renewable energy zone planning and statutory functions. So while VicGrid will be subject to the Victorian Freedom of Information Act, the bill designates documents containing protected information as exempt documents and therefore exempt from FOI requests.

Bev McARTHUR: New section 93BF 'What is an entry order?' authorises a person entering the land to bring with them any equipment or other things reasonably necessary for the purpose of the exercise of a power under section 93. What equipment is being proposed here?

Ingrid STITT: We have been down this road a few times, but it would depend on the circumstances of the land that access was being sought on.

Bev McARTHUR: Could it include body cameras and capsicum spray, for example?

Ingrid STITT: I think that is being alarmist.

Bev McARTHUR: Answer the question. Handcuffs?

Ingrid STITT: I would point you to the discussion we were having much earlier in the evening about the code of practice and the fact that authorised officers are an established workforce in a number of different parts of government. I point you to those answers that I have given previously.

Bev McARTHUR: I just know that when I had some drovers out in the Moyne shire, the VicRoads authorised officers had body cameras and capsicum spray and were very intimidating, so I am presuming these authorised officers will be equally equipped. But I am wondering how the box has gone in finding out the answer to the child protection orders. So how is that going with anybody coming on to properties? Will they have a working with children certificate?

Ingrid STITT: I note that authorised officers, Mrs McArthur, are not permitted to enter homes on land, but notwithstanding that, yes, they can be required to have a working with children check.

Bev McARTHUR: Can? Or will it be compulsory that they have a working with children certificate?

Ingrid STITT: We are saying yes, Mrs McArthur.

Richard WELCH: Mr Davis was asking questions before about freedom of information and other transparency measures. One of the obstacles to transparency is the claim of commercial in confidence over certain contracts and decisions. Could you please give an example of what on these projects would be commercial in confidence and why?

Ingrid STITT: When VicGrid takes over the role of AEMO – subject to this bill passing the Parliament – as I have already indicated, there will be sensitive market information that will need to remain confidential. These exemptions are also essential for ensuring that the confidential information that VicGrid receives as a result of its network planning role is protected from unauthorised or unwanted use or disclosure, including through FOI requests. It is not the project itself that is sensitive per se, it is the information held by VicGrid, some of which will come from a particular proponent.

Richard WELCH: I would like to understand: what market information? What does that mean? That is a very broad term that could mean practically anything. What is the market information that is commercial in confidence?

Ingrid STITT: I cannot predict that in specific terms, but what I can say is that sensitive information could include costs, models of operating, operational plans and the like. There would be much potentially sensitive information that would be part of any particular energy project proposal – security, for example.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: I invite Mr Davis to move amendment 1, which tests amendment 9.

David DAVIS: I move:

1. Clause 1, page 3, lines 20 to 23, omit all words and expressions on these lines.

This is the VicGrid amendment, and this is the removal of part of clause 1. I give notice that we will move amendments 9 onwards on our list to oppose the retention of clauses.

Ingrid STITT: The government will not be supporting this amendment. This amendment would exempt the statutory body corporate VicGrid from the requirement to hold a licence under the act to transmit electricity, so the amendment would prevent VicGrid from delivering a crucial function of the legislation to plan Victoria's electrical transmission infrastructure.

Business interrupted pursuant to standing orders.

Gayle TIERNEY: Pursuant to standing order 4.08, I declare the sitting to be extended by up to 1 hour.

Council divided on amendment:

Ayes (16): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Noes (21): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Amendment negatived.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: I move:

1. Clause 1, page 3, lines 27 to 30, omit all words and expressions on these lines.

Ingrid STITT: The government will not be supporting this amendment. The amendment would remove all land access provisions from the bill, and the proposed amendment would fail to deliver a critical function of the legislation to establish a new compliance and enforcement framework for land access and REZ schemes to support the performance of VicGrid's functions and the delivery of essential energy infrastructure.

David LIMBRICK: The Libertarian Party will be supporting Ms Tyrrell's amendment for the exact reasons that the government opposes it.

David DAVIS: The Liberals and Nationals will support Ms Tyrrell's amendment. In fact it is identical to ours, and we see that it is actually a very well framed amendment, if we may say so.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: The question is that Ms Tyrrell's amendment 1, which tests her amendment 2, be agreed to.

Council divided on amendment:

Ayes (17): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Adem Somyurek, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Noes (21): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Amendment negatived.**Clause agreed to; clauses 2 to 49 agreed to.****Clause 50 (22:10)**

Sarah MANSFIELD: I move:

1. Clause 50, page 80, line 20, omit "subparagraph (i)." and insert "subparagraph (i); and".
2. Clause 50, page 80, after line 20 insert –
“(c) to, through the payment of grants of money from the Fund, support biodiversity outcomes in Victoria, including support for the implementation of biodiversity programs, and the carrying out of biodiversity research, in Victoria.”.

I spoke to these in my second-reading speech, but the amendments I am putting forward today pertain to the community energy fund. They are quite simple. The first set of amendments proposes that the community energy fund be not only used to support renewable energy projects, as currently written in

the legislation, but expanded so the parameters of the program include projects that support biodiversity outcomes, including biodiversity programs and research in local communities.

On the second set of amendments, I will speak to that now. I understand that the Liberals have an identical amendment, which will take precedence, but I will speak to it anyway. We actually agree with this. The ability of the Treasurer to take money away from the community energy fund into the Consolidated Fund should not be allowed to occur. This amendment would ensure that money in the community energy fund can only be used for local communities, as the fund was intended.

Ingrid STITT: In relation to Dr Mansfield's amendment, the government will be supporting this amendment. As we went into earlier in committee, the amendment expands the REZ community energy fund to encompass supporting biodiversity outcomes and biodiversity research in Victoria, and this will deliver material benefits to Victoria's environment. I will hold my thoughts about Mr Davis's amendment, which is in identical terms to Dr Mansfield's, until we get to that.

David DAVIS: There are different opinions here. On the biodiversity, I just have a question. As I understand it, this will see additional charges put on the bills. Where is the money coming from for this? As I understand it – and obviously the amendments are new to us this evening – the money will come from households and the bills that they pay and businesses. Please tell me if I am wrong on that, but I want to know where the money for this funding is coming from.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Just for clarity, the community energy fund is already outlined in this legislation, and where the funding is coming from for that has already been outlined by the minister. All our amendment does is expand the types of projects that money can be spent on. So it does not say anything about where the money comes from – that has already been discussed – and perhaps the minister can speak to where that money comes from. This does not change the amount of money that is collected; it changes the scope and the breadth of the types of projects that can be funded so that it is not just energy projects that can be funded but also projects that support biodiversity.

David DAVIS: That is exactly as I understood it. You will seek to fund a larger range of projects with the same amount of money, but I do not see that this bill fixes the amount of money. I see that this bill is actually open-ended for what is struck, and my fear is that additional charges will be put on families and additional charges will be put on businesses to pay for this. It is good in its intent, but I am very concerned that there will be additional costs put on families and businesses.

Ingrid STITT: No, that is not the case, Mr Davis. This will not change decisions about the funds or indeed the amount of money that will be in the funds. It is just one more eligible use under the fund.

David DAVIS: But I want to record here now that the minister could not tell me earlier in this committee the amount that would be put onto each bill year by year going into the future. You could not tell me that, and that worries me, because I think what is going to happen here is effectively a larger number of items will be required to be funded, and families and businesses will pay more on their electricity bills.

Ingrid STITT: I reject that hypothesis. Essentially you are conflating a number of different issues and questions in committee. The amendments are very clear, and the government is supporting Dr Mansfield's amendments. We have no issue with expanding the REZ community energy fund to encompass projects supporting biodiversity outcomes.

David DAVIS: So how much will be put on the bill of each family and each business next year and the year after and the year after? Can you tell me that? Is there a schedule or a list or an estimated amount? Is that available somewhere?

Ingrid STITT: Mr Davis, you are playing a few games with this one, because basically you have already been told that it is the same amount of money.

David DAVIS: Which is an undefined amount of money. You cannot tell me how much it is. I am concerned about that. In that sense I see it as an open-ended new tax.

David LIMBRICK: The Libertarian Party will not be supporting these amendments. I see the community energy fund as just a way for the government to buy social licence with the money of the energy consumers, so it is giving their own money back to them, effectively, in a long roundabout way, and expanding the uses for that I do not support. I think that this is a magnet for misallocation of resources and potentially corruption, and therefore I will not support expanding its uses.

Council divided on amendments:

Ayes (21): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Noes (15): Melina Bath, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Amendments agreed to.

David DAVIS: I move:

4. Clause 50, page 81, line 24, omit “Fund;” and insert “Fund.”.
5. Clause 50, page 81, lines 25 and 26, omit all words and expressions on these lines.
6. Clause 50, page 82, lines 1 to 5, omit all words and expressions on these lines.

The amendments simply ensure that money in this fund cannot be taken into consolidated revenue.

Ingrid STITT: The government will be supporting these amendments. These amendments are identical to amendments that have already been agreed with the Greens. And yes, the amendments remove the possibility that money from the REZ community energy fund can be returned to the Consolidated Fund.

David LIMBRICK: I have a question for the minister regarding the community energy fund. It is my understanding that this is a supplier charge based on volume, which seems quite similar to an excise tax. Has the minister received advice on the constitutional validity of this charge?

Ingrid STITT: I am not the minister, I am the minister representing the minister. One moment.

Yes, there has been advice received, and that will inform the making of the regs.

David LIMBRICK: The Libertarian Party will also be supporting these amendments. I think these are good ones, despite my reluctance to support the community energy fund in the first place. Since I have been in this Parliament I have seen too many times where the government sees pots of money, like the TAC or WorkCover or water boards, and they see this capital in these funds and then they do a ‘capital repatriation’, they call it normally, and they rip the money out. But effectively this is just a tax when that happens, so this will at least prevent that and ensure that the money will be spent according to the rules of the fund, rather than just sent back to consolidated revenue.

Sarah MANSFIELD: As indicated, the Greens will be supporting this. We had an identical amendment, so we think this is a sensible change to the legislation. We understand that there probably was not an intention for this to occur anyway, but ensuring that this potential gap in the legislation is closed just gives certainty that the community fund will stay as a community fund and the money will remain in there.

Amendments agreed to.

David DAVIS: I move:

7. Clause 50, page 82, after line 28 insert –

“93A Retailer to notify customer of Fund costs passed on

- (1) If a retailer passes a Fund cost on to a customer as described in subsection (2), the retailer must notify the customer of that cost.
- (2) A retailer passes on a Fund cost to a customer if –
 - (a) the retailer charges the customer for electricity; and
 - (b) that charge includes an amount (a *Fund cost*) that is subsequently to be paid to VicGrid (whether by the retailer or by any other entity) for payment into the REZ Community Energy Fund.
- (3) A notification under subsection (1) must be made within 12 months of the Fund cost being passed on.
- (4) In this section –

retailer has the same meaning as in the **Electricity Industry Act 2000**.”.

Amendments 7 and 8 are a pigeon pair. They are transparency measures. In the case of 7, it requires that money that is collected for the REZ community energy fund is obviously collected from the bills, from the supply charge of every electricity consumer, so that is households and businesses. They are not told currently, clearly and up-front how much is collected and how much is paid through a number of these schemes. With respect to this scheme, we seek to set up a regime so at least annually they are told how much is collected from them. Otherwise they will never know.

Ingrid STITT: The government will not be supporting this amendment.

Council divided on amendment:

Ayes (16): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Noes (21): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Amendment negated.

David DAVIS: I move:

8. Clause 50, page 85, after line 22 insert –

“95A Retailer to notify customer of Fund costs passed on

- (1) If a retailer passes a Fund cost on to a customer as described in subsection (2), the retailer must notify the customer of that cost.
- (2) A retailer passes on a Fund cost to a customer if –
 - (a) the retailer charges the customer for electricity; and
 - (b) that charge includes an amount (a *Fund cost*) that is subsequently to be paid to VicGrid (whether by the retailer or by any other entity) for payment into the Traditional Owners Fund.
- (3) A notification under subsection (1) must be made within 12 months of the Fund cost being passed on.
- (4) In this section –

retailer has the same meaning as in the **Electricity Industry Act 2000**.”.

The same applies to the traditional owners fund. People who are paying the money should at least know how much is being taken from them.

Ingrid STITT: The government will not be supporting this amendment.

Amendment negated; amended clause agreed to; clauses 51 to 58 agreed to.

Clause 59 (22:33)

David DAVIS: I invite members to vote against this clause. This is a repeat of an earlier one, but the substance is different in the sense that the clause must stand part of the bill, and in that sense we will move it again.

Ingrid STITT: The government will not be supporting this amendment. The proposed amendment would fail to deliver a critical function of the legislation to establish a new compliance and enforcement framework for land access and risk schemes to support the performance of VicGrid's functions and the delivery of essential energy infrastructure.

Clause agreed to; clause 60 agreed to.

Clause 61 (22:34)

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: I invite members to vote against this clause.

Ingrid STITT: The government will not be supporting this amendment.

David DAVIS: The Liberals and Nationals will support it.

Council divided on clause:

Ayes (21): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Noes (16): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Clause agreed to.

Clause 62 agreed to.

New clause 62A (22:39)

David ETTERSHANK: I move:

1. Insert the following New Clause before clause 63 –

'62A Definitions

In section 3 of the **Electricity Industry Act 2000** insert the following definition –

"public sector employee has the same meaning as in the **Public Administration Act 2004**;"

I think we have previously discussed the question of authorised officers at some length. Some concerns were expressed that this is not defined. This amendment inserts new clause 62A, and it basically defines 'public sector employee' and links them directly to the Public Administration Act 2004. It has relevance to my amendments 2, 3 and 5, where basically all authorised officers need to be public employees. In other words, they are public sector employees, they cannot be private contractors, and they are also bound by the public sector code and various other things such as that. I have covered those before, so I will not go on any further.

Ingrid STITT: The government will be supporting this amendment. The amendment clarifies that AOs may only be public sector employees.

Sarah MANSFIELD: The Greens will be supporting this amendment. We think this is a good change. It strengthens the bill and provides some clarity and some assurances around the role of authorised officers. There is capacity for greater oversight of their conduct and the ability for VicGrid and the government to monitor how authorised officers are being used to oversee the functions that they are. So we are very supportive of this and are supporting the changes that Mr Ettershank has proposed.

David LIMBRICK: I just have a question for the minister. Was there ever any intention that an authorised officer would ever be someone that is not a public sector employee anyway?

Ingrid STITT: No, Mr Limbrick, the amendment builds on the government's commitment that authorised officers are accountable to the minister and therefore the Victorian people.

David DAVIS: I accept the member bringing this to the chamber in good faith. As this tranche of amendments has come extremely late in the piece, we have not had a chance to consult or to actually test some of these points closely. It is just not clear to me why we would need to legislate to make it public sector employees. As has been asked by Mr Limbrick, we all presumed it would be the case. Certainly I would think that public sector codes could apply to people who are perhaps employed for summer periods or something like that, like with firefighters and some others of that nature who are employed for a shorter period. So I am just not exactly sure what is trying to be achieved here.

David ETTERS HANK: Very simply, I suppose this is primarily for the purposes of clarity. The bill does not define what constitutes an authorised officer. As I said in the second-reading debate, we had concerns that this could be any sort of vigilante deputy type or someone with no training or that it could be entirely subcontracted or whatever. So our desire is to indicate that this has got to be someone who is employed under the Public Administration Act. There is then a whole series of training obligations and behavioural obligations that apply specifically to those public employees. That is the purpose of it; it is for the removal of any ambiguity.

David DAVIS: I think in this circumstance the Liberals and Nationals, whilst understanding the good faith that it is brought in with, just cannot support it. We just have not had the time to test it and to actually look at the other alternatives, and in this circumstance we will oppose it.

New clause agreed to.

Clause 63 (22:45)

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: I invite Mr Ettershank to move his amendment 2, which has already been tested by his amendment 1.

David ETTERS HANK: I think I spoke to it before, but basically that first one is the definition and the second one is its application in clause 63, replacing the previous reference. I move:

2. Clause 63, line 8, omit "person" and insert "public sector employee".

Ingrid STITT: The government will support this amendment.

David DAVIS: The Liberals and Nationals have the same view as with the clause before.

Amendment agreed to.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: I invite members to vote against this clause.

Ingrid STITT: For similar reasons, the government will not be supporting this amendment.

David DAVIS: The Liberals and Nationals will support Ms Tyrrell on this matter by voting to omit the clause.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: The amendment is seeking to omit a clause, so I remind people that those supporting Ms Tyrrell's amendment should vote no.

Council divided on amended clause:

Ayes (21): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Noes (16): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Amended clause agreed to.**Clause 64 (22:50)**

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: I invite members to vote against this clause.

Ingrid STITT: The government will not be supporting this amendment.

David DAVIS: The Liberals and Nationals will be supporting this amendment.

Council divided on clause:

Ayes (21): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Noes (16): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Clause agreed to.**Clause 65 (22:54)**

David ETTERSHANK: I move:

3. Clause 65, line 26, omit “person” and insert “public sector employee”.
4. Clause 65, line 27, omit “person” and insert “public sector employee”.
5. Clause 65, page 127, lines 1 to 7, omit all words and expressions on these lines.

If I may speak briefly to this, amendments 3 and 4 specifically insert the public sector employee definition into the definition of who the minister can appoint, that they have to be a public sector employee. Amendment 5 deletes multiple lines in the bill. This arises as a result of invoking the Public Administration Act which precludes a person being a police officer because this is put in here separately. It is a redundant clause and that is why it is being removed. It is purely a technicality.

Ingrid STITT: The government will be supporting these amendments.

David DAVIS: For the same reasons as the earlier amendments – insufficient time and insufficient capacity to test these points – the opposition is going to oppose them.

Sarah MANSFIELD: As outlined before, the Greens will be supporting these amendments.

Amendments agreed to.

David ETTERSHANK: I move:

6. Clause 65, page 132, line 6, omit “60” and insert “30”.
7. Clause 65, page 137, line 26, omit “60” and insert “30”.

9. Clause 65, page 143, line 17, omit “60” and insert “30”.
10. Clause 65, page 149, line 4, omit “60” and insert “30”.
11. Clause 65, page 149, line 25, omit “60” and insert “30”.

I am hoping I can tempt my opposition colleagues here. These five clauses very simply halve the penalty for a range of offences that relate predominantly to destruction of property or documents that relate to entry. The amendments reduce the penalties from 60 penalty units to 30 penalty units, or a bit over \$12,000 to a bit over \$6000.

David DAVIS: Again, these amendments came very late. Whilst on one level any reduction in penalty is a step, I just put on record that there are 19 sets of new penalties in this bill. This amends nine of them, but the other 10 are untouched. For example, in clause 68B, ‘Providing false or misleading information’, the penalty units are 60 penalty points or 240 for a body corporate. But that is not touched by any of these. There is no rationale for why one lot of penalties is touched and the other is not with this set of amendments, so it is a very confusing set of points. We will oppose the whole clause and all of the penalties that are put forward in those clauses, and that is why on a number of these we do need to vote against every clause, because we want to make it crystal clear that we do not agree with these penalties. Even a mild or slightly filtered down version is actually not what we propose.

David LIMBRICK: Whilst I concur with Mr Davis and I also do not want these penalty units, I think that what we are doing here with these amendments is we still have the rights breach; we are simply changing the magnitude of penalties for that. However, I will take a reduction over nothing. I also intend to oppose it overall, but for these particular amendments, I will not oppose it.

Ingrid STITT: The government will be supporting these amendments, and we thank Legalise Cannabis Victoria for their constructive engagement with the government.

Sarah MANSFIELD: The Greens will also be supporting these amendments. We welcome the amendments that have been put forward by Legalise Cannabis. I understand also the Animal Justice Party were involved in the discussions around this, so I thank them for their work on this. We had some concerns which we had asked a number of questions around, and I think the reduction in the penalty is appropriate.

Amendments agreed to.

David ETTERSHANK: I move:

8. Clause 65, page 139, after line 29 insert –
 - “(1A) In determining whether there are reasonable grounds for making the order, the Magistrates’ Court must have regard to the extent to which an electricity corporation or the CEO VicGrid has complied with the relevant obligations described in subsection (1B) in relation to entering –
 - (a) onto the land in respect of which the application is made; and
 - (b) in the circumstances in relation to which entry is sought to be authorised under the entry order; and
 - (c) for the purpose for which entry is sought to be authorised under the entry order.
 - (1B) The relevant obligations for the purposes of subsection (1A) are obligations that –
 - (a) are imposed by the provisions of a Code of Practice referred to in section 93(5)(d); and
 - (b) require things to be done before (and not during or after) entry onto land.”.

This is an amendment to clause 93BL regarding the Magistrates’ Court. What it does is it specifically points the magistrate to the code of practice in section 3 of the Electricity Act, and that code of practice has been in place since 2015. Under the existing provisions in the act there are limitations on the scope of the magistrate’s discretion, such that it is basically consistent with the rollout plan for transmission infrastructure. In that sense it basically introduces a much greater natural justice provision, and it also

requires that actions can only be initiated prior to an entry or suchlike rather than during or after. So it actually means that these are pre-emptive, not concurrent or punishing.

Business interrupted pursuant to standing orders.

Gayle TIERNEY: Pursuant to standing order 4.08, I declare the sitting to be extended for up to 1 hour.

Ingrid STITT: The government will be supporting this amendment. The amendment builds on the existing requirements for VicGrid to operate in a manner that ensures any penalties are a last-resort measure.

David DAVIS: The opposition again have concerns that we have not been able to test this. We have not had time to get some legal views on it. It sounds like it might be an improvement, but I do not claim to have legal capacity. In that respect I think the safest course is for us to indicate that we oppose it.

Sarah MANSFIELD: The Greens will be supporting this amendment. We believe it provides some greater clarity around the steps that need to be taken before any enforcement orders are made, and so we welcome that.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: The question is that Mr Ettershank's amendment 8, which tests his amendment 16, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

David ETTERS HANK: I move:

12. Clause 65, page 152, line 4, omit "6" and insert "4".
13. Clause 65, page 152, line 9, omit "6" and insert "4".
14. Clause 65, page 152, line 14, omit "6" and insert "4".
15. Clause 65, page 152, line 24, omit "6" and insert "4".

These amendments simply identifies four other infringement areas. I think perhaps this is what Mr Davis might have been referring to in error before. These are the other four clauses that specifically have a penalty of 60 penalty units. For these four it reduces that penalty from 60 penalty units to 40 penalty units, or a reduction from \$12,000 to \$8000 or thereabouts.

David DAVIS: The opposition will not support these. We understand why Mr Ettershank is bringing these, but again they have come very late. I make the point that out of the whole raft of penalty changes that Mr Ettershank is proposing, I make it nine out of 19 have been slightly reduced and the other 10 have not. It is our preference to vote against the entire clause and make it clear that we do not support any of these additional penalties being put in place. I am tempted to use an expression that was used to me by Mr Bourman, but I do not think that would be parliamentary, about how this might make the pain of the outing easier. But I do not think that this is probably the place to use that expression, although I was amused.

Sarah MANSFIELD: The Greens will be supporting these for the same reason we supported the previous amendments regarding the reduction in penalties.

Ingrid STITT: The government will be supporting Mr Ettershank's amendments.

Amendments agreed to.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: I invite members to vote against the amended clause.

Ingrid STITT: The government will not be supporting this amendment.

David DAVIS: The Liberals and Nationals will wholeheartedly support this amendment. Instead of tinkering and tampering and trying to negotiate some half-baked solution, we should just say no to these harsh and extreme penalties that are being imposed by a draconian and out-of-time government.

Council divided on amended clause:

Ayes (21): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Noes (16): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Amended clause agreed to.

Clauses 66 to 75 agreed to.

New clause 75A (11:09)

David ETTERS HANK: I move:

16. After clause 75 insert –

‘75A Magistrates’ Court may make entry order

In section 93BL(1A) of the **Electricity Industry Act 2000** omit “or the CEO VicGrid”.

The lucky last amendment. This clause is an amendment that removes the right of the VicGrid CEO to make an entry order. The act currently treats both the CEO and a magistrate as equal in making those orders, and the effect of this amendment is to delete the reference to the VicGrid CEO and limit the power to make an order to the magistrate.

Ingrid STITT: The government will be supporting Mr Ettershank’s amendment.

David DAVIS: I understand again the good faith that this has been brought in, but again it is very hard for us to assess this on very short notice. We are minded not to support it because there is not a timely opportunity to consider it.

Sarah MANSFIELD: The Greens will be supporting this, as discussed previously.

New clause agreed to; clauses 76 and 77 agreed to.

Reported to house with amendments.

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (23:11): I move:

That the report be now adopted.

Motion agreed to.

Report adopted.

Third reading

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (23:11): I move:

That the bill be now read a third time and do pass.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (21): Ryan Batchelor, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Katherine Copsey, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Shaun Leane, Sarah Mansfield, Tom McIntosh, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Gayle Tierney, Sheena Watt

Noes (16): Melina Bath, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie Hermans, David Limbrick, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Richard Welch

Motion agreed to.**Read third time.**

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

Australian Grands Prix Amendment Bill 2025*Introduction and first reading*

The PRESIDENT (23:15): I have a message from the Legislative Assembly:

The Legislative Assembly presents for the agreement of the Legislative Council 'A Bill for an Act to amend the **Australian Grands Prix Act 1994** in relation to the race period, the definition of *grand prix insignia*, acting appointments and public access areas, to provide for the Australian Grand Prix Corporation to host approved events and for other purposes.'

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (23:16): I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.**Read first time.**

Harriet SHING: I move, by leave:

That the second reading be taken forthwith.

Motion agreed to.*Statement of compatibility*

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (23:16): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

In accordance with section 28 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*, (the **Charter**), I make this Statement of Compatibility with respect to the Australian Grands Prix Amendment Bill 2025 (the **Bill**).

In my opinion, the Bill, as introduced to the Legislative Council, is compatible with human rights as set out in the Charter. I base my opinion on the reasons outlined in this statement.

Overview

The main purposes of this Bill are to amend the *Australian Grands Prix Act 1994* (the **Act**):

- to extend the maximum duration of the race period from 7 to 21 days;
- to provide for the declaration of public access areas within the declared area;
- to update the definition of 'grand prix insignia';
- to increase the maximum payment that the Australian Grand Prix Corporation (the **Corporation**) can make to the committee of management under section 41 of the Act;

- to allow the Corporation to host non-motor sport events or the Australian Formula One Grand Prix (**Grand Prix**) events approved by the Minister;
- to provide for the appointment of acting members and an acting chairperson to the Corporation; and
- to update gendered language and make other minor and consequential amendments.

Human Rights Issues

The human rights that are relevant to the Bill include:

- recognition and equality before the law (section 8);
- freedom of movement (section 12);
- privacy (section 13(a)); and
- property (section 20).

Updating terminology

Clauses 16, 17, 27 and 28 of the Bill amends sections 11, 12, 44 and 51 of the Act by replacing references to 'his' and 'her' and 'he' and 'she' with non-gendered terms, such as 'the person' and 'the Minister'.

Recognition and equality before the law (section 8)

Section 8(2) of the Charter provides that every person the right to enjoy their human rights without discrimination. Section 8(3) provides that every person is equal before the law and is entitled to the equal protection of the law without discrimination and has the right to equal and effective protection against discrimination. This component of the right ensures that laws and policies are applied equally and do not have a discriminatory effect.

'Discrimination' under the Charter has the same meaning as in the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010*. Discrimination includes direct and indirect discrimination on the basis of an attribute listed in section 6 of that Act (which includes a person's gender identity and sex characteristics).

The Bill promotes the right to recognition and equality before the law by removing gendered language and replacing it with non-gendered terms. These amendments promote the right by removing exclusionary language and clarifying that the provisions in these Act are inclusive of all persons, including non-binary persons.

Extension of race period

Clause 22 of the Bill amends section 27 of the Act, which currently empowers the Minister responsible for administering the Act, acting jointly with the Minister responsible for administering the *Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978 (Crown Land Act)*, to declare a race period not exceeding 7 days in relation to the 'declared area', being all or part of Albert Park, and other land surrounded by it. Relevantly, section 30 of the Act requires the Corporation to manage and control the declared area, section 32 allows the Corporation to fence or cordon off the whole or any part of the declared area, and section 33 authorises the closure of any (part of a) road within the declared area, for the duration of the race period. Specifically, clause 22 amends section 27(b) of the Act to extend the maximum duration for which the race period can be declared from 7 to 21 days.

Freedom of Movement (section 12)

Section 12 of the Charter relevantly provides that every person lawfully within Victoria has the right to move freely within Victoria. The right extends, generally, to freedom to move throughout the State without impediment or restrictions (both physical and procedural) and a right to access places and services used by members of the public. However, this right is not absolute and may be subject to such reasonable limitations as are demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society, including the property rights of others and restrictions legitimately made in the public interest.

The effect of the above amendment to extend the duration of the race period is to increase the length of the existing restrictions on public access to, and use of, Albert Park, which is Crown land reserved under the Crown Land Act for the purpose of a public park. This amendment may further restrict public access to the Melbourne Sports and Aquatic Centre (MSAC), Lakeside Stadium, Albert Park driving range, and various sporting clubs and businesses. To the extent that the amendment excludes or limits public access to public places, it may interfere with the right to freedom of movement.

However, this amendment serves an important and legitimate public safety objective. While the maximum duration for which the race period can be declared under the Act has not changed since its commencement in 1994, the scope of work involved in hosting the Grand Prix has changed significantly over this period, including a significant growth in attendance levels and a corresponding rise in operational and infrastructure requirements. The expanded scope of the event has increased the scale of, and time required for, erecting and

dismantling the event. The effect of this escalation is the requirement for works to be increasingly undertaken outside the 7-day race period. The greater presence and activity of construction machinery and vehicles for the purpose of erecting and dismantling significant infrastructure outside of the race period creates safety risks for pedestrians and cyclists. Therefore, the amendment to extend the maximum duration that public access is restricted in the declared area is necessary to appropriately prepare the site for the Grand Prix and protect the general public from safety risks posed by the works, thereby facilitating the safety of local residents and the wider community.

Further, section 30 of the Act already provides for the continued operation of most venues and businesses within the declared area. For example, Lakeside Stadium, the Albert Park driving range, and the MSAC are likely to remain at least partially open with some alternative access arrangements. Additionally, members of the general public will continue to have access to numerous sporting clubs and venues, which will not be affected by the extended race period.

Further, to mitigate the impact of this reform on the freedom of movement, clause 6 of the Bill inserts new section 27A, which allows the Corporation to declare specified areas within the declared area to be a public access areas, and specify the dates and times during which the public may have access to these areas during the race period. These new powers will be subject to notification and consultation requirements and Ministerial oversight (ss 27C and 27G). This amendment thereby minimises the impact of the increased access restrictions on the general public, so that any limitations on the freedom of movement go no further than reasonably necessary to achieve the purpose of the Bill.

Therefore, while the Bill limits the right of members of the public to move freely within and through Albert Park, it is aimed at balancing public safety, operational and contractual requirements with the rights of local residents and the wider community to access public spaces and services, including recreational facilities and parks. Further, the limitation is time bound (up to 21 days a year) and is necessary to enable the Corporation to safely deliver the event. Further, the Bill strengthens existing measures in the Act to limit the restrictions on movement to the least restrictive means available to safely host the Grand Prix, facilitating public access insofar as the event build and dismantle allows.

Accordingly, in my view, the Bill is not incompatible with the right to freedom of movement under section 12 of the Charter.

Restrictions on access affecting business operations

Section 30 of the Act requires the Corporation to manage and control the declared area, and provides that the rights and interests of any person in relation to the declared area are suspended for the duration of the race period. As the Bill extends the maximum duration of the race period, it consequently extends the period that affected persons' rights and interests are suspended.

However, section 30 further provides that a person who ordinarily has the right to carry on a business in premises within the declared area, being a premises in which they have a right of occupation, may continue to operate the business to the extent and in accordance with the conditions set by the Corporation, after consulting the committee of management. Clause 13 amends this provision to further require the Corporation to have regard to the operational requirements and safety considerations of the Grand Prix, and the access required by business owners in order to carry on the business (whether at full or reduced capacity) (cl 14, new s30A), in determining these conditions.

Commercial tenants will, therefore, be variably impacted by the extended race period, either experiencing limited operation and/or alternative access arrangements, or being required to cease operations altogether for the extended 21-day race period.

As such, the extended restrictions may be relevant to the property and privacy rights of the commercial tenants within the declared area. However, only natural persons have Charter rights, while the amendments primarily apply to incorporated entities and to the commercial affairs of people, rather than to individuals. To the extent that the Bill will affect the rights of individuals (e.g. sole proprietors and members of unincorporated associations), as opposed to companies or other incorporated bodies, I discuss the relevant human rights issues below.

Right to privacy (section 13(a))

Section 13(a) of the Charter provides that a person has the right not to have their privacy, family, home or correspondence unlawfully or arbitrarily interfered with. An interference with the right to privacy will be lawful if it is permitted by a law which is precise and appropriately circumscribed, and will be arbitrary only if it is capricious, unpredictable, unjust or unreasonable, in the sense of being disproportionate to the legitimate aim sought.

Although the Charter does not include an express 'right to work', there is case law which suggests that the right to privacy may include 'a right to work of some kind' where there is a sufficient impact upon the personal

relationships of an individual or on their capacity to experience a private life, for example by curtailing their ability to earn a living and maintain their identity through employment.

It is possible that for a person who operates a business, the suspension of their rights to operate their business for the extended period of 21 days, may significantly curtail their ability to earn a living. Thus, on a broad reading, the right to privacy may be engaged by the suspension of a person's rights as a result of the extended maximum duration of the race period. However, given the temporary nature of such suspension, it could not be said to be reaching the threshold of adversely affecting their ability to maintain their identity through employment.

Accordingly, I consider that any interference arising from the extended maximum duration would not be arbitrary, and therefore, that the privacy right is not limited.

Property rights (section 20)

Section 20 of the Charter provides that a person must not be deprived of that person's property other than in accordance with the law. This right relevantly requires that powers which authorise the deprivation of property are conferred by legislation, are confined and structured rather than unclear, are accessible to the public, and are formulated precisely.

For the purposes of section 20 of the Charter, 'property' includes all real property interests recognised under the general law, which extends to contractual rights. As the Bill increases the period of time that commercial tenants and sublessees' rights to operate their business may be suspended, and these rights are contractual in nature, the Bill may be relevant to a property interest.

An interference with property may amount to a deprivation in circumstances where it effectively prevents a person from using or dealing with their property. A deprivation of property includes any substantial restriction on a person's exclusive possession, use or enjoyment of their property. As amended section 27(b) extends the period that the Corporation is granted exclusive possession of the declared area, which includes certain business premises, it is likely to interfere with the property rights of persons who are deprived of the exclusive possession and use of their business premises. Further, the tenants who are required to significantly reduce or cease operating for the entire race period will experience significant disruptions to their business operations, such that they are deprived of the right to the use or enjoyment of their property.

However, the right to property will only be limited where a person is deprived of property 'other than in accordance with the law'. For a deprivation of property to be 'in accordance with the law', the law must be publicly accessible, clear and certain, and must not operate arbitrarily. In this instance, the interference will not be arbitrary, but governed by a clear and accessible process set out in the Bill and subject to reasonable conditions. For example, it can only be exercised with the approval of the Minister (s 27). Further, many affected tenants will be eligible for the existing compensation scheme, which entitles persons with businesses established before 1994, whose rights are suspended by the reason of the declared area access restrictions, to monetary compensation in accordance with section 30(5) of the Act. This provision allows for further compensation to account for the additional days of closure required under the extended race period.

Accordingly, any interference with a person's property right that results from the increased access restrictions under section 27(b), is in accordance with law. Further, the new provisions of the Bill are drafted in clear and precise terms, and are sufficiently accessible via public notice requirements. As such, I consider that the right to property is not limited by this amendment.

To the extent that the Bill limits any Charter rights, such limits are reasonable, proportionate and justifiable in accordance with section 7(2) of the Charter. I am satisfied that reforms introduced by this Bill are compatible with the Charter.

Hon Gayle Tierney MP
Minister for Skills and TAFE
Minister for Water

Second reading

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (23:16): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

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

The *Australian Grands Prix Act 1994* (Act) has been in force for over 30 years. It empowers the Australian Grand Prix Corporation to hold the Formula 1 Australian Grand Prix (Grand Prix) at Albert Park and the

Australian Motorcycle Grand Prix (MotoGP) at Phillip Island. These events have been annual features of the Victorian major events calendar since 1996 and 1997 respectively.

The Grand Prix provides a significant contribution to the Victorian visitor economy – driving visitation and spend, contributing to the vibrancy and liveability of Victoria and promoting Melbourne and Victoria to a global audience. This event holds the record for the highest attended weekend sporting event ever staged in Melbourne.

In 2025, the Grand Prix increased Victoria's Gross State Product by \$323.9 million, generated an estimated \$3.08 in economic impact for the state for every dollar invested by the Victorian government and supported an estimated 1,631 annual full-time equivalent jobs through roles such as event construction and hospitality.

It is truly one of the biggest jewels in Victoria's major events crown and one that will remain here until at least 2037.

As with all legislation, it is important to ensure that the Australian Grands Prix Act remains fit for purpose and reflects contemporary needs. With the Grand Prix continuing to grow in popularity and complexity, this Bill makes a number of amendments to the Act to ensure the arrangements continue to support the conduct of the Grand Prix in a manner that balances the safe operation of the event with the needs of the community.

The Act currently allows for the declaration of a race period not exceeding 7 days. While this may have been adequate 30 years ago, the Grand Prix has grown significantly so the infrastructure required, and time needed to build and dismantle race infrastructure has also increased. Bigger attendances at the Grand Prix requires a bigger event footprint and more infrastructure. Consequently, the Bill proposes to increase exclusive access to Albert Park to up to 21 days. This extension to the maximum duration of the race period is critical as pedestrians and cyclists would otherwise be subjected to increasing safety risks through exposure to workers and vehicles undertaking the growing infrastructure build and dismantle. The Act provides that people carrying on business in the declared area may continue to access those parts of Albert Park during the race period, subject to the approval and conditions of the Australian Grand Prix Corporation. This will continue to apply in relation to the longer race period however the Bill requires the Australian Grand Prix Corporation to be transparent in its decision making around tenant access.

The Bill also establishes a mechanism to enable the Australian Grand Prix Corporation to allow access to Albert Park during the race period, ensuring the public continues to have as much access to the park as possible for as long as is safe to do so. The AGPC will be required to consult the minister responsible for administering the Act and publish its determinations on the Victoria Government Gazette and its website. This will ensure Victorian Government oversight of AGPC's decision-making and adequate public awareness of AGPC's determinations. The Bill also enables the AGPC to vary or revoke a determination with approval of the Minister responsible for administering the Act. Further, the AGPC can temporarily close a publicly accessible area if it considers it necessary to do so in an emergency or for public safety.

It is intended that amendments will be made to the *Australian Grands Prix (Formula One) Regulations 2016* (Regulations) to facilitate operation of public access areas.

The Bill also reduces the time for which a designated access period can be declared under the Act to compensate for a potentially increased race period. The designated access period allows the Australian Grand Prix Corporation to control small parcels of land for storage and other matters. The reduction will avoid inconsistencies between the race period and designated access period.

The definition of 'grand prix insignia' in the Act is now out of date. Some of the protected expressions are simply no longer used to promote the Grand Prix or MotoGP and the operational requirements for the events have changed over time. The Bill therefore updates the definition of 'grand prix insignia' to reflect these outcomes.

The Bill also increases the legislated payment to the committee of management for Albert Park – Parks Victoria – in recognition of the increased footprint of the Grand Prix and the additional work required from it to help stage the event, including tenant liaison and park maintenance and upkeep. The annual payment will rise from \$100,000 to \$200,000, which is roughly equivalent to adjusting the original figure for inflation. In addition, the Bill allows this compensation to be increased through the Regulations.

The Act currently only authorises the AGPC to facilitate the Grand Prix and the MotoGP, which includes ancillary activities such as concerts and parades where they are associated with the motor events. The Bill provides the Australian Grand Prix Corporation with the power to host non-motor sport events at any time, subject to the approval of the Minister. This will enable the AGPC to pursue additional avenues for raising revenue, which may reduce its reliance on government funding.

The amendments require applications from the Australian Grand Prix Corporation to host non-motor sport events to be provided 6 months in advance of the proposed event and contain essential operational and security information. The Minister may have regard to the financial sustainability of the event, operational factors and

consultation undertaken. The Minister must consider any effects on the committee of management and tenants of Albert Park if an event is proposed to be held there.

The Bill also amends governance provisions relating to the Australian Grand Prix Corporation board to allow the Minister to appoint acting members, as opposed to the Governor in Council, and allow for the appointment of an acting chairperson. These are important amendments to ensure continuity in the performance and leadership of the AGPC board.

Finally, the Bill enhances the governance and powers of the Australian Grand Prix Corporation to deliver its functions.

I commend the Bill to the house.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (23:16): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for one week.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for one week.

Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Medication Administration in Residential Aged Care) Bill 2025

Introduction and first reading

The PRESIDENT (23:16): I have a further message from the Legislative Assembly:

The Legislative Assembly presents for the agreement of the Legislative Council 'A Bill for an Act to amend the **Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981** to further provide for the administration of medication to residents in aged care and for other purposes.'

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (23:17): I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Harriet SHING: I move, by leave:

That the second reading be taken forthwith.

Motion agreed to.

Statement of compatibility

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (23:17): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

In accordance with section 28 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (the **Charter**), I make this statement of compatibility with respect to the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Medication Administration in Residential Aged Care) Bill 2025 (the **Bill**).

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

Overview of the Bill

The Bill builds on a broader suite of reforms by the Victorian Government that are aimed at improving the quality and safety of care for older people living in residential aged care. Specifically, the Bill aims to build on existing legislative requirements that require a registered nurse to manage the medication administration process for people living in residential aged care.

The main purposes of the Bill are to amend the *Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981* (the **Act**) to:

- further provide for the administration of drugs of dependence and Schedule 4, 8 and 9 poisons to persons accessing funded aged care services in residential aged care homes; and

- make consequential amendments, including those required following the repeal of the *Aged Care Act 1997* (Cth) and the enactment of the *Aged Care Act 2024* (Cth).

Human rights issues

The Bill is relevant to the right to life (section 9) and promotes the right to freedom from forced medical treatment (section 10(c)) and right to privacy (section 13(a)).

Administration of medication in aged care services

The Bill amends Division 10A of Part II of the Act, which regulates the management and administration of drugs of dependence and Schedule 4, 8 and 9 poisons in residential aged care. Specifically, clause 8(2)(c) of the Bill amends section 36E(1)(a), which requires registered providers to ensure that a registered nurse manages the administration of any drug of dependence or Schedule 4, 8 or 9 poison to persons receiving funded aged care services in a residential aged care home. The effect of this amendment is to expand the application of section 36E from aged care residents receiving a high level of care to all residents accessing funded aged care services in a residential aged care setting.

New section 36EA, which is inserted by clause 9, requires registered providers to ensure that any drug of dependence or Schedule 4, 8 or 9 poison supplied to persons accessing funded aged care services in the residential aged care home, is administered by a registered nurse, an enrolled nurse who holds a specified qualification, or another registered health practitioner (eg, medical practitioner, pharmacist, dentist) who is authorised under the Act or regulations to do so.

This new requirement is subject to the conditions that the drug or poison has been supplied on prescription to that person who is on the premises of the residential care home when the drug or poison is administered to them. Non-compliance is subject to a criminal penalty. The effect of this amendment is to restrict who can lawfully administer medication in Victorian residential aged care homes to suitably qualified practitioners.

However, this provision is subject to limited exceptions: under new section 36EA(3), a registered provider does not contravene section 36EA(1) if:

- they have a reasonable excuse;
- a resident self-administers the drug or poison;
- a person administers the drug or poison in accordance with circumstances prescribed in the Regulations.

Right to life

Section 9 of the Charter provides that every person has the right to life and to not be arbitrarily deprived of life. The right to life is one of the most fundamental of all human rights. It is concerned with both the protection and preservation of life.

The right to life has not been examined by the courts in any detail in Victoria. Under international human rights law, the right to life includes an obligation on the State to refrain from conduct that results in the arbitrary deprivation of life, as well as a positive duty to introduce appropriate safeguards to minimise the risk of loss of life. This includes an obligation on the State to prevent arbitrary deprivation of life, particularly towards persons in vulnerable situations where threats to life are reasonably foreseeable. An 'arbitrary' deprivation of life may be described as one that is unreasonable or disproportionate.

The amendments introduced by this Bill are intended to build on existing obligations with respect to the management and administration of medications in residential aged care settings by restricting who can lawfully manage and administer medication to suitably qualified practitioners. A large number of people living in residential aged care have complex health needs which typically require intricate medication regimes. While medicines can treat conditions, control symptoms, and prevent disease, people with complex health needs taking a high number of medications are at an increased risk of adverse drug events. Further, the management and administration of drugs of dependence and Schedule 4, 8 and 9 poisons by unqualified persons can risk compromising health outcomes for aged care residents and lead to serious adverse health events.

The Bill mandates the safe and effective administration of certain prescribed medicines by appropriately qualified nurses and health practitioners. Registered nurses have the clinical skills to understand the therapeutic action of medicines and recognise adverse reactions and respond appropriately. Enrolled nurses also have clinical training and work under the supervision and delegation of a registered nurse. Clinical judgement is required when managing and administering medication and often involves assessing whether medicines should be administered or withheld. Accordingly, as the Bill aims to reduce adverse event-related morbidity and mortality for older people living in residential aged care, it can be characterised as promoting the right to life.

Given the inherent potential dangers of these drugs and poisons, this amendment may engage the right to life in relation to the adequacy of steps taken to safeguard against risks to life. The scheme is subject to strict regulatory controls that are reasonable and proportionate to the risks to human life posed by the amendments. First, the provisions will be subject to a range of regulatory requirements and sanctions relating to the management and administration of drugs of dependence and Schedule 4, 8 or 9 poisons, including:

- Stringent eligibility criteria in relation to the authorisation of enrolled nurses and other registered health practitioners, specifically:
 - Enrolled nurses are required to hold a qualification approved by the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia in relation to the administration of medication (clause 9, new section 36E(2)(b)). This mandatory minimum requirement is aimed at facilitating high professional standards and ensuring that enrolled nurses have the knowledge and skills required to safely administer medication to the aged care residents;
 - Other registered health practitioners must be authorised by or under the Act or regulations to administer the drug or poison (clause 9, new section 36E(2)(c));
- Existing practice limits apply in relation to registered nurses and registered health practitioners who are subject to a condition, limitation or restriction prohibiting the obtaining, possession, use, sale or supply of a drug of dependence or Schedule 4, 8 or 9 poison, where they will not to be authorised under the Act to use or supply the relevant poison. These restrictions protect against any risk of harm associated with the management and administration of drugs or poisons by practitioners who have been sanctioned by the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia; and
- Offence provisions in relation to a failure to comply with the drug and poison management and administration (clauses 8 and 9, sections 36E(1) and 36EA(1)).

These safeguarding provisions are directed at reducing the incidence of harm, including death, from the administration of drugs of dependence or Schedules 4, 8 and 9 poisons. Accordingly, I conclude the Bill is compatible with the right to life.

Additionally, the administration requirements do not apply in respect of residents who self-administer their own medication (clause 9, new section 36EA(3)(b)). Further, these offence provisions do not apply to the residents themselves. As such, the Bill promotes the right not to be subjected to medical treatment without one's full, free and informed consent (section 10(c), and the right to bodily integrity, which protects against interference with a person's physical self by others without their consent (section 13(a)).

For these reasons, I consider the Bill to be compatible with the human rights protected by the Charter.

Hon Ingrid Stitt MP
Minister for Mental Health
Minister for Ageing
Minister for Multicultural Affairs

Second reading

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (23:17): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

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

The purpose of this Bill is to improve the quality and safety of care for older people living in Victorian residential aged care homes.

It will amend the *Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981* so that only registered nurses, enrolled nurses with specified qualifications and other authorised registered health practitioners, administer drugs of dependence and Schedules 4, 8 and 9 medications to people in residential aged care for whom the medication has been supplied on prescription. This is a legislative change that will strengthen protocols around how medication is delivered to people living in Victoria's residential aged care homes. The Bill will also modernise language to reflect amendments made to Commonwealth legislation.

These changes reflect the Victorian Government's commitment to reduce the risk of medicine-related problems in residential aged care.

This Bill builds on existing state legislative requirements that aged care providers ensure that a registered nurse manages the medication administration process.

Older people are increasingly entering residential aged care later in life and with more complex health conditions that cannot be safely managed in their own home.

Complex care needs often means people have multiple medications. Based on Commonwealth data covering the period from July to September 2024, 36% of people living in Victorian residential aged care facilities are prescribed nine or more medications – which is the highest rate of polypharmacy in the country. Further, 19% receive antipsychotics which can carry particular risk if not managed appropriately.

Compared to older people living in the community, people living in residential aged care have complex health needs and intricate medication regimes that requires clinical skills when administering medication.

In 2020, the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia estimated that 20% of unplanned hospital admissions from residential aged care are a result of inappropriate medicine use.

The 2021 Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety identified medication management and safety in residential aged care as an essential area for improvement, and highlighted incidents of inappropriate management of medication regimens, including medicines not being administered correctly or residents being given tablets without oversight to ensure they swallow them.

The Royal Commission's report also found that the routine care of older people in residential aged care often did not meet expectations.

Mandatory Care Minutes were introduced in response to the Royal Commission, to ensure that older people in aged care homes receive the dedicated care time they need. Since October 2023, providers have increased their staffing profile to meet targets – including 44 minutes of direct care by a Registered Nurse.

Commonwealth reforms to funding residential aged care and the implementation of the AN-ACC funding model has seen providers have greater certainty over their funding and more appropriate funding to meet the needs of their residents. This change has allowed for adequate staffing levels to provide quality care for residents.

This Bill helps ensure that older Victorians receive the best and highly skilled care from our registered and enrolled nurses in residential aged care.

This Bill will not remove a person's right to administer their own medication – if it is safe and they wish to do so. The Commonwealth Government has *Guiding Principles for medication management in residential aged care* which includes the importance of regular clinical assessment to determine a person's capacity to self-administer medicines safely and document their consent to do so.

This Bill will also not change how medication is administered in other settings, such as in someone's own home or in hospitals. This Bill will also not change how the Voluntary Assisted Dying scheme operates.

The Bill will not have any effect on the ability of registered health practitioners with existing authorisation under the DPSCA or Regulations to administer medication to residents, such as general practitioners, geriatricians, pharmacists or dentists.

Building on consultation undertaken in 2022 and 2024, we have consulted widely in the development of this Bill. This year alone more than 29% of the non-government sector has been consulted and contributed to the development of this Bill, and we have also worked closely with the Public Sector Residential Aged Care Services. We've consulted with peak bodies including Ageing Australia, the Victorian Healthcare Authority, and unions including, the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation and the Health Services Union; and the Commonwealth Government, including the regulatory bodies that oversee aged care.

I thank these valued stakeholders for their meaningful input into this reform.

This Bill incorporates what we have heard and learnt from our extensive consultation and engagement with the sector. We understand that it is common practice in most Victorian homes to have registered and enrolled nurses to administer Schedules 4, 8 and 9 medication to people for whom the medication has been supplied on prescription. We also recognise that in some residential aged care homes, there may be a need to shift away from having non-nursing staff, such as personal care workers, undertaking this responsibility.

We understand there may be unforeseen circumstances that impacts nursing availability – a serious resident emergency, temporary unexpected staff shortages at the commencement of a shift, or other factors impacting nursing availability to administer medication on time. For that reason, the Bill provides power to make regulations to prescribe exceptional circumstances where the obligation will not be breached. For example, this power may be used to specify circumstances where another person may administer prescribed medication if there is a risk to a resident from delayed or missed medication because of nursing availability. This is not intended to cover rosters with insufficient nurses, but rather unplanned situations that may occur from time to time.

Consistent with the broader Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act, the Health Regulator will adopt a risk-based and responsive approach to enforcement, with a priority focus on addressing significant harms from non-compliance, consistent with a public compliance and enforcement policy. Consistent with the Act, the Bill will provide for a criminal penalty of 100 penalty units for non-compliance with the new requirements without reasonable excuse. This criminal penalty will not apply in situations where a person self-administers or there is a prescribed circumstance.

We recognise that change may be difficult for some providers. And in addition to the commencement of this reform on 1 July 2026 – nearly 12 months away, the Victorian Government is committed to a 90-day grace period – a policy position where no enforcement action will be pursued until 29 September 2026 to give providers additional flexibility as they implement these changes.

In the 2025/26 budget, \$7.6 million over four years was allocated to support State Government funded services – the Public Sector Residential Aged Care Services – with implementation of the reform.

In addition, the Victorian Government has ongoing initiatives, incentives and policies to support and increase the nursing workforce, including in aged care:

- A Diploma of Nursing is available under the Victorian Government's free TAFE initiative, which will increase the pipeline for additional enrolled nurses for government and non-government health and care sectors.
- The Making it Free to Study Nursing initiatives aiming to increase the public sector nursing workforce, including in Public Sector Residential Aged Care Services.
- The landmark 28.4% increase (over 4 years) to Nurses and Midwives' Enterprise Agreement 2024–2028 which is expected to assist with attracting and retaining nurses in the government sector.
- The Nurses and Midwives' Enterprise Agreement also enables and encourages diploma of nursing students to be employed in the public sector as Registered Undergraduate Students of Nursing (RUSONs – Bachelor students) and Registered Enrolled Nurse Students (RENS – Diploma students) whilst they complete their studies.
- \$95.1 million over four years was announced in the 2025/26 State Budget to support Victoria's health workforce through initiatives including registered undergraduate students of nursing, transitional support programs and capacity development for rural nurses.

The Department of Health will be supporting the sector with change management through sector communications and an opportunity for government and non-government providers to come together to exchange best practices in medication management, prior to the reform commencing.

To ensure these changes are working as intended, and that aged care providers are adequately supported, a five-year review will be undertaken by the Department of Health. This review will gauge the implementation of the reform against implementation objectives as proposed. From day one, the Department will also regularly engage with the broader sector through voluntary and anonymised surveys to gather insights and information on implications of the reform.

With this Bill, the Victorian Government will be the only jurisdiction to explicitly legislate that registered health practitioners can administer schedules 4, 8 and 9 medications to some of our most vulnerable people. It is part of the Government's commitment to ensure Victorians living in residential aged care homes receive the highest quality care and their medication from the most qualified workers.

I commend the Bill to the house.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (23:17): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for one week.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for one week.

Statute Law Revision Bill 2025

Introduction and first reading

The PRESIDENT (23:18): I have a further message from the Legislative Assembly:

The Legislative Assembly presents for the agreement of the Legislative Council 'A Bill for an Act to revise the statute law of Victoria.'

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (23:18): I move:

That the bill be now read a first time.

Motion agreed to.

Read first time.

Harriet SHING: I move, by leave:

That the second reading be taken forthwith.

Motion agreed to.

Statement of compatibility

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (23:18): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

In accordance with section 28 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* (Charter), I table a statement of compatibility for the **Statute Law Revision Bill 2025** (Bill).

In my opinion, the Bill, as introduced in the Legislative Council, is compatible with human rights as set out in the Charter. I base my opinion on the reasons outlined in this Statement.

Overview

The Bill makes minor and technical amendments to a number of Acts.

In particular, the Bill:

- Corrects typographical, grammatical, numbering and section reference errors in the *Accident Compensation Act 1985*; *Administration and Probate Act 1958*; *Australian Consumer Law and Fair Trading Act 2012*; *Business Franchise (Petroleum Products) Act 1979*; *Caulfield Racecourse Reserve Act 2017*; *Cemeteries and Crematoria Act 2003*; *Child Employment Act 2003*; *Corrections Act 1986*; *Country Fire Authority Act 1958*; *Court Services Victoria Act 2014*; *Disability Service Safeguards Act 2018*; *Family Violence Protection Act 2008*; *Fisheries Act 1995*; *Health Complaints Act 2016*; *Mental Health and Wellbeing Act 2022*; *Serious Offenders Act 2018*; *Status of Children Act 1974*; *Surveying Act 2004*; *Tobacco Act 1987*; *Transfer of Land Act 1958*; *Triple Zero Victoria Act 2023*; and the *Youth Justice Act 2024*.
- Updates references to the *Administrative Appeals Tribunal Act 1975* (Cth) in a number of Acts, to reflect the fact that it has been repealed and replaced by the *Administrative Review Tribunal Act 2024* (Cth) by updating references to the former Act in the *Agricultural and Veterinary Chemicals (Victoria) Act 1994*; *Competition Policy Reform (Victoria) Act 1995*; *Corporations (Victoria) Act 1990*; *Federal Courts (State Jurisdiction) Act 1999*; *Gene Technology Act 2001*; *Marine (Domestic Commercial Vessel National Law Application) Act 2013*; *New Tax System Price Exploitation Code (Victoria) Act 1999*; *Research Involving Human Embryos Act 2008*; *Sports Anti-doping Act 2005*; *Therapeutic Goods (Victoria) Act 2010*; and the *Water Efficiency Labelling and Standards Act 2005*.
- Amends a number of Acts to correct references to names of departments that are out of date because of Orders made under the *Administrative Arrangements Act 1983*.
- Amends the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006* to correct a reference to that Act being “the specified Act” for the purposes of the *Land Acquisition and Compensation Act 1986*, as the term defined in the *Land Acquisition and Compensation Act 1986* is “the special Act”.
- Amends the *Circular Economy (Waste Reduction and Recycling) Act 2021* to replace references to an Alpine Resort Management Board with references to Alpine Resorts Victoria, its successor in law, following the abolition of the Alpine Resort Management Boards by the *Alpine Resorts Legislation Amendment Act 2022*.

I consider that the amendments under the Bill do not engage any rights under the Charter.

Hon Jaclyn Symes MP

Treasurer

Minister for Industrial Relations

Minister for Regional Development

Second reading

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (23:18): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

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

The Bill before the House, the Statute Law Revision Bill 2025, is a regular mechanism for reviewing Victoria's statute books and is required in order to ensure Victorian statutes remain clear, relevant and accurate.

The Bill makes minor and technical amendments to various Acts, including updating references and correcting typographical errors. This serves the broader purpose of ensuring these Acts remain relevant and accessible to the Victorian community.

The Bill:

- Corrects typographical, grammatical, numbering and section reference errors in the *Accident Compensation Act 1985*; *Administration and Probate Act 1958*; *Australian Consumer Law and Fair Trading Act 2012*; *Business Franchise (Petroleum Products) Act 1979*; *Caulfield Racecourse Reserve Act 2017*; *Cemeteries and Crematoria Act 2003*; *Child Employment Act 2003*; *Corrections Act 1986*; *Country Fire Authority Act 1958*; *Court Services Victoria Act 2014*; *Disability Service Safeguards Act 2018*; *Family Violence Protection Act 2008*; *Fisheries Act 1995*; *Health Complaints Act 2016*; *Mental Health and Wellbeing Act 2022*; *Serious Offenders Act 2018*; *Status of Children Act 1974*; *Surveying Act 2004*; *Tobacco Act 1987*; *Transfer of Land Act 1958*; *Triple Zero Victoria Act 2023*; and the *Youth Justice Act 2024*.
- Updates references to the *Administrative Appeals Tribunal Act 1975* (Cth) in a number of Acts, to reflect the fact that it has been repealed and replaced by the *Administrative Review Tribunal Act 2024* (Cth), by updating references to the former Act in the *Agricultural and Veterinary Chemicals (Victoria) Act 1994*; *Competition Policy Reform (Victoria) Act 1995*; *Corporations (Victoria) Act 1990*; *Federal Courts (State Jurisdiction) Act 1999*; *Gene Technology Act 2001*; *Marine (Domestic Commercial Vessel National Law Application) Act 2013*; *New Tax System Price Exploitation Code (Victoria) Act 1999*; *Research Involving Human Embryos Act 2008*; *Sports Anti-doping Act 2005*; *Therapeutic Goods (Victoria) Act 2010*; and the *Water Efficiency Labelling and Standards Act 2005*.
- Amends a number of Acts to correct references to names of departments that are out of date because of Orders made under the *Administrative Arrangements Act 1983*.
- Amends the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006* to correct a reference to that Act being "the specified Act" for the purposes of the *Land Acquisition and Compensation Act 1986*, as the term defined in the *Land Acquisition and Compensation Act 1986* is "the special Act".
- Amends the *Circular Economy (Waste Reduction and Recycling) Act 2021* to replace references to an Alpine Resort Management Board with references to Alpine Resorts Victoria, its successor in law, following the abolition of the Alpine Resort Management Boards by the *Alpine Resorts Legislation Amendment Act 2022*.

I commend the Bill to the House.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (23:18): I move:

That debate on this bill be adjourned for one week.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for one week.

Adjournment

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (23:19): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Community safety

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (23:19): (1897) My adjournment tonight is for the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. We have seen over the last 24 hours some disgraceful commentary

in this place by those opposite, who seek to divide at every turn. It is divisive language like this that leads to very real dangers for many in our communities.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, matters for the adjournment are matters of government administration, not attacks on the opposition.

Michael Galea: Further to the point of order, President, it was clearly an adjournment matter to the Minister for Multicultural Affairs regarding social cohesion. Mr Davis has been asking those sorts of questions to the minister in question time as recently as today.

The PRESIDENT: I think there are rulings around ministers answering questions, not attacking the opposition. I am sure Ms Ermacora will get to the action.

Jacinta ERMACORA: It is divisive language like this that leads to very real dangers for many in our communities, particularly our multicultural communities. The action I seek is for the minister to provide an update on what the Allan Labor government is doing to improve belonging for everyone in our community and to continue to promote harmony and foster social cohesion.

Kingston City Council

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (23:21): (1898) My adjournment for the Minister for Local Government requests that the minister immediately withdraw monitors from the Kingston City Council. Integrity is always doing the right thing, even when no-one is watching. Sadly, this minister and his recent predecessors have perfected an art form of covertly weaponising their local government portfolio for political purposes: arbitrations, conduct panels, commissions of inquiry and monitors – all to shut down dissent and seize control of councils that refuse to toe the Labor Party line. Having previously dealt with this council in my capacity as shadow minister, it appears well run and to not require the minister's so-called assistance. After all, the sitting mayor is serving her third term and the CEO has maintained a good reputation in the sector over several years. Their crime is opposing cost shifting, inappropriate development and what constitutes insufficient infrastructure. But that is what their ratepayers want, having changed the political make-up of the council at the last election.

The circumstances around this intervention are totally dubious. Guess whose electorate overlaps with Kingston? The minister's. Guess whose cousin and current Labor state secretary was the former four-time mayor of Kingston? The minister's. And guess who will be paying for this exercise? His ratepayers. Clearly the minister is consolidating his power locally and that of his party by undermining those councillors who are not in his Socialist Left factional grouping.

In an article from April 2025 by *Mornington Peninsula News* titled 'Bullying allegations aired in council meeting' it was reported that council referred for investigation to the Local Government Inspectorate a grant that was handed out to the Druze Community Charity of Victoria. Labor councillor Hadi Saab was reportedly on its committee at the time but reportedly recused himself from the June 2024 vote. In relation to this referral he is quoted as saying:

... the discharging of our governance responsibilities in this way is a surefire way of ensuring monitors are appointed to oversee this council ...

Ensuring monitors: how ominous, how convenient, especially when the minister's own cousin was accused of alleged bullying during the last term of council. Ratepayers are wondering if this referral is one of the poor excuses this minister is relying on. So, Minister, I call on you to do the following: publicly name every council or council officer that requested the –

The PRESIDENT: Time has expired.

International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (23:24): (1899) My adjournment matter is for the Attorney-General, and the action I am seeking is for her to advocate to the federal government to ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. This

Saturday, 30 August, is the United Nations International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances. On this day victims are remembered, the suffering of their families is acknowledged and the international community is called upon to take action to end this brutal violation of human rights. The act involves state-sponsored actors, often the military or police, abducting and detaining those they perceive to be a threat to their power. The arrest or detention is denied by authorities, and families are given no information about their loved ones' whereabouts, sometimes in perpetuity. It is considered one of the gravest violations of human rights. The state, which creates and enforces laws, deprives victims of the protection of those very laws. Not much could be more terrifying.

This annual day will be closely followed by the 30th anniversary of the abduction, forced disappearance and death of Mr Jaswant Singh Khalra. Khalra was a human rights advocate in Punjab who was investigating the abduction and illegal killing of tens of thousands of Sikhs, possibly over 25,000, by the state. Much of what he uncovered has since been confirmed by the Supreme Court of India and the National Human Rights Commission, India, yet decades on, thousands of families still have not had any acknowledgement of what happened to their loved ones, a trauma that is hard to imagine. On 6 September 1995 Khalra himself was then abducted from outside his house by Punjab police. It took a decade for the police involved to be held to account. Sikhs around the world, including here in Australia, will be commemorating Khalra's pivotal role in exposing horrendous human rights violations against his fellow Sikhs, the legacy of which continues in their communities today.

Khalra's story highlights the need to protect citizens against the abuse of power by states, which continues to occur in countries all around the world. Many members of multicultural communities in Australia, including refugees and asylum seekers, have direct experience of this crime against humanity, and the threat of it happening to them or their families is sometimes what has forced them to flee their home countries. Ratifying the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance ensures that Australia must adhere to its obligations to protect people from enforced disappearance and do more to hold international counterparts to account. Australia has so far rejected calls to ratify this convention, citing adequate alternative protection. I urge the Attorney-General to advocate to her federal counterpart to review their position and ratify this convention.

Suburban Rail Loop

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (23:27): (1900) The action I seek is from the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop. I have received disturbing correspondence from a resident living within 100 metres of the Suburban Rail Loop site in Heatherton who since early 2025 has experienced debilitating symptoms from vibrations and noise caused by the SRL works. These symptoms include nausea, vertigo, vomiting, insomnia and extreme fatigue, which has resulted in them becoming isolated and sometimes bedbound. These serious health effects are shared by other members of the household and disappear entirely when these residents are away from the property – a clear link to the site-related disturbances. Despite repeated complaints and medical documentation, the SRL authority's responses so far have been deeply inadequate: dinner vouchers, massages, a suggestion that residents install double-glazed windows and daytime relocation to a co-working space, provided you leave the house before 7 am, are no substitute for the natural right of families to enjoy the peace and quiet of their own home as they wish.

The residents' experience is not unique, and their story reflects a broader and growing concern in the community that goes beyond the temporary disruption of construction works. This is about the right of people to live safely in their homes without suffering physical harm, psychological distress or the erosion of their quality of life. Real people are seeing health, employment and quality of life damaged by this project, and I have been advised that the SRL has even acknowledged that these disturbances will continue until an acoustic chamber is completed in 2026. This is an unacceptable delay for residents whose health, employment and wellbeing are already being severely impacted. Accordingly, I ask the minister to urgently investigate these serious health complaints, direct the authority to engage with affected residents in a meaningful and compassionate way, consider appropriate compensation

options and, most importantly, ensure that effective acoustic and vibration mitigation measures are implemented as a matter of urgency well before further avoidable harm is inflicted on residents.

Harriet Shing: So you support the project now?

Richard WELCH: No, I do not.

Wombat protection

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (23:30): (1901) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Environment, and the action I seek is for him to urgently reinstate funding to ensure the continuation of Mange Management Victoria's life-saving work. This small, volunteer-run organisation has carried the weight of a problem the government has long overlooked: the devastating spread of sarcoptic mange in our wombat populations. Mange is caused by a parasitic mite that burrows into the skin of wombats. It leads to relentless itching, fur loss, blindness, secondary infections and a slow and excruciating death. There is no natural recovery. Without treatment every wombat infected will die of mange. In my electorate and across Victoria thousands of wombats suffer this fate each and every year. It is both a welfare crisis and a conservation concern because localised wombat populations can collapse entirely as a result of it. We are talking about one of our most iconic native animals, the bare-nosed wombat, enduring preventable cruelty on a mass scale. Mange Management has stepped into this void. They have pioneered innovative, community-based treatment programs, creating accessible kits that allow landholders, wildlife carers, farmers and rescue volunteers to administer simple but effective mange treatment in the field. This approach has been critical to stopping the spread of the disease and giving infected wombats a chance to survive and to recover.

Previously, the Animal Justice Party was able to secure four years of funding for their work at quite a modest cost, and it was quite literally the difference between life and death for wombats in our state. This year that funding expired, and the government rejected our request for it to continue. Despite their track record and despite the enormous demand for their services, their funding lifeline has been cut. Volunteers are now left scrambling to hold back a wave of suffering with dwindling resources when they should be supported and scaled up. The community should not be expected to carry the burden of this entirely alone. Wombats are a public good, they are part of Victoria's biodiversity and they are part of our natural heritage. It is unacceptable that their survival depends solely on unpaid labour and donations. So the action I seek is that the government urgently reinstate ongoing funding for Mange Management Victoria and commit to a broader statewide strategy for sarcoptic mange management. We need a plan that matches the scale of this crisis and prevents thousands more wombats from enduring an agonising, preventable death.

Pick My Park

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (23:32): (1902) The Pick My Park program has launched, which gives Victorians the opportunity to have their say on local infrastructure and how green spaces are utilised. A great example of this is down at PB Ronald Reserve in our electorate. My action is for the Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts to update me on a successful recipient of the program in our electorate of Eastern Victoria.

Fire Rescue Victoria

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (23:33): (1903) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Emergency Services, concerning Fire Rescue Victoria's truck crisis. Their firefighting capacity has been compromised due to the poor condition of the fleet, and many ageing trucks have been pushed way past their service date. It is very disappointing, to say the least, as I raised this matter with the minister back in March 2024, requesting a review of the metropolitan fleet. At the time 58 per cent of the 73 frontline vehicles had exceeded their service date. Now, 17 months later, during my recent visit last week to fire station 55 at Caroline Springs, the first thing I saw on the station's whiteboard was 'truck failure, out of action'. The station had to borrow another truck from Keilor fire station. So the action I seek is for the minister to acknowledge the concerns of our firefighters and immediately

replace all outdated fire trucks. Approximately 200 fire trucks in FRV's possession – more than 40 per cent of the trucks – have passed their use-by date, and in the metropolitan area the figure exceeds 50 per cent. The Allan Labor government must act now, because in two years time an additional 22 per cent of the FRV fleet will be out of date, bringing the total number of obsolete trucks to 64 per cent. The government is playing with the lives of our firefighters and Victorians by failing to replace old, outdated, unreliable fire trucks and pump trucks.

The factory fire which erupted in Melbourne's west in my electorate last August had massive toxic plumes of chemicals, roaring flames and thick smoke, which were halting traffic. And what did the frontline firefighters have to confront while battling the hazardous fires? They were faced with a truck which had been in service over two decades and which failed to produce foam on two separate occasions during that emergency response. You do not hear that in the news. These hazards and risks are preventable. In this situation disaster could strike at any time during the failure of these fire truck pumpers, which could lead to serious injuries or loss of lives. These types of mishaps cannot be classified as accidents when potential risks are pre-warned. Someone must be held accountable for the lack of action. Our firefighters – the United Firefighters Union Victoria and others – have raised this concern. How do we expect our firefighters to perform their duties and keep our communities safe under these conditions? I urge the minister to meet with the firefighters in my electorate and come prepared to discuss upgrading the ageing fleet, which is no longer fit for purpose.

Rail freight services

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (23:36): (1904) My adjournment this evening is to the Minister for Public and Active Transport. Minister, the upcoming works at Sunshine station to enable Melbourne Airport rail and future electrification to Melton will be beneficial for passenger rail, but recent media reports indicate that the current designs would cause significant problems for freight rail. The current designs seem to sever a crucial link between the Ballarat line and a number of ports and terminals in Melbourne's west. Removing this link would mean a detour via Geelong that is 47 kilometres further. According to the media reports, grain handler CHS Broadbent would not proceed with its intermodal facility in Ballarat West, freight operator Pacific National would have to cut half of its trains carrying dairy products and other freight operators have expressed similar concerns.

The net impact of this will be not only the inconvenience but hundreds more trucks on the roads through regional Victoria and Melbourne's western suburbs, with all the pollution, congestion and danger to pedestrians that that entails. This has echoes of Labor's botched Murray Basin rail project, which was essentially abandoned halfway through when the money ran out and has resulted in trains from Mildura diverting via Ararat, adding a whopping 128 kilometres to their trip to port. To reduce traffic congestion, road damage, road trauma and carbon emissions, Victoria does need to be increasing the proportion of freight that travels by rail. Minister, the action I seek is that you ensure our rail network has the infrastructure in place to support freight on rail.

Suburban Rail Loop

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (23:37): (1905) My adjournment matter this evening is for the attention of the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, and by good chance it seems that the minister is indeed in the chamber. Now, the action that I seek is that the minister update me on the benefits that the Suburban Rail Loop project will bring to my constituents in South-Eastern Metropolitan and also update me on the government's policy and position on this very important project, because it stands in stark contrast to the, we believe, eight positions – but as of Mr Welch's contribution tonight, perhaps nine –

Nick McGowan interjected.

Michael GALEA: We seem to have backtracked again, Mr McGowan – perhaps nine, perhaps who knows. Tomorrow is a new day – perhaps 10, 11, 12 positions from those opposite. Now, we

know that Mr Guy and Mr Farnham have left the Parliament and gone AWOL today. Having seen the shambles in this place last night, I cannot say I blame them. I am not sure who it was that said ‘The party room is in absolute tatters’ to the *Herald Sun*. It could be anyone in here. There are too many of you. It seems that the – what is his role? – shadow minister for transitioning to becoming a minor party has gone over to South America to look at rail infrastructure, to look at projects that we are actually building right here. If he went to visit the site in Heatherton or Box Hill or Clayton, he would see that. He could actually see an infrastructure project happening right here in Melbourne, an infrastructure project that is going to support and benefit people right across different parts of Melbourne and Gippsland, with the SRL East, and in particular my constituents. I would be very grateful for that update and indeed grateful to know that whilst we have eight or nine or many more policies –

Nick McGowan: I thought it was a housing project.

Michael GALEA: What is your position, Mr McGowan? Are you in favour or opposed?

The PRESIDENT: It is 20 to midnight. Do not do this stuff.

Michael GALEA: I ask the minister for an update on this very important project.

Goulburn Valley Highway

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (23:40): (1906) My adjournment tonight is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and the action that I seek is for the minister to instruct Regional Roads Victoria to replace the poor-quality road patching on the Goulburn Valley Highway just north of the Calder Woodburn rest stop with proper pavement repair. I recently raised the appalling condition of the Goulburn Valley Highway between Numurkah and Nagambie and was pleasantly surprised that it resulted in a blitz of work to repair the surface. However, I am disappointed in the quality of some of the repairs, including a large patch of resurfaced road in the left-hand lane of the northbound carriageway just after the Calder Woodburn rest stop. The repaired section has already started to disintegrate and develop potholes. The community has serious concerns that the Victorian government is allowing lower repair standards, which means roads are not being properly repaired. The minister has a duty to ensure that all road repair works meet stringent standards and result in a safe and smooth driving surface on all roads across Victoria. I urge the minister to instruct Regional Roads Victoria to address the poor-quality road patching on the GV highway just after the Calder Woodburn rest stop and ensure full pavement repair of the road is undertaken.

Indian community

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (23:41): (1907) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Minister for Multicultural Affairs, and the action I seek is for the minister to extend the closing date for stage 1 applications for the Indian community centre expression-of-interest project on Melbourne’s west and for the Indian community centre expression-of-interest project for Melbourne’s south-east, which are set to close on 17 September 2025. Minister, we welcome the significance of having dedicated spaces for our diverse multicultural diasporas and recognise how cultural centres like the Indian cultural centres encourage mutual understanding, cultural continuity and a more connected and resilient society. However, members of the Indian community have contacted my office expressing the need for more time to ensure that all eligible organisations have adequate opportunity to prepare the necessary documentation and processes to be fairly considered for shortlisting. As your department understands and recognises, Indian community organisations may be at different stages of community scale, demand and need. Therefore we ask for flexibility to be offered so that all Indian community organisations that would like to be considered in the stage 1 application are offered a fair time to consider all the necessary requirements. Minister, your urgent consideration of this action is important to ensure a fair, just and inclusive process. Therefore I urge you to extend the closing date so all interested applicants are given a genuine and equitable opportunity to participate and be considered.

Community safety

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (23:43): (1908) My adjournment is for the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. In a time of division and mistrust in our institutions, it is more important than ever that our leaders do not seek to divide and undermine the clear principles of what it means to be Victorian, to belong, to be respectful and to provide a fair go for all. The action I seek is for the minister to please update me on how the Allan Labor government is providing leadership in this space, where it is too often lacking, and promoting our cultural and social cohesion as a state.

Retail workplace safety

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (23:43): (1909) My adjournment is to the Premier. In Eastern Victoria youth gangs are ramraiding shops with stolen cars, and they are terrorising shopping centres by swinging machetes and hammers. Staff at Woolworths, Coles and Bunnings are now being equipped with body cams. A mother asked me how the government could let crime spiral out of control so much that her 16-year-old daughter has to wear a body cam when working on the check-outs. What has Jacinta Allan done? She has not followed the advice of experts; she has spent \$13 million on 40 machete bins. New Zealand has not let their crime go unchecked. They have cut ramraids by 60 per cent by using a zero-tolerance approach. They are using tougher policing, instant fines and stricter bail enforcement. Their lead crime expert has now given Victoria the same advice to follow. The action that I seek is for the Premier to follow the evidence-based bail recommendations put forward for years by the Liberal Party, which will keep our community safe and repeat offenders off the streets.

Homeschool Academy Australia

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (23:45): (1910) My adjournment matter this evening is for the attention of the Minister for Education. Mainstream education does not serve the needs of every child or family. There are a variety of reasons for this. Sometimes kids have special needs, sometimes they have experienced bullying and sometimes they simply do not respond well to the structure and environment of a classroom. For many families, though, the education disruptions of COVID changed things forever. Some families discovered that homeschooling really worked for them, and others are dealing with ongoing impacts, with the term 'school refusal' becoming a mainstream term. The TV program *A Current Affair* recently featured Lydia Denker and her tutoring company Homeschool Academy Australia. As Lydia stated on the program, by the time families contact her they are often in tears, as she is their last resort. The support offered by her tutoring service is considered essential for the families that use it. The families that were quoted in the TV segment seemed baffled as to why the regulator was targeting the homeschool academy when there was not anything wrong with the service and the service they were providing was highly valued. Frankly, I am confused too. My request for the minister is to do whatever is required to ensure that the homeschool academy can continue to operate and support families in home education.

Fire Rescue Victoria

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (23:46): (1911) Victorians pay a fire services levy expecting protection in life-threatening emergencies, but Fire Rescue Victoria is spending record levels on lawyers and consultants instead. Fire Rescue Victoria has spent nearly \$10 million on King's Counsels and top-tier law firms in the past two years, despite having its own legal staff. Consider this: half the state has been declared high risk for the upcoming fire season. By the time the fire season peaks, two in three trucks in the FRV fleet will be past their 15-year use-by date. Right now they break down more than once a day. But it gets worse: by the peak of the fire season it will have been more than five years since firefighters have had a pay rise. In the midst of a cost-of-living crisis, these heroes, these workers, these firefighters – some of them mums and dads – who put their lives on the line to protect Victorians are being paid 20 per cent less in real wages than they were being paid five years ago, and they are doing it in trucks that put themselves in danger and put the public in danger too. That troubles me.

Meanwhile, blank cheques to the lawyers keep getting signed. And what are those lawyers doing? They are arguing against an independent audit of truck safety. They are arguing to make the 20 per cent cut to firefighters' real wages permanent. They are arguing to remove firefighters' ability to stand up for their own safety and the safety of all Victorians, even down to the safety of their equipment and uniforms. The \$10 million was on top of the \$32 million spent on consultants for Fire Rescue Victoria last year and on top of the \$27,000 that FRV spent on one front page for their annual report – \$27,000 for a front page. I do not know what every consultant did, but I know what they did not do: no lawyer or consultant ran into a burning building to rescue people without water because a pump on their ancient truck had failed. It is little wonder that 90 per cent of firefighters and emergency services workers at Fire Rescue Victoria have lost confidence in the leadership of commissioner Gavin Freeman and his team. When similar votes happened in other emergency services, those leaders recognised their positions were untenable and rightly stood aside. When will the Premier stop the attack on our firefighters – Victorian workers, many of them mums and dads; honour the Fair Work Commission statement that all EBA matters were agreed, other than wage and allowance increases; and appoint a new commissioner to clean up this mess?

Planning policy

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (23:49): (1912) I want to raise an issue for the Minister for Planning, and it concerns issues in the City of Monash and issues in the City of Boroondara. The state government has announced a number of centres – areas, large swathes of land – where it will force density to grow massively, in some cases well over 100 per cent in quite short periods of time, and yet there has been no proper planning for schools, for hospitals or for services on a wider front. What I want the Minister for Planning to do is to come clean and explain how the government are going to fund these services and how they are going to actually plan for these services. I asked in an earlier adjournment about the need for open space and ovals for a lot of these high-density areas. But what I say is if you are going to put people in like sardines, if you are going to pack them in like one of those cities in South America where the numbers and the density are –

Nick McGowan: São Paulo.

David DAVIS: São Paulo and cities like that – the quality of life is not as good as we are used to. Really what I am worried about here is that the state government shows no sign of having any plan to deal with these services. What the Minister for Planning needs to do is she needs to convene a taskforce with MPs in each area. Ms Crozier and I would be very happy to be active in Monash and in Boroondara, and others in this chamber would be very happy to be active in the south-east and north-east of Melbourne –

Georgie Crozier: And Bayside.

David DAVIS: and Bayside indeed. I know down in Kingston there are increasing concerns. People are very worried about the density that is going in there. But let me just narrow this down to Monash and Boroondara. In those areas the minister needs to –

Georgie Crozier: Stonnington.

David DAVIS: Well, I am just trying to focus on one particular area. It is true, and I made the point the other night, as the President will remember, that Stonnington and Glen Eira have got the lowest amount of open space of any municipality, and yet they are proposing to pack nearly double the number into those areas like sardines. So we are going to be living a very different quality of life. We know what Ms Terpstra said. She said everyone would be happy with it being like Hong Kong or Shanghai. That is what she did say, and I do not think that that is right. I do not think the density is what Australians want. I think Australians want backyards. I think they want proper services. What I am calling on the minister to do is to meet with local MPs, including upper house MPs, to discuss these services that are needed if you are going to double the number of people in a particular zone.

Kingston City Council

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (23:52): (1913) My adjournment is to the Minister for Local Government, and the action I seek is an assurance that the municipal monitors recently appointed to Kingston City Council are not a veiled attempt to influence or smooth the path for the current controversial planning decisions around the proposed housing development sites at Rosssdale and Kingswood golf courses, which are currently being touted for large-scale housing development. Within days of a large public gathering against a development at Rosssdale we have monitors appointed at Kingston council. Monitor interventions like this are supposed to be justified. They must be transparent and grounded in evidence. But I have not seen any explanation of why these newly created positions are justified, because I am pretty certain it is not to support the local community. Meanwhile we have some excellent, decent councillors and a mayor who work hard for these communities.

The timing of the monitors' appointment is interesting, with the huge community outcry of petitions and rallies calling on the government to listen to the people and reconsider these plans. Dividing up golf courses and putting up huge numbers of apartments – 941 proposed in Kingston – without supporting infrastructure is just foolhardy and a kneejerk reaction, conveniently timed before an impending election. Local residents have been more than vocal and are wanting to be heard. They are wanting to be part of the planning negotiations, but their concerns are being ignored by the Labor state government. In a widely publicised case, about 96 per cent of approximately 10,500 residents opposed the development, which would increase Dingley Village's population by nearly 25 per cent. More than 1400 community members submitted concerns on the scale of development during the consultation period. Concerns relate to traffic congestion, environmental loss and a total lack of adequate infrastructure. There is also mounting evidence around the Kingston development being built on a flood plain, with possible ramifications on insurance liabilities.

I would like some reassurance from the minister that these monitors are not being used as a political tool to override community sentiment, apply pressure to council decision-making or facilitate a given development outcome under the guise of government support. The community deserves better. Locals have already been ignored in the initial planning stages and in every step of the process. The community and local councillors deserve to know what conduct has triggered this decision to have an oversight body deny them the right to be heard. Victorians deserve to trust that interventions by this government are not being used to silence great councillors and steamroll contentious planning matters.

Minister, are you able to outline the terms of reference and rationale for the appointment of the monitors at Kingston council, guarantee that any planning matters particularly involving Rosssdale and Kingswood are inclusive of the elected council and the community and are not influenced by unelected monitors operating at the current desperate whim of this dishonest government and assure the community that –

The PRESIDENT: Time has expired.

Health system

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (23:55): (1914) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Health. The Victorian Auditor-General's report *Planned Surgery in Victoria*, tabled on 13 August, exposes significant failures in the Allan Labor government's \$1.5 billion COVID catch-up plan. One of the most concerning areas that was highlighted is around transparency and the reporting of elective surgery data. In the other place today the minister was asked about category 1 surgeries. The reporting has consistently said 100 per cent of cases are done well, but that was exposed through the questioning of the minister with the case presented to her. She said that is what the data shows. Clearly there is an issue. But as the Auditor-General's report exposed, there were a number of issues, including that 34 health services are not captured in the elective surgery information system, which is ESIS. There is no complete single information source for all Victorian planned surgery activities, and that is where this data is captured and how it is reported.

Through the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, my Liberal and Nationals colleagues have repeatedly asked the minister and the department secretary when the non-ESIS list will be included in the quarterly data published by the Victorian Agency for Health Information, or VAHI. In 2023 the then department secretary said:

Part of the planned surgery recovery reform program is to progressively make those non-ESIS lists visible ...

Yet they were unable to provide a timeline. Last year the secretary said:

It is the intent of the department progressively to bring all planned surgery onto ESIS ...

In 2025 the minister said:

... we are expected to commence public reporting in the 2025–26 financial year ...

This has been years of me asking about the issue around getting this accurate data and proper transparency in the reporting and the government has continually failed to be able to do. The action I seek is for the minister to confirm that waiting list data from these 34 non-ESIS health services will be included in the next quarterly reporting cycle to provide a more accurate and comprehensive picture of elective surgery performance across Victoria and allow for better informed decisions to address the ongoing crisis in our health system.

Solomon Heights precinct

David ETTERSHANK (Western Metropolitan) incorporated the following (1915):

The Solomon Heights subdivision in Sunshine North has been described by former mayor Bruce Lancashire as ‘Melbourne’s worst example of urban blight.’

It certainly is a mess.

The estate is approximately 32 hectares, with 433 privately owned lots, that have remained undeveloped and unserviced since the subdivision was rezoned back in the 1920s.

One of the issues holding up the long-overdue development is the presence of rare grasslands containing federally protected critically endangered species of fauna and flora on the estate. This includes the spiny rice flower, of which only 465 remain. But sadly, these are being pushed to extinction through sheer neglect.

A 2016 proposal to protect these remnant native sites called for a conservation zone to be established at the northern end of the estate so that the southern end could be developed. This would create an unfair situation for the northern landowners as those on the southern side could still retain their land interests and profit from future developments. It needs a large-scale solution that is equitable for all landowners.

Brimbank is the council responsible for the area but has ruled out buying the land for environmental protections.

The council would like to see a process whereby the state government steps in with a plan for the whole area, including plans for equitable distribution of profits from sale of the land.

So the action I seek is for the Minister for Planning to meet with representatives of Brimbank council and the Grassy Plains Network to finally begin the planning process for Solomon Heights.

Responses

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (23:58): This evening there have been 18 matters on the adjournment directed to a range of ministers. Save for the ones which I am about to address, they will be referred to the relevant ministers for a response in accordance with the standing orders.

Unfortunately, Mr Welch has disappeared from the chamber, but I would like to take this opportunity to address the matters that he has raised in respect of the Heatherton stabling facility. Just to be really, really clear, the Suburban Rail Loop Authority continues to have ongoing engagement with residents who are living in and around the area where the Heatherton stabling facility is located and where those major works and construction are occurring. As part of the ongoing engagement with the community, the Suburban Rail Loop Authority has been working really closely with residents to understand the

impact of those construction works on them. Understanding those impacts includes a range of different factors at play. With any large-scale construction and with any disruption there is change that has an impact on the way in which people move around and the way in which people live, and I do not discount the impact of change for a second. We know, for example, that when we remove level crossings – and we are up to 86 level crossings having been removed now – there is an impact, particularly in built-up areas where we have large-scale construction. We know with the Melbourne Metro Tunnel, for example, that there have been a number of adjustments required to accommodate the impact of construction in and around built-up areas, often where very technical and specialist equipment is operating.

In Clayton with Suburban Rail Loop and the removal of the level crossing there we had to schedule times for heavy construction to occur to coincide with ophthalmology surgery and also with really intricate fertility treatments that were taking place in and around the area through specialist biomedical and other services, so there is extensive experience in understanding what impact looks like and making adjustments to minimise that impact. However, when we are talking about large-scale construction we are also talking about the operation of heavy machinery. This is where, again, in working alongside the Heatherton community, the Suburban Rail Loop Authority has been talking with the community about a range of options that exist to minimise and to mitigate the impact of those works. That includes offering respite, relocation and work on changes that can be done, including through watering of areas where dust may arise as a problem in warmer months to the ingress and egress for vehicles across various parts of the site. That ranges from ongoing discussions with community crews and the Suburban Rail Loop Authority on the one hand right through to voluntary purchase opportunities, which are, again, the subject of ongoing discussions with a number of residents at this time. We do want to make sure that in addressing the impact of major construction, we are doing so in a way that respects and recognises the impact on people in and around areas where major construction is occurring, and that as these works continue and we deliver the Suburban Rail Loop, we are doing so in a way that understands and respects those impacts into the future.

I just want to make a couple of other points in response to Mr Welch's final remarks on that adjournment, where I suggested to him that on the basis of what he was talking about with an acoustic shed and with noise attenuation he was supporting the project. In response to that, I just want to be really clear that Mr Welch, in putting this position on the record, said, 'We don't support the project. No, no, we don't. We haven't changed our position.' This is something which, again, will come as yet another surprise, and yet everything old is new again when it comes to the coalition and its repeated backflips on a position on the Suburban Rail Loop. It is unfortunate that the shadow minister for transport infrastructure, Matthew Guy, is not here. He has disappeared and headed to South America, getting as far away as he possibly can from his colleagues in the Victorian coalition, which is not in and of itself a bad idea given that every day we see a new implosion because of their complete inability to find any consensus on a position which Victorians have backed in at four elections now.

We saw just today an editorial from the former Premier, who was Mr Guy's boss at the time, Jeff Kennett, talking about how the Suburban Rail Loop should not proceed until certain circumstances occur around the Victorian government of the future. Therefore he is suggesting that until such time – an indeterminate period and point in the future – that tunnel-boring machine should sink into the ground and we should actually just stand down 3000 workers. That is off the back of what current Leader of the Opposition Brad Battin said when he said, 'We will pause and review.' Nobody actually knows what that means, because 'pause' would seem to mean that we stop work while another set of circumstances occurs. A 'review' means that you could be in fact doing anything from a full-scale assessment through to walking out onsite. But Mr Guy's colleagues – again, on the other side of the world to him now – seem to have no clear understanding or idea of what that means.

We have also seen, in separate dispatches from the opposition, the member for Brighton in the other place talking about how the project should be scrapped and workers should down tools. That would tend to indicate that he wants the project not to proceed at all. Mr Welch, when he was on an outside

broadcast at the Box Hill site, some 23 metres above where the underground station will be located, referred to his priority being to save Victoria. That was when he was asked about what his position was on the Suburban Rail Loop. Yet again, that is as clear as mud, because we do not actually know what that means save for the fact that saving Victoria might well mean saving Victoria from the ambiguity and the mass confusion being attended upon the Victorian Liberals at this particular point in time. We have seen different positions variously over time. Mr Battin has created more than a measure of confusion, ably assisted by Mr O'Brien and Mr Pesutto. Mr Rowsell issued a video very late on Saturday night on Instagram which referred to –

Ann-Marie Hermans: On a point of order, President, I do not believe that the response at the end of the evening about the number of adjournments that we have had and the response from the minister is actually on point with what has been actually said by Mr Welch. It has got nothing to do with the adjournment. It is completely off point, and I would ask that you ask the minister to stay on topic.

Michael Galea: Further to the point of order, President, the point of an adjournment debate is for matters to be raised to ministers so that they may respond and act. The minister is acting by responding to the matter which has been raised by Mr Welch. I am not sure if Liberal Party members expect their matters to be listened to by anyone – perhaps they do not – but it is appropriate that the minister, especially the responsible minister, actually responds, and it is good that she is.

The PRESIDENT: The minister can acquit a matter in the way she sees fit. There are no rulings around how she goes about doing that, and it is actually called the adjournment debate. We used to live in a time when the minister would speak on every portfolio. We used to be here for a very long time, so I think we have evolved into something that is a bit better than that.

Harriet SHING: Mrs Hermans, credit to you, you are still here. That does indicate a preparedness perhaps to stick around and to hear some of the detail about the Suburban Rail Loop, unlike your colleague the member for Bulleen in the other place, who has literally taken himself to the other side of the world in order to not be here for this particular discussion on Australia's largest transport and housing project.

I just want to perhaps round out my response to Mr Welch's adjournment this evening, where he said 'We don't support the project. No, no, we don't. We haven't changed our position.' That is confirming this evening, at 10 past 12 on what is now Friday 29 August, that the Liberal–National parties do not support the project, which is at odds with a range of his colleagues, but in fact we will continue with the project. We are building the project. We have only ever had one position in relation to the project: that it stacks up, that it is necessary, that it will make a fundamental difference in providing people with housing options and with better access to public transport, that it will reduce congestion and travel times, that it will help the city to grow and, in addition to that, that it sits alongside a range of other investments in rail infrastructure, including the work at Sunshine, the Melbourne Airport rail loop, the untangling of the Sunshine services and the Melton electrification, and that sits alongside the Melbourne Metro Tunnel of course and the West Gate Tunnel as well. So while those opposite might seek to continue to tie themselves in the most extraordinary of knots – the contortion has been quite extraordinary – we will continue with the project that Victorians have backed in and supported for four elections now. Mr Welch, I would just conclude by saying you are welcome anytime at a site that is well underway, where construction has been occurring since 2022. I would be delighted to show you around and perhaps to reinforce a number of the views of your colleagues who do support the project while you stand in strident opposition to it.

I will address very briefly the matter raised by Mr Galea, which also relates to the Suburban Rail Loop. Mr Galea was asking for a discussion and an update on the benefits of the Suburban Rail Loop for the Cheltenham through to Box Hill corridor. As part of Australia's largest housing and rail project, we are delivering 70,000 homes across these areas where, when trains commence operation in 2035, we will see travel time slashed; we will see better connectivity, including a station at Australia's largest university; and we will see tunnel-boring machines continue to be able to deliver the sort of

infrastructure that, had we had the opportunity, we would have built 100 years ago. I just want to perhaps give you a point of relevance here, Mr Galea. In 1880 – Mr Davis was probably in the chamber then – when the rail line from Melbourne to Lilydale was built, we displaced farmland and orchards, and that involved change, but what it also enabled was the delivery of housing. As a consequence, what we see now is built-up suburbs all the way from Melbourne right out to Lilydale, and we have seen the delivery of large-scale investment in all of the infrastructure that communities need. This is a good demonstration of what happens when planning is undertaken for future generations and when growth occurs but occurs well.

Growth, Mrs Hermans, is inevitable, but good growth is a choice, and that is why we are continuing with the work on the Suburban Rail Loop – including in partnership with councils and with communities and including as part of a draft structure plan process, planning scheme amendments, hearings and an extensive process of engagement, consultation and discussion with the Suburban Rail Loop Authority – to make sure that this transformational project occurs in a way that enhances communities, builds and enhances open space and ensures that when and as we increase density, affordability and supply we are doing so in a way that means that people have further housing options to live closer to where they grew up and that people have options to live closer to public transport, to health care and to education. This is again about a polycentric city. When we think about a polycentric city, I know that in the business and investment case that was produced back in 2021 it was made really clear that *Plan Melbourne* had actually set out the importance of developing and delivering a polycentric city, and Mr Guy, when I was privileged to appear in a radio panel with him a couple of weeks ago, indicated that he had written *Plan Melbourne*. So he was prepared to define the problem but not actually create any solutions. Now, the solutions that were proposed at the time from the coalition or in various dispatches – and who knows whether they have remained static or not, because things keep changing all the time –

Ann-Marie Hermans: On a point of order, President, is there a time limit on how long the minister can go for on this or is this an unlimited speech?

The PRESIDENT: To address the point of order, there is no time limit on the minister's response to adjournments, but it does suggest in the standing orders that the minister should try to be brief in their response. Unfortunately, it does not describe what brief is, so brief could be subjective. This minister might, in her mind, be being quite brief in what she wants to externalise.

Harriet SHING: I do note the lateness of the hour, and Mrs Hermans, I would be delighted to provide you with a briefing on another day, should you wish to understand a little bit more about the project that you and your colleagues seem so determined to rip each other apart about.

Mr Galea, thank you for your interest in the Suburban Rail Loop and all of the things that it is doing. It is transformational. It is making a fundamental difference in communities already. We are determined to make sure that it is embedded in the work of a growing city that grows well. I would be delighted to continue to provide you with updates. I can also, with reasonable confidence, say that those updates will be necessary if we are to try to understand what appear to be the constant dynamic and the inevitability of change of the coalition party's position on the Suburban Rail Loop overall as a project. So I will leave that particular matter there.

Finally, Mr McIntosh raised a matter, as did Ms Watt, about Development Victoria and the work on enhancing our parks and public spaces. Neither of them are in the chamber now, so perhaps in deference to you, Mrs Hermans, and the fact that you have had a very big week, I am very happy to provide them with a written response so that again there can be no issue about my desire to make sure that there is an adequate level of respect afforded to those here in the chamber, alongside the people who work so hard to keep this Parliament functioning at its optimal level. That is it from me.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 12:14 am (Friday).