Hansard

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

60th Parliament

Thursday 11 September 2025

By authority of the Victorian Government Printer

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, Gaelle	Northern Victoria	Nat	Mulholland, Evan	Northern Metropolitan	Lib
Copsey, Katherine	Southern Metropolitan	Greens	Payne, Rachel	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LCV
Crozier, Georgie	Southern Metropolitan	Lib	Puglielli, Aiv	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Greens
Davis, David	Southern Metropolitan	Lib	Purcell, Georgie	Northern Victoria	AJP
Deeming, Moira[2]	Western Metropolitan	Lib	Ratnam, Samantha[5]	Northern Metropolitan	Greens
Erdogan, Enver	Northern Metropolitan	ALP	Shing, Harriet	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Ermacora, Jacinta	Western Victoria	ALP	Somyurek, Adem[6]	Northern Metropolitan	Ind
Ettershank, David	Western Metropolitan	LCV	Stitt, Ingrid	Western Metropolitan	ALP
Galea, Michael	South-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Symes, Jaclyn	Northern Victoria	ALP
Gray-Barberio, Anasina[3]	Northern Metropolitan	Greens	Tarlamis, Lee	South-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Heath, Renee	Eastern Victoria	Lib	Terpstra, Sonja	North-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Hermans, Ann-Marie	South-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib	Tierney, Gayle	Western Victoria	ALP
Leane, Shaun	North-Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Tyrrell, Rikkie-Lee	Northern Victoria	PHON
Limbrick, David[4]	South-Eastern Metropolitan	LP	Watt, Sheena	Northern Metropolitan	ALP
Lovell, Wendy	Northern Victoria	Lib	Welch, Richard[7]	North-Eastern Metropolitan	Lib

[1] Resigned 7 December 2023
[2] IndLib from 28 March 2023 until 27 December 2024
[3] Appointed 14 November 2024
[4] LDP until 26 July 2023
[5] Resigned 8 November 2024
[6] DLP until 25 March 2024
[7] Appointed 7 February 2024

Party abbreviations

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

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Thursday 11 September 2025

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

Papers

Papers

Tabled by Clerk:

Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission – Annual Plan, 2025–26 *(Ordered to be published)*.

Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 – Government response to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee's Report on the 2023–24 Financial and Performance Outcomes.

Parliamentary Workplace Standards and Integrity Commission – Report, 2024–25.

Subordinate Legislation Act 1994 – Documents under section 15 in relation to Statutory Rule No. 65.

Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission – 2024 Report on the Operation of the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities *(Ordered to be published)*.

Voluntary Assisted Dying Review Board – Report, 2024–25.

Petitions

Responses

The Clerk: I have received the following paper for presentation to the house pursuant to standing orders: the Minister for Planning's response to petition titled 'Rooming houses planning scheme requirements'.

Business of the house

Notices

Notices of motion given.

Adjournment

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (09:37): I move:

That the Council, at its rising, adjourn until Tuesday 14 October 2025.

Motion agreed to.

Members statements

Barwon Heads Road

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (09:38): As a regular commuter I know how important the next stage of the Barwon Heads Road upgrade is for our fast-growing community. Stage 1 is already complete, delivering major improvements in safety and traffic flow from Settlement Road in Belmont to Reserve Road in Charlemont. With contracts locked in and crews already on the ground, stage 2 is powering ahead, starting with upgrades from Reserve Road in Charlemont through to Lake Road in Armstrong Creek, and I was pleased to join the member for Bellarine Alison Marchant last Friday to see firsthand how quickly stage 2 is taking shape. This stage will deliver new lanes, safer intersections, traffic lights and improved walking and cycling paths between Reserve Road in Charlemont and Lower Duneed Road in Connewarre. Whether it is the school run, commuting or a quick trip to the shops, this upgrade will mean less time in traffic and safer, more reliable journeys for around 35,000 motorists each day. This is not just another fantastic step forward for our Geelong region, backed by both the Allan and the Albanese Labor governments, this project is delivering the infrastructure Armstrong Creek needs and deserves. It is also supporting

local jobs, and I look forward to seeing the improvements in the Barwon Heads Road rollout over the coming months.

Western Victoria Region schools

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (09:39): I had the great pleasure of visiting Miners Rest Primary School last week. I visited the senior students there, and we had an awesome time talking about civics and politics and what it means to be an MP. I was equally as thrilled to visit Lal Lal Primary School, a primary school in the seat of Eureka – what a great little school that is. I visited students from grades 3 to 6 and had a really good chat about all the local issues that are impacting them, such as the poor state of roads, lack of access to services and how we can work together to make sure that we draw attention to those things. I also went to Bacchus Marsh Primary School last week, which is the oldest primary school in the state. I spoke to all the grade 6 students, about 116 of them. We talked about leadership and how they can make an impact in the future. I was really proud to be there and talk to them about how they can have an influence in the future.

Ballarat Hospice Care

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (09:40): Lastly, I want to pay tribute to Ballarat Hospice Care Incorporated, particularly to Andrew Howard, the CEO. They had a 40-year celebration just last week. That is 40 years of care and service to the community. Particularly when people are going through the palliative care process, it is a really difficult time for families. I want to pay tribute to the volunteers and the staff and the care that they provide day in, day out to the many people that are impacted by this service. It is just magnificent, so well done to them.

Louisa Ioannidis

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:41): I rise to join those who are calling for an inquest into the death of Louisa Ioannidis. The circumstances around this were featured recently on ABC television's *Australian Story*, and I understand Louisa's supporters have provided new evidence to the coroner for their consideration. I am not here to make a judgement about the case or to disrespect the independence of the Coroners Court of Victoria, and I understand nobody should pre-empt the results of an inquest, if one was to be held. However, I would like to make a point from personal experience that when tragedies occur, grief can be compounded if people feel the system has let them down. More than anyone, the person who deserves answers is Louisa's older brother Tass. He deserves to be acknowledged for his tenacity. He has never given up on his sister and will never let her be forgotten. Her untimely passing in 2011 has not just affected her family; her story has shocked thousands of people in Melbourne because of the continuing concerns about women's safety. Over 22,000 people have signed a petition asking for an inquest. I encourage the coroner to take all of this into account when making their determination.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region bus services

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:42): Last week I had the great joy of joining my colleague the wonderful member for Pakenham Emma Vulin out on the buses in Pakenham on the new route 928, which has now been extended all the way through to Berwick through Beaconsfield, connecting the communities on the south side of Officer and Beaconsfield and those new estates there on this great newly extended east–west bus route. Operated by Ventura Bus, it was great to have managing director Andrew Cornwall join us, as well as Aaron Binion, the Pakenham depot manager. Special thanks to Sobia, our driver, and we got to meet and chat with some passengers along the way as well. Ventura is a terrific third-generation Australian family business. They are Melbourne's largest operator, and they are based in Dandenong in the south-east with a state-of-the-art operations centre. It was great to chat with Andrew about some of the measures that they use to ensure safety and compliance, including relays from their control centre through to buses so that any challenging incidents can be dealt with without involving the driver and putting them in harm's way. It is a terrific

new route on a terrific new bus and a terrific new service. I thank Ventura for inviting Emma and me along to join for the hour.

Liberal Party

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:43): On another matter, I would like to also congratulate Mrs McArthur for vanquishing yet another factional enemy.

Parentline

Nick McGOWAN (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:43): A few short hours ago 16 dedicated, professional, expert staff were advised through their union, the CPSU and their representative Magda Ackermann, that the clause 11 negotiations with this government have failed, effectively, and that Parentline will cease to operate as of 31 October. We have in front of me today a cabinet minister, and I would implore – through you, President – this cabinet minister and all cabinet ministers at the next cabinet meeting to appeal to the Premier to save Parentline. Parentline is the only service that operates from 8 am to 12 am seven days a week, every week of the year. I will repeat that: every week of the year. I spoke with some of those workers, dedicated members of our society – they are experts, they are social workers, they are psychologists. They field calls – some 17,800 calls each year – from concerned and worried parents and carers every day of the week. One of those workers said to me last night that they fear the government are now strangling – not my word, her word – this service because the staff have now been told they should take their leave. Effectively that will mean that this service will close earlier than 31 October. These are people helping parents at their weakest point, helping parents on the verge of breaking down. This is a preventative service. It is a vital service. I implore those opposite – the cabinet ministers and the Premier – please do not cease funding to Parentline. It would be a travesty. It is the first line of defence for all our children and families.

Cannabis law reform

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:45): The annual David Penington Oration honours David Penington AC, a courageous advocate for drug law reform. This year it was a particular privilege to see the oration delivered by none other than Tony Parsons. As a former magistrate of the Drug Court, Tony has seen firsthand how current laws fail our most vulnerable Victorians. Tony spoke about how all the way back in the late 1990s then Liberal Premier Jeff Kennett was supportive of decriminalising cannabis, setting up a drug advisory council headed up by David Penington to investigate how Victoria could better respond to illicit drug use. Almost 30 years ago the willpower was there, and it seemed like cannabis would be decriminalised until the Premier unfortunately was overruled by the party. At the time Victoria had the opportunity to become a world leader, and now we are not even a world follower. All around the world we are witnessing cannabis law reform. The evidence is well and truly there, and public support is at an all-time high. And with that I will end on the same note as my colleague David Ettershank with a final message from Tony's oration for cannabis reform: 'It's time.'

Fitzroy Stars Football & Netball Club

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (09:46): I rise to celebrate a historic moment for Aboriginal sport in Victoria. The Fitzroy Stars Football & Netball Club have broken a 35-year drought to win the senior men's premiership in the Northern Football Netball League. The Fitzroy Stars are more than a football club – for decades they have stood as a cultural home, a place of belonging and pride for Aboriginal players, families and supporters. They embody the best in sport with resilience, strength and enormous community spirit. This victory is not just about a premiership flag; it represents something far greater – that young Aboriginal people belong in sport, that they can dream big and that their culture is and always will be their strength. I especially want to acknowledge Eddie Betts, whose career on the field more than speaks for itself, but what matters most is the example he sets. Eddie has always led the way, showing what it means to lead with pride, with humility and with deep commitment to community. Eddie was on the field on the weekend and won best on ground, so

congratulations to Eddie Betts. To the players, volunteers and supporters and the coaches, congratulations. The Fitzroy Stars' future is bright, and this premiership is a milestone for community and culture alike. You have made us all so proud. Go Stars!

Bendigo Maubisse Friendship Committee

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (09:48): I rise to inform the house that a group of Bendigo volunteers has been given the highest possible honour from East Timor in recognition of almost two decades of friendship and work. The Bendigo Maubisse Friendship Committee was recently awarded the Order of Timor-Leste medal. The medal recognises the strong partnership that the Bendigo committee has with the people of Maubisse, a town of around 6000 people located 70 kilometres from Dili. In a statement East Timor President Ramos-Horta said the award symbolised the nation's profound appreciation for those who have walked alongside Timor-Leste in times of struggle and progress. The committee was set up in 2006 at the suggestion of the then First Lady of East Timor Kirsty Sword Gusmão. Kirsty grew up in Bendigo and attended Eaglehawk Primary School and Golden Square Secondary College. Since 2006 the committee has delivered a range of projects that have had profound impacts on the Maubisse community. These have included school and university scholarships, nurse training, reproductive health programs, medical and dental equipment, small business support and infrastructure upgrades as well as a special program providing hand-knitted baby clothes for distribution to new mothers. The committee has provided scholarships to almost 1000 students. Some students who started in the program have now graduated from university and returned to Maubisse as teachers and doctors. I understand many strong friendships and connections have also been forged through the years. I congratulate the Bendigo Maubisse Friendship Committee for their years of work and their medal.

Australian video game industry

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:49): Just recently the e-stores of all gaming platforms crashed worldwide due to demand following the release of *Silksong*, the sequel to the critically acclaimed Australian-made game *Hollow Knight*. This country has some of the best indie video game developers in the world. It is an export that does not get the fanfare that it deserves. Popular Australian-made indie games include *Unpacking*, *Untitled Goose Game*, *Schedule 1*, *Frog Detective*, *Cult of the Lamb* and one people in this room may know – *Fruit Ninja*.

Members interjecting.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay, some recognition. Here in this state we should be encouraging our budding game creators to grow our local industry. The grants that are currently available need to be more widely promoted and they need to be expanded. Video games get a bad rap, but I would encourage everyone here to get on board to support the amazing creatives that we have here in this country. I have been known to play an occasional video game in the little downtime I have as an MP – shock, horror. It helps me relax. I will be heading down to PAX next month and will be checking out the indie games showcase. See you there.

Trung Luu Award

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (09:51): I am extremely passionate about education and empowering young Victorians to receive a well-rounded education. I take great pride in visiting schools in my electorate, and I am always pleased to see the outstanding work done by educators to ensure that students get the best academic achievement they possibly can. It was an honour for me last week to visit four schools to give an award to high school students from the Trung Luu Award program, which I initiated three years ago. I want to congratulate those recipients, including students from Homestead Senior Secondary College, Suzanne Cory High School, Penleigh and Essendon Grammar School and Salesian College Sunbury. I look forward to visiting the following schools in coming weeks: Werribee Secondary College, MacKillop College, Sunshine College's west campus, Laverton P–12 College, and after that the primary school.

Box Hill High School

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:52): Last week I had the absolute pleasure of attending Box Hill High School's 95th anniversary historical expo. They had on display uniforms and photographs from past years. I especially enjoyed seeing the circular that said in 1967 boys would have their grades downgraded for not getting their hair cut. There were former alumni and former principals. I was very pleased to speak about the essential role of state education in shaping our communities and our young people. It was a fantastic event. Congratulations to principal Kellie Ind for putting on such a fantastic performance. Hopefully in five years we will group again for the 100th.

Australian Guangdong Chamber of Commerce

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:52): I also had the pleasure of meeting with the Australian Guangdong commerce council in my electorate. This is a very productive group of extremely professional business men and women. They build essential bridges between our economy and the Chinese economy. I congratulate them, especially their convenor, Apollo Lin, who has done a power of work to get that group together to be doing a lot of work creating economic growth and jobs in both economies.

Australian Foreign Lawyers Association

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:53): Lastly, on Saturday I had the honour of speaking at the establishment of the Australian Foreign Lawyers Association. This is a first in Australia. It is a national body. Congratulations to all.

Refugee Resource Hub

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:53): I had the great pleasure of attending a nutrition education skills training session that was held at the Refugee Resource Hub in Dandenong. I had the opportunity to cook alongside the refugee community, and it was a wonderful, wonderful time. I do congratulate this skill training. I think it is a fantastic thing that is offered to young people, to the elderly, to those who need to learn how to cook with the current food that is before them and within a budget. This program can be highly commended to all sorts of programs. They are going into schools and into aged care and into community centres, and the work that they are doing is providing people in our communities the opportunity to learn how to cook with fresh resources and to do it on a very good budget. Congratulations to them.

Victorian Fisheries Authority

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:54): In this house we debated the axing of people in the fisheries department, from scientists to fishery officers, with over 20,000 signatures that came in on a petition. There was also a petition that was tabled in the other place, and all we get is a nod from the government. Meanwhile what we have now done is allowed our waterways to be open and exposed to criminal activity. In a state that has a history of rising crime, we simply cannot afford to have open avenues by this – *(Time expired)*

State forest access

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (09:55): In the lower house today the Labor government is going to do what it does very well all the time: it is going to divide Victorians. It is going to introduce the Parks and Public Land Legislation Amendment (Central West and Other Matters) Bill 2025. On one hand, it is going to be a great outcome for deer hunters because they will be able to hunt in the Errinundra and Snowy River national parks. They have been calling for this for years and years. But on the other hand, other bush users are going to be absolutely gutted because this government is introducing new laws that will shut up the Wombat–Lerderderg, Mount Buangor and Pyrenees state forests into national parks. That is going to exclude a whole heap of bush users and cause great division. This is unfair, and the government should have brought them in separately so that they could be voted on in this house separately and we would not be dividing bush users. Where we have national

parks, you cannot do fossicking. Prospectors and miners have been advocating for the continuation of the Wombat and Pyrenees areas to be open, and horseriders, four-wheel drivers and the like. This is a divisive government. It should not be doing it this way, and I am calling the government out on it.

A Better Life for Foster Kids

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (09:56): On one more comment, it is A Better Life for Foster Kids pyjama day on Friday. Gippslanders will be in their pyjamas and they will be donating to the most amazing, wonderful charity, and well done, Heather Baird.

Northern Victoria Region rail services

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (09:56): I rise to highlight the dreadful state of rail services on the Shepparton line and also the Seymour line. This morning's Ballarat *Courier* carries an article by Ben Silvester that points out the inequities of those services. The article points out that on the Geelong line the services travel at a speed of 97.8 kilometres an hour, on Albury at 97.7 kilometres an hour and on Bendigo at 95.3 kilometres an hour. But on the Seymour line the fastest service travelled at 77.1 kilometres an hour, which is more than 20 kilometres slower than Geelong and Albury. The Shepparton line is even worse. The average service was 70.9 kilometres an hour, but the slowest service was 65 kilometres an hour. That is more than 30 kilometres slower than the Geelong, Albury and Bendigo lines, and it is the slowest in the state. Back in 2020 Jacinta Allan promised us that we would have nine services running to Shepparton. In 2021 she again said those nine services would run by the end of 2023. We are no closer to getting nine services today than we were back then, and we are two years past her deadline. Traffic lights that were installed in Wyndham Street have not been turned on, because the work has not been done to upgrade the signalling on our track, and it is a disgrace.

Business of the house

Notices of motion

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (09:58): I move:

> That the consideration of notices of motion, government business, 278 to 1086, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Bills

Domestic Building Contracts Amendment Bill 2025

Second reading

Debate resumed on motion of Lizzie Blandthorn:

> That the bill be now read a second time.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (09:59): I am pleased to rise and make a contribution to the Domestic Building Contracts Amendment Bill 2025 and note that our response on this was led by Dr Heath, and it made a number of very clear points about the bill. Obviously this is a bill that we are not opposing. It is a bill that we think there are some useful points in, so we are in a position where we are quite prepared to not oppose. The industry has noted a number of significant objections, and the bill is a consequence of the poor business practice and unforeseen circumstances that cost many families their life savings. The government botched these matters around building contracts. They botched the arrangements for so many young families that have been left high and dry, and I do not need to, as many in this chamber have, go over those many examples of families and firms that have really struggled under the government's arrangements for domestic building contracts. The point I would make here is that this is part of a wider failure of the Andrews first and then Allan Labor governments to manage construction and building in this state, and we know the CFMEU has had far too much power, far too much say. We know that the government has botched so many of these issues.

I just want to draw the chamber's attention to the front page of the *Age* today: 'Leaked files show Big Build went bad years ago, as former corruption chief calls for major inquiry'. The *Age* and the *Australian Financial Review*, with a trove of leaked documents, have been able to make it very clear that the government ministers knew about these matters and they knew about them a long, long time ago. The trove indicates, and I am quoting from the *Age* here:

> … government correspondence that, for the first time, shows government officials were repeatedly warned of Big Build corruption from early 2023 to as recently as June this year.
>
> Some of the wrongdoing was reported in detailed spreadsheets maintained by the state government's multibillion-dollar Level Crossing Removal Project …

I have asked questions in this chamber about level crossing removal corruption, CFMEU links to that and some of the social procurement programs over a number of years. The government has always flippantly tried to say that these things were not happening, that there was no problem and that any minor thing that happened was quickly swept away. Well, of course that is not true. Of course these projects are running over time and over budget massively. They are adding to construction costs more generally and thereby impacting even domestic construction costs, which is the subject of this bill.

The concern I think many of us have is the government's failure is spilling over into domestic construction. But the *Age* went on to say:

> In the confidential spreadsheets, government level crossing officials were told repeatedly throughout the first half of 2023 about extortion and "blackmail" tactics by a cabal of subcontractors "aligned" with the CFMEU.

This was clearly unlawful behaviour but unlawful behaviour that the police did not take any action on and the government did not take any serious action on. The article continues:

> Another internal file from June 2023 complained of a significant cost to the Big Build because of unlawful behaviour …

Every single Big Build project has blown out. Many of them are behind time, but every single Big Build project has blown out, some massively – $50 billion of cost blowouts. One of the Labor members, Mr Batchelor, in this chamber yesterday, when we said we could remove some of the taxes that are burning and hurting so many families and businesses, said we would have to do cuts. Well, I will tell you what, the point I made at the time and I remake now is we would actually run these projects properly. We would root out the corruption in these projects. We would make sure that these cost overruns do not occur in this way. I mean, it is actually scandalous that we have got these massive cost overruns. This is taxpayers money that is being spent here – taxpayers money – entirely because the government is incompetent, entirely because they are captured, they are held tightly, by the CFMEU. The CFMEU has got real, tight control on this government, and the government has failed to act on these corruption issues. Corruption is riddled through these Big Build projects, and it is adding to the cost. We could do more with construction if we did not have these cost blowouts. We could do more in other areas if we did not have these cost blowouts. As Mr Mulholland made the point and I made the point yesterday, there is more than $50 billion in cost overruns. That is not the original cost of the project. The North East Link started at somewhere under $10 billion and has run up to now more than $26 billion. How on earth do you get by with a project cost overrun of that scale? It is just rampant incompetence, rampant failure to deal with proper cost control, and these costs are being sheeted home to everyone in the state.

Another internal file, as I said, complained of the significant cost of Big Build because of unlawful behaviour, and the article continues:

> Among the workers on this payment list, which has been separately seen by this masthead, are several bikie gang members.

So we have got the CFMEU and we have got the bikie gangs deep inside this process. We have got the social procurement program where certain Indigenous groups are favoured over other Indigenous groups. We have got certain requirements for people, and you have got to get the tick to get through

the chicane of controls here. One of the ticks is that you have got to pay off people on the way through. This is corrupt. It is mafialike. This is the sort of stuff that you would expect to see in some of the countries where there are not proper cost controls and are not proper financial controls and there is frank and outright corruption. This is what we are increasingly facing in Victoria – frank and outright corruption that is costing a huge amount.

Transparency International makes a number of good points about the cost of corruption. A set of papers I looked at in recent times argues that between 3 and 8 per cent is the likely figure for corruption in most countries. I might say in Victoria it is probably much greater than that. Corruption is actually skimming off, scooping off money from major projects to fund crooked, corrupt groups that are able to exercise political and industrial power. This is a disaster. When Transparency International look at this kind of corruption, one of the things they say is that actually it has a disabling effect across the whole economy. These costs are amplified across the whole economy in a very, very unhelpful way, so countries that have these sorts of corruption problems are less likely to be able to get high productivity levels and high standards of living. It actually saps the outcomes for the community, and that is what we are seeing. In Victoria because of these huge costs we have got massive new taxes, 63 new taxes. Victorians are paying the price of this corruption. They are paying the price directly of this corruption. Corrupt behaviour means Victorians pay more in tax. It means we get less infrastructure. It means that we are unable in new estates, for example, to put in the infrastructure that is needed, because the money has been scooped off and paid to corrupt individuals in construction or associated with the construction industry. This is a very serious problem for Victoria into the future.

I was struck also by the complaints that have clearly gone to IBAC, and I am not sure that IBAC has dealt with these points satisfactorily. I have myself referred some of these allegations and issues that have come to my attention to IBAC, and I do not believe I have got a satisfactory response. In one case they waited some very, very lengthy period of time, well over a year, to come back and say they would not investigate these complaints. Ms Shing in this chamber likes to point around and say, 'If you've got information, you should refer it.' I am telling you that many of us have referred information. What is concerning is that government ministers, and Jacinta Allan is amongst them, are involved with these Big Build projects, whether it be housing or the large tunnels or roads of various types or the Level Crossing Removal Project. The truth is that these large construction projects have become the plaything of corrupt groups. The government ministers have known; they have not acted. They have not done what they should have done. That is a damning indictment on this government.

Nothing saps governments more than to be seen by the Victorian community as corrupt to the core, and that is what I think is going on here. In the case of Jacinta Allan, I have an FOI which will be heard soon at VCAT. We did the obvious thing; we asked for copies of briefs provided by the department to Jacinta Allan, the then Minister for Transport and Infrastructure. That seems a very reasonable request. They came back and said there are three briefs – I think that is the number – and they gave us a couple of the briefs, which were very skimpy. But the key documents – two documents, one large, one 27 pages long – were redacted, and they said the reason we could not see these was because they were personal information. This is a brief with an attachment provided by the department to Jacinta Allan in her capacity as transport infrastructure minister, so her department is providing a brief about corruption and the CFMEU to her as the relevant minister. I ask the question: what could possibly be in briefs of that nature – in the one document that I think is seven pages, the other is 27 pages and the redactions there – that would mean we cannot have those documents at all because they relate to personal information? I can understand if this information had come to the minister from some other source. Perhaps it is an individual, or perhaps there is a reference in those documents to a medical condition, for example. I would get that that is personal. But 27 pages in a document that is provided by the department to the minister in a formal capacity? One of the consequences of these sorts of corruption issues is that costs spill across the economy. Taxes go up; the costs in domestic building go up and up and up. If you lift the costs in the construction sector where government is procuring, government is purchasing, that has a necessary consequence. It spills over into costs and charges in the rest of the economy.

You will appreciate, President, as a former tradesperson yourself, that the tradie market is a very fluid market. And that market, if it is higher in one area, will drag wages up in other areas, and that is where some of the cost blowouts are coming from, because the state government has not managed these projects properly. They have not kept proper control on these projects, and we say there should have been better parliamentary oversight over many of these large construction projects. We have moved in this house on a series of occasions before for a parliamentary committee, an old-fashioned Public Works Committee. The old-fashioned Public Works Committee had its own act, and the old-fashioned Public Works Committee was able to help control costs. The Public Works Committee members of both sides actually under the act had the power to go onto any site and to get to documents and to ensure that the project was proceeding in a constructive way, and many of the large construction projects done in this state in earlier times were oversighted by that Public Works Committee. The city loop tunnel was one of those; the large dams in the country were oversighted by the then Public Works Committee. Now, the state government has refused to restore that committee, and we say that that is one way that you can root out some of this corruption.

It is also the case that Robert Redlich has made the point that IBAC has got to step up a bit on this and that we need another sort of inquiry, perhaps even a royal commission. I think these are very worthwhile suggestions from Robert Redlich. He is a person who understands these matters, and we do need proper scrutiny in this area. Clearly what is in place now has not been able to control the corruption inside this government, the corruption of these major projects or the corruption in procurement, and we are all paying a massive price, including in higher taxes and less services.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (10:14): I am also pleased to speak on the Domestic Building Contracts Amendment Bill 2025. Yet again we see a bill that is giving authorised officers – these mysterious authorised officers that seem to keep popping up all over the place – powers of entry without warrant. Yet again the Libertarian Party will say no to this. In division 3(68F) it gives extremely broad powers to these authorised officers basically of search and seizure. This should never be done without some sort of warrant. The government – I do not know why they keep doing this. It makes it easier, I suppose, but there have to be checks on the power of the bureaucracy, and if they want to limit people's rights by entering and searching and seizing property, then get a warrant.

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (10:15): I am pleased to speak on the Domestic Building Contracts Amendment Bill 2025. The Allan Labor government is driving reforms that are transforming Victoria's building system. We are ensuring homes are safer, more compliant and built to last for Victorian families by establishing a system that is safe, modern, durable and above all fair, as it should be. Building a home is the largest investment many Victorians will undertake in their lifetimes. It is often the only time that people enter into a contract and have to negotiate along the way. There are both substantial financial and emotional investments in the choices that are made. A home is a place where children take their first steps, major events happen and life milestones are celebrated. It is where people put down roots into communities that often last for decades. Everyone should be able to make those choices with confidence in our building system. That is the aspiration that families have, and often young couples have, when they are building their first home – the hope that they will build a beautiful home in a lovely street in a wonderful community that they then can bring children into and belong and contribute to. That is why it is critical that the regulatory framework for domestic building contracts is clear, effective and modernised. This protects the interests of consumers and meets the needs of a dynamic building industry, an industry that contributes to innovating and adopting new construction methods, including modern methods of construction, to deliver more housing for Victorians.

The building industry is under pressure at the moment. State and federal Labor governments are fully aware of the housing shortage and are thundering away as we speak. The Allan Labor government is taking very seriously the responsibility to ensure that families can enter into building contracts with confidence. After the collapse of Porter Davis, the government committed to reviewing the Domestic Building Contracts Act 1995 (DBC act) to ensure it remains fit for purpose. This bill reflects the

outcomes of that review. It is focused on bolstering consumer protections while supporting Victoria's building sector, particularly at this time as the building sector plays such a vital role, as I said, in achieving the housing supply targets set out in the government's 2023 housing statement. The review highlighted a message from every corner of the industry: the Domestic Building Contracts Act 1995 is outdated, confusing and rigid. Consumers wanted greater protection and clearer rights, builders wanted greater flexibility and less red tape, financiers wanted certainty so loans could be advanced with confidence, and lawyers pointed out that the act no longer kept pace with broader developments in consumer law.

The core purpose of this bill is straightforward: to deliver a modern, flexible and fair regulatory framework for domestic building contracts in Victoria. There are several key reforms in the bill. The first will mandate contemporary and flexible payment timing requirements. Payment arrangements under the building contracts have not been updated in nearly 30 years. They are out of step with modern industry practice. To enable a contemporary payment framework to be established, the bill will amend the act to insert a new regulatory head of power. This will enable the regulations to prescribe deposit limits, progress payment stages and limits specific to different types of contracts. A brick-and-mortar home is very different from a modular, prefabricated dwelling. This amendment will provide for several contract types for building a home. For each contract type, the payment stages and their limits will be set out in regulations allowing them to be updated over time, and at each payment stage builders will not be permitted to demand or receive more than the limit prescribed in the regulations or more than any amount that directly relates to the progress of the work, whichever is the lower. For families this is a safeguard against hardship when payments run ahead of progress. For builders it provides clarity and certainty. For renovation and extension projects, parties will be able to agree on tailored payment stages, providing flexibility while keeping consumer protections in place.

The second key element will enable cost escalation clauses with strong consumer protections. The volatility of recent years has left both builders and families exposed. We saw material prices surge during COVID. Labour costs also rose sharply due to skill shortages. Builders have consequently advocated for the ability to use cost escalation clauses to enable the price of a build to be increased to reflect the unexpected increases in the costs of materials or labour as well as unforeseen delays. As such, a key reform will be to permit cost escalation clauses in major domestic building contracts with a value of $1 million or more and for an increase no larger than 5 per cent. So this bill strikes a careful balance. Cost escalation clauses will be permitted but only for contracts worth $1 million or more, representing around 6 per cent of builds. For the vast majority of families building a home under $1 million, builders will need to price in cost risks up-front. Where escalation clauses are permitted, increases will be capped at 5 per cent. This protects consumers from negative equity and loan defaults while giving banks the certainty they require. These clauses will exist as exceptions, not the norm – controlled, capped and monitored.

Thirdly, the bill facilitates preliminary works and agreements. At present the act makes it cumbersome to contract for preparatory work even though accurate pricing depends on it. This change will allow builders to be fairly paid for up-front planning while giving consumers clear, more detailed contracts. It will reduce disputes and bring Victoria in line with jurisdictions like Queensland and Western Australia. Better planning at the start means fewer disputes at the end.

Another key reform is the establishment of a new Building and Plumbing Commission. This new powerful watchdog will be created by transferring powers from Consumer Affairs Victoria to the Victorian Building Authority. This will bring together all aspects of building quality control, regulation, insurance and dispute resolution into a single agency. How many times do we hear stories of regulatory black holes where there are just multiple regulators relevant to the problem at hand, and it really can be quite overwhelming for mums and dads who are just simply wanting to build their house. Consumers will know exactly where to go for help, builders will know where to find their guidance and regulators will have a stronger platform for accountability. The reforms also seek to manage cost and completion time blowouts. Too often families have been trapped when builders drag

on endlessly or costs spiral out of control. This bill changes that. If completion times blow out by more than 50 per cent or if costs increase by more than 15 per cent, owners will have the right to terminate the contract. They will not have to prove what a builder could reasonably have foreseen.

The bill will also close loopholes and strengthen consumer rights. It tackles contract splitting, strengthens cooling-off periods and extends statutory warranties to verbal and unsigned agreements. It will also provide a single, clear contract variation process for plans and specifications for major domestic building contracts, regardless of who initiated the variation. I just want to say that there is a stark contrast between the skill set required to negotiate the one contract that a young couple might enter into in their life and some large companies whose major business is to contract major capital works. Some of the big companies have contract managers with legal qualifications and decades of experience whose entire day and entire career are spent negotiating variations and changes in scope to major capital projects. Often they have longstanding relationships over multiple contracts over many years. Building a home is often the only construction contract mums and dads and couples will ever have in their life, and that is why this bill is needed. It is to provide consumer protections for those that do not do this every day.

The bill will remove consumer protections from commercial arrangements between developers and builders. It will also modernise the statutory warranties in the DBC act so they are consistent with the Australian Consumer Law. It is important to recognise that much consultation and collaboration has formed the backbone of these reforms. They have not been developed in isolation. Wide public consultation took place between November 2023 and February 2024. We heard from families, from small builders, from large firms, from financiers, from consumer advocates and from legal experts. We worked closely with the Housing Industry Association, the Master Builders Association of Victoria and the Consumer Action Law Centre. The building special advisory panel provided expert advice in October 2024 and again in May 2025. Once this bill passes, consultation will continue as regulations are developed.

This is reform shaped with industry, not imposed upon industry. It modernises a framework that has been frozen since 1995. It strengthens protections for consumers. It supports innovation and flexibility for industry, and it ensures that Victorians can enter into building contracts with confidence, knowing that they are protected by this bill and knowing that there are clauses that will assist them in the event of the need to change the contract. The bill represents Labor values in building trust, building fairness and building the future for Victoria. I wholeheartedly commend this bill to the house.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (10:30): I also rise to speak on the Domestic Building Contracts Amendment Bill 2025. There are a few things I want to address. This government has a very dark and sorry history when it comes to building contracts in this state – allowing for the stealing of deposits, allowing a small minority of dodgy builders to take deposits off young families and phoenix themselves or go into administration only to pop up elsewhere in another state – because of this government's inability to manage this crisis, from the Porter Davis collapse to Montego Homes and Chatham Homes. One thing that I did at that time was sit down with many families who had lost everything, and they had really lost everything because of this government's incompetence to enforce existing law that meant that builders were not to take deposits.

One thing that I found quite sickening – I think it really highlights this government – is that they had a deposit scheme where you could get your deposits back from the government. Instead of freely enabling young Victorians and families to take part in that scheme, whether it was Porter Davis, Montego Homes or Chatham Homes – by the way, they opened that scheme after the advocacy of the Liberals and Nationals – in order to try to minimise the cost of that scheme, what did the Victorian Managed Insurance Authority do? They called in very expensive law firms in order to stonewall young families who had lost everything. They were told, 'You can no longer speak to anyone here. Speak to someone over there at MinterEllison, over there at this law firm in particular' – an absolute disgrace. You had young families who had lost everything, and the government's response – we see them outsourcing consultants at the Victorian Infrastructure Delivery Authority today – in this case was they

went to the top lawyers in town and said, 'Get rid of this political problem for us.' That political problem was young families, like Jess from Doreen, who lost everything because of the failure to enforce existing laws by this government. The government knows it was the wrong thing to do. They know they have spent probably millions on lawyers trying to screw young Victorians out of deposits.

We actually put in an FOI to ask how much it cost, to ask for the invoices. They could even redact a whole bunch of other information, but 'What is the total cost of the lawyers you are using against young families?' Of course they rejected it, so I went off to the information commissioner over a year later. Often the information commissioner goes a bob each way, but this was quite clear: a determination that the government ought to release how much it had spent – basic transparency – 'How much did you spend on lawyers to screw young people out of deposits?' And what was the government's response after the information commissioner said to the government that it needed to release this so Victorians can know? The government's response was to take me to court to try to prevent that information from being made public – because those on that side of the chamber know they will look very bad if that information is released, that they have spent millions of dollars screwing young families out of deposits through a scheme that was set up to help them. The government is now trying to screw them. So I call on the government to just release the documents. From the information commissioner it was a clean, one-sided determination – it took over a year – saying, 'You ought to release those documents. You ought to provide those documents and make them public.' The government's response, after spending millions of dollars trying to screw young families, was to spend even more money taking me to court to try to prevent the release of those documents. That is what this government does. They kick the can down the road for anything they do not like – for anything that exposes them for being the awful government that they are, that would try to screw young families. This is what they do; this is Labor. I think the government ought to release those documents. This whole tawdry affair has been incompetence of the government's own making. It has nowhere to hide in regard to issues to do with domestic building contracts and domestic building insurance.

Of course we particularly see today shocking reports in the *Age* newspaper of just how bad the building industry has become in terms of infiltration into government housing projects and government infrastructure projects. We saw a worthwhile intervention from the former IBAC Commissioner, the highly respected Robert Redlich, basically saying there is no government authority at the moment that has the ability to stamp this out. We saw that government level crossing officials were told repeatedly throughout the first half of 2023 about extortion and blackmail tactics of a cabal of subcontractors aligned with the CFMEU and that the government was told three times – March, April and May 2023 – that unlawful behaviour was causing major financial impact to taxpayers. Another internal file from June 2023 complained of a significant cost to the Big Build because of unlawful behaviour.

Let us break down that significant cost, almost $50 billion in infrastructure cost blowouts over the last decade, and for that entire time Jacinta Allan has been the responsible minister or the Premier. We know that she was warned and failed to act, and she just claimed when the first stories came out that she was completely blindsided. 'How could this be happening? I'm so angry. I'm going to act.' Rubbish, absolute rubbish, because it is still happening. Her wet lettuce Wilson review failed to stop and prevent what is going on at Victorian construction sites. I mean, you have got First Nations Traffic Management reporting issues on the government's Big Build. You have got gangland figures, crooked CFMEU officials and companies rorting the government's social procurement program. A program that is meant to help Indigenous Victorians and vulnerable cohorts, veterans and the like is being rorted by crooked officials and is being rorted by gangland figures. How can the government just accept this? Even after all the government's talk almost a year ago, it is still happening to this very day. I meet regularly with people who bring me new reports. They are afraid to speak out because if they speak out they are dobbing in a gangland figure. It is extraordinarily difficult for people to just go and report it to the authorities. How about the government actually does something about it, listens to Robert Redlich and calls for a royal commission?

We saw that an Indigenous firm NLA Trucking has accused a fellow Big Build contractor of agreeing to unlawful demands made by the CFMEU's Joel Shackleton. Joel Shackleton, who is meant to be banned – and the government banned him from all Victorian construction sites – is still to this day pulling the strings on who gets on and off Victorian construction sites: 'You can't work on the Mordialloc Level Crossing Removal Project.' He is clearly still pulling the strings when he can tell a contractor for the Mordialloc Level Crossing Removal Project, 'You can't hire this Indigenous firm, or we're going to black ban you from the North East Link.' I know, because I meet with people on almost a weekly basis who have these kinds of stories, that the North East Link is being used as a giant hook to control the entire Big Build in Victoria – 'Unless you do this on this smaller level crossing removal project, you don't get onto the North East Link.' It is being used for corruption, for extortion and for the fleecing of taxpayer money. No wonder this North East Link project has gone from $10 billion to $16 billion to $26 billion – and the government has enabled this. The government is continuing to shrug its shoulders when asked about this and asked what further action it is going to take – 'Oh, we'll just refer it to the authorities,' even when you have respected figures like Robert Redlich saying that that has failed and more needs to be done.

We were asking the government right here yesterday. Their response was basically to invite us all to go down to a construction site or 'Report it yourselves.' You are the government, and the government ought to do more to stamp out this corruption on the Big Build. And I feel terribly sorry particularly for the stories we saw yesterday about veterans that were forced to pay gangland figures for a pay to play – 'You can't work on the Big Build unless you pay us to get in.' Favoured union-backed firms with what clearly is no link to the Indigenous community are getting on worksites, like they did in the Mickleham Road project, and kicking out good, decent Indigenous businesses. I know Kinaway had a lot to say about that particular project, as did many Indigenous leaders, because it is wrong, it is extortion and it is the fleecing of taxpayer money, and the government to this day are still not doing anything about it.

We know that the CFMEU's next endeavour is housing, and we know anything above about six storeys has to be – because they have forced their way in – a CFMEU project. We have seen countless stories by Nick McKenzie about housing projects here in Melbourne where builders are being extorted, fleeced and then called by Mick Gatto with a 'How about it?' This is their next endeavour, and it is going to be corrupted and is being corrupted in the same way as the Big Build is being corrupted. I mean, with almost $50 billion of cost blowouts on major projects in the last 10 years under Jacinta Allan, when you blow out the budget by $50 billion it means you have to cut $50 million from the police budget; you have to cut Parentline, a great service; you have to cut maternal and child health services in our growth areas; you have to cost shift onto local government; you have to introduce a massive new emergency services tax; and you have to introduce massive new land taxes, as the government has done. All Victorians are paying the price for the massive cost overruns, corruption and acquiescence of this Labor government when it comes to stamping out union corruption on Victorian construction sites.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (10:45): Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak in strong support of the Domestic Building Contracts Amendment Bill 2025. For many families across Victoria, their home is the single largest investment they will ever make. A home is more than bricks and timber; it is a foundation of security, stability and a future for children and generations to come. It is where people raise families, build lives and become really a part of their communities, yet in recent years too many Victorians have seen this dream not happen, not through any fault of their own but because of failures in the regulatory system. The collapse of Porter Davis Homes in 2023 left thousands of families devastated. They were left stranded in half-finished homes. It truly was a desperately sad situation. They were dealing with disputes over deposits, cost blowouts and uncertainty about what rights they had to protect themselves. The Allan Labor government has listened to those families. We made it clear in 2023 through a commitment to review the Domestic Building Contracts Act 1995 and ensure it is fit for purpose in today's housing market. This bill delivers on that commitment.

The Domestic Building Contracts Amendment Bill 2025 strengthens protections for consumers, modernises the framework to reflect modern building practices and supports a stronger, fairer building industry. We cannot underestimate the scale of the housing task facing Victorians. Our government's housing statement sets ambitious but necessary targets, delivering more homes faster to keep up with demand and to keep housing affordable. Achieving this requires an industry that is not only innovative and productive but also trustworthy and accountable ultimately to Victorians. Victorians should never have to second-guess whether their contracts protect them. They should not be left vulnerable to hidden clauses, unfair cost escalations and builders who game the system. The bill is about ensuring confidence – confidence for families who sign a contract to build their home and confidence for an industry that knows the rules of the game are fair, modern and enforceable.

One of the most significant reforms in this bill concerns the timing of payments in major domestic building contracts. The rules governing when and how builders are paid have not been updated since 1995. That is 30 years of industry change without reform. In that time, construction methods have evolved dramatically, including modern methods of construction such as prefabrication, modular housing and these kit-based builds. These are quicker and they are more efficient ways of delivering housing, but the outdated rules around payment staging really have not kept up. This bill introduces a new contemporary framework. Regulations will now be able to set deposit limits and progress payment stages that are specific to different types of contracts. This flexibility means payment stages can evolve alongside industry practice, ensuring customers are not left and consumers are not left exposed to front-loaded contracts where builders take too much money before sufficient work is actually done. The general proportionality safeguard is also introduced in this bill. Builders will not be able to demand or receive more than the value of the work that has actually been completed. That means consumers pay for what they get, no more and no less. I am pleased to say that this reform alone will give families enormous confidence that their investment is protected.

Another major reform in this bill is the introduction of cost-escalation clauses but with very strict consumer protection. In recent years the building industry has been hit by surges in the costs of timber, steel and labour. Builders have rightly argued that they need to be able to manage unexpected and extraordinary cost increases, but for consumers these clauses carry real risks. Without limits, families can be forced into contracts they can no longer afford, facing mortgage stress or even losing their homes. The bill takes a balanced approach. Cost-escalation clauses will only be permitted in contracts worth $1 million or more, and any increase will actually be capped at 5 per cent. 'Why this threshold?' some may ask. Because contracts at this value represent the top 6 per cent of home builds in Victoria. These are high-value builds where both parties are better equipped to negotiate risks and absorb additional costs. For everyday families building homes, cost escalation clauses will remain prohibited. Builders in these circumstances must factor potential price changes into their up-front contracts rather than shifting the risk onto the consumers. Where escalation clauses are used, the bill introduces strict consumer protections. Builders will need to provide a clear, written warning of the clause before the contract is signed, obtain the home owner's initials or signature next to that clause and justify the increase with invoices or receipts. They also need to warrant those increases as being calculated with due care and with skill. If these steps are not followed, the builder cannot enforce the clause. That is accountability in action for Victorians.

The bill will also make important changes to facilitate preliminary works and agreements. Right now the law makes it extremely complex for builders and home owners to contract for preparatory work like plans, designs or even soil testing. These works are vital for pricing and preparing contracts to that professional standard, but under current law they are caught up by the definition of 'domestic building work' and are subject to the full framework of the act. The bill actually removes those barriers by aligning us with jurisdictions like Queensland and Western Australia, where builders and owners will be able to enter into preliminary agreements for plans and specifications without triggering all the requirements of a full domestic building contract. This reform means fewer disputes, better prepared contracts and more certainty up-front. It also means consumers are paying for high-quality plans and specifications that make the later building contract clearer and fairer.

Beyond payment timing, escalation clauses and the preliminary works, the bill delivers a broad range of reforms that lift standards and protect Victorian home owners. These include ending contract splitting, so builders will no longer be able to avoid obligations by splitting projects into smaller contracts, a practice that was exposed in fact during the Porter Davis collapse. There are cooling-off rights, where owners will be able to exit a building contract during the five-day cooling-off period even after obtaining legal advice. We have also got statutory warranties being extended. Protections will apply even to verbal or unsigned contracts or poorly defined written contracts so that builders cannot exploit loopholes. There are clearer variation processes. These will now be a single, transparent process for varying plans or specifications, regardless of whether the owner or the builder initiates that change.

In relation to completion and cost blowouts, owners will be able to terminate contracts if the agreed completion time blows out by more than 50 per cent – extraordinary – and if costs rise by more than 15 per cent. Owners will be able to terminate contracts with those conditions, either a more than 50 per cent time blowout or if costs blow out by 15 per cent. Importantly, owners will not have to prove whether the builder could have reasonably foreseen the increases.

Each of these reforms speak to a single principle that this side of the chamber cares about when we are legislating, and that is fairness – fairness for consumers, fairness for families and fairness for an industry that wants to do the right thing but really has been undermined by loopholes and bad actors. Another key part of this bill is the creation of a new integrated regulator, the Building and Plumbing Commission. We have spoken about that in this place in recent months. Currently regulatory functions are split up. Consumer Affairs Victoria, the Victorian Building Authority and Domestic Building Dispute Resolution Victoria all play different roles, and this has created silos where Victorians are meant to go to get the help or information they need when the problems arise, and that adds additional complexity. By consolidating compliance, enforcement, insurance and dispute resolution into a single powerful watchdog, we are giving Victorians a regulator that is clear, accessible and effective.

The commission will be able to monitor standards, issue orders and resolve disputes in one place, cutting through red tape and ensuring accountability. These reforms have not been developed in isolation. The review of the Domestic Building Contracts Act 1995 includes public consultation from November of 2023 through to February of 2024, and this was supported by some targeted engagement with industry, financial institutions, legal experts and consumer groups. Stakeholders such as the Housing Industry Association, the Master Builders Association of Victoria and the Consumer Action Law Centre have all provided feedback. Consumer groups have supported measures that clarify rights and strengthen protections. Industry has welcomed reforms to payment timing and the preliminary works that I spoke of earlier. Banks and lenders have supported the safeguards, particularly around the escalation clauses. It is safe to say that this bill is shaped by the voices across the sector, from families to financiers, builders to consumer advocates.

I have touched on some of the great things that the Allan Labor government is achieving with this bill for Victorian home owners, and I wanted to touch on some of the criticisms that have been heard from those opposite, who may say that consultation has been limited. I have heard some remarks during this debate, but I just want to say that in July of 2025, only now a couple of months ago, 81 submissions had been received during the consultation period for this bill, and there were more that came through. I have got to say that this is really a clear sign that Victorians care deeply about these reforms.

Some have raised concerns about the treatment of kit homes and other modern construction methods. The answer to those concerns about how the law will in fact treat kit homes and other modern construction methods is simple. The bill's framework is flexible. Definitions of modern methods of construction will be set by regulation, allowing government to adapt as technology evolves. Many kit homes involve prefabrication and will fall within the protections provided by the act. The *Guide to Standards and Tolerances* is also being updated, ensuring that builders meet modern best practice and that regulators have robust tools to enforce quality.

Some have suggested we should require all deposits to be held in trust accounts, but that is not the most effective way to protect consumers. Instead our government has introduced a first resort statutory insurance scheme for contracts over $20,000. This allows owners to claim lost deposits immediately if a builder collapses without costly and complex trust structures.

The Domestic Building Contracts Amendment Bill 2025 is not an isolated piece of legislation. It is part of the broader building reform program, which includes the establishment of the Building and Plumbing Commission, the introduction of the first resort insurance scheme and measures to drive the uptake of modern methods of construction. Together these reforms will give Victorians the most modern, consumer-focused and resilient building regulatory system in the nation.

This bill is about more than just some amendments, I have got to say. It is about trust and it is absolutely about fairness. It is about giving Victorians confidence that when they invest in a home, they are investing in a future that is secure. It balances the needs of families and the needs of industry. It recognises that builders need flexibility, but it also insists that flexibility must never come at the expense of consumer protections.

The Allan Labor government made a promise to Victorians in the wake of the devastating collapse of Porter Davis to fix the system, to lift standards and to ensure that families are never left again in the dark. This bill delivers on that promise. It gives families confidence in their contracts, it gives industry clarity in its obligations and it gives Victoria a building system worthy of the people it serves.

With that, can I say that I absolutely commend to the chamber today the Domestic Building Contracts Amendment Bill 2025.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (11:00): I rise to speak on the Domestic Building Contracts Amendment Bill 2025. I want to thank the minister in the other place for his work on this important issue, which goes directly to the rights of consumers and home buyers as well as supporting our building industry. It is no secret that Australia needs more homes. It is no secret that Victoria needs more homes. It is also no secret that the Allan Labor government has a very strong record on housing construction. From June last year to May of this year we saw 55,560 residential building approvals. That is 9500 more than in New South Wales. And we do not have any intention of keeping secret the fact that Melbourne is the build-to-rent capital of Australia, with more build-to-rent projects here than in any other capital city.

It is also not a secret that the new housing activity centres will facilitate the construction of 300,000 new homes by 2051 in areas already well serviced by infrastructure and where people most want to live. Further, while the bill we are debating today goes to the issue of private sector development, it is important to remember the role the Allan Labor government is playing in building more social homes. Between the Big Housing Build and the Regional Housing Fund we are investing $6.3 billion in building more than 13,300 social and affordable homes. Taking it all in, we have a dynamic, fast-moving building sector, with homes and apartment blocks going up all over the place.

Under these circumstances it is important that we continually update our laws and regulations to ensure that systems run efficiently and honestly. That is why this bill makes sure that building owners get a fair deal and that developers are getting the support they need to continue building the homes that Victorians need. We know that construction costs have gone up all over the sector over the last few years. That is what led to the collapse of Porter Davis Homes in 2023, which left 1500 in-progress homes uncompleted. The collapse of Porter Davis, one of Australia's biggest development firms, was difficult for many workers and many families. The Victorian government had to step in to help families who were suffering as a result of the collapse. But stepping in to offer help after the problem occurs is not enough by itself. We changed the law to mandate that builders must have building insurance, and we introduced new penalties for builders who accept deposits without taking out insurance. We did this because we believe that nobody deserves to go through what that collapse put so many families

through. We also believe that while we cannot change the past, we can make changes to prevent this from happening in the future.

This bill follows up on changes we made previously but also comes in response to the findings of the review into the Domestic Building Contracts Act 1995, which began following the collapse of Porter Davis Homes. We waited for the outcomes of the review before pushing forward with these changes, because it is important that we get them right. People's homes are too important for this to be rushed through as a knee-jerk reaction to one company's collapse, but at the same time these reforms are too important to put off again and again. That is why we have gone through the consultation process with relevant stakeholders. These include the Housing Industry Association, the Master Builders Association of Victoria and the Consumer Action Law Centre. It is through this sort of process that the Allan Labor government has balanced the interests of workers, building owners, homebuyers and housing developers in writing and producing this bill, because the Allan Labor government is a government for home ownership, for supporting first home buyers and for protecting the family home.

For so many families the idea of home ownership represents the most important asset. For others it represents the most important aspiration. And for others it simply represents safety, security, a roof over their heads and a place to call home, things that we on this side of the chamber believe that all Victorians deserve. One of the ways the Allan Labor government has sought to achieve this for our state is through something resembling an all-of-the-above housing strategy. Ultimately, we want to give people choice and give them security. We want to get to the point where people make choices about whether they prefer to rent or own their own home, because both have their own benefits. That is why we became the build-to-rent capital, in Melbourne. That is why we invested so much in social and affordable housing, and that is also why we have done everything from creating the new activity centres to offering off-the-plan stamp duty concessions to help stimulate new private development. While social housing is an important part of the make-up of our housing sector and the Labor government's housing policy, this bill primarily goes towards the issue of private development. Essentially, we recognise that navigating the housing market can be difficult and confusing, especially when buying off the plan. We certainly do not want things to get to the point where you need a degree in property law before you can think about making a purchase. We want the housing market to be accessible to all Victorians, not exclusive to those at the very top, so it is especially important that buyers have the confidence to know that the law is on their side and that any developer who tries to cut any corners, as certain developers have done recently, will be punished severely.

The process of building a new home or a new apartment block is a difficult one. It takes a long time; it takes years. Planning takes time, planning approvals take time and construction takes time, and as often happens, the longer it takes the more expensive they become. This means that, like in any other industry, confidence is currency. Developers will only build new houses if they can be confident that someone will be out there to buy it. Buyers, on the other hand, will have the confidence to put down a deposit if they know what they are dealing with – a reliable developer who does not cut any corners and who will deliver a high-quality house. Bills like this one are important to help us restore buyers' confidence in developers, which was understandably shaken following the collapse of Porter Davis Homes as well as a number of other developers in recent years.

There are a number of changes being made by this bill. One important change is the new ability to regulate deposit limits, progress payment stages and progress payment limits. These will ensure a level of proportionality and that payments can be made that correlate directly to the work as it is completed. It is important to make changes here, because for all of the changes that have come to the construction industry since the 1990s the regulations surrounding how builders get paid have not been updated since 1995. Under the changes in the bill, payment can no longer be demanded unless it relates to the work already completed.

Another change in the bill are the reforms to cost escalation clauses. It is understandable that given uncertainty in the prices of materials and labour, costs may vary from original estimates in some circumstances. However, it is important that any cost flexibility is calculated in a transparent way, is

motivated by genuine necessity and is not being done in a way that is exploitative. As such, cost escalation clauses will only be valid on constructions worth more than $1 million and will only allow for a 5 per cent increase in the cost of the contract. Further, there are stricter requirements being placed on builders who seek to activate a cost escalation clause to prove that it is being done in a way that is transparent and honest.

While this is a bill which introduces regulations to the building sector to protect consumers, there are also some areas where we are seeking to remove regulations so they can better support developers and better facilitate new development. One area where we are doing this is removing some types of preliminary works from the scope of the act. This is building on a principle that already exists, where preliminary works such as architectural designs and soil testing are already exempt from the existing regulations in the act. This is because often these works must be done before the contract can reasonably be signed or before an accurate estimate of the cost can be given, so they are regulated elsewhere, just not under this act. The bill will remove preparation plans, specifications and builds of quantity from the scope of this act to ensure that the government is not getting in the way of the planning process. This will bring Victorian law in line with other states and follows a fairly simple idea that the planning process should be governed by the planning code more than by contract law. It is important that while we are placing additional regulations on developers in order to protect consumers and building owners, we are not seeking to punish those developers who are doing the right thing. That is why this bill is as much about supporting developers and supporting development as it is about implementing new regulations to protect Victorian families.

There are a range of other changes to the act as well which seek to clarify contractual requirements for all the parties involved. One example of this is cracking down on contract splitting – the practice of creating multiple contracts where a contract should be serviced by only one. Developers use this as a way to avoid the classification of 'major domestic building contract' and the additional regulations that come with it. This practice can be dangerous. It was used by Porter Davis Homes before they collapsed. Often loopholes like this, which developers use to skirt around the edges of regulations, are sources of danger for the building owners and homebuyers, and in some cases for the developers themselves. Further, to avoid any incentive to clarify a project which should be made under the major domestic building contract under just a normal domestic building contract, we are making sure that several existing regulations will apply equally to both. This is to prevent misunderstandings and ensure that parties are always clear about their requirements and their obligations.

Another important provision is implementing the new rights for building owners to end contracts in the event of completion time blowouts of more than 50 per cent or cost blowouts of more than 15 per cent. Previously a building owner could only do this in the event that they could demonstrate that these blowouts were foreseeable. This bill will remove this requirement. We also are ensuring that building owners are covered by statutory warranty, even in circumstances where their contracts are verbal, unsigned or poorly written. This is an important reform, because you should not have to hire a lawyer to get your home renovated. The bill will also provide a transparent contract variation process to prevent consumer protections for individual homeowners from applying to commercial property and to improve the relevant dispute framework.

There are several areas of reform which are being touched on by this bill, but one that is particularly important is laying the background for the implementation of the new Building and Plumbing Commission. This will be done by transferring powers from the director of Consumer Affairs Victoria to the Victorian Building Authority as the first step in creating the Building and Plumbing Commission as the state's single regulator for the construction sector. The Building and Plumbing Commission was announced in October last year by the Minister for Planning in the other place. Its aim is to be a more powerful regulator than the existing Victorian Building Authority. It will have new powers to protect the rights of home owners. Currently the VBA can only instruct work to be fixed by the developers before occupants move in. The new commission will be able to do so even beyond that time. This is an obvious reform. Often defects in a home only become apparent after someone has lived there for a

while. Other powers will be to increase reporting requirements before attaining an occupancy certificate and to stop seriously defective apartments from being sold.

I spoke earlier on the issue of confidence in the housing market. For so many, their home is the biggest and most important investment that they will ever make. When families save up for years and put down a deposit and take on a mortgage, they deserve to have the confidence that the house that they will buy will be well built by qualified and professional developers and builders. Unfortunately, when developers cut corners, defects occur. This can undermine confidence in the sector as a whole. If people do not have the confidence to buy new homes, developers will have no reason to build them. And if nothing gets built, the cost of housing will only increase, and ordinary Victorian families will suffer. That is why it is important that the new Building and Plumbing Commission is brought about, so that it can help ensure that there is accountability and integrity in the construction section. While this bill does not establish the commission itself, it does change the law around which powers lie where so as to help facilitate the creation of the commission.

All in all, this bill is about supporting our construction sector as it works to build the homes that this state needs, that Victorian families need. It is about helping to repair any damage or trust between developers and Victorians following the collapse of several development firms in the last few years which left many Victorian families in the lurch. It is about regulating the sector so that we can prevent these collapses from occurring in the future, it is about cracking down on dodgy developers who cut corners while supporting developers who are doing the right thing and it is about providing building owners, homebuyers and anybody who works in the construction industry with the security that they need to do what they are doing and get a fair deal. With that, I commend the bill to the house.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (11:14): I rise to make a contribution on the Domestic Building Contracts Amendment Bill 2025. It is an important bill. I had the benefit of listening to Mr Berger's contribution, which was a great contribution. It certainly underscored the importance of what these reforms are about. At the heart of these reforms, it is really about making sure that our laws are modern and fit for purpose and come into line with changes in other jurisdictions, but also provide consumer confidence. In a moment I will go through and talk about some of the things that have happened. For anybody who may be watching along at home on the live stream, in regard to this debate many people will know and will remember what was reported on in the media. When builders collapse, it is always heartbreaking when you have families who have saved up their lifesavings for a deposit – or even young people, for that matter – to build a home. It is their dream home, something they have thought about and dreamed about for a long period of time, only for that builder to collapse. Noteworthy was the collapse of Porter Davis Homes. That was a very harrowing period for people who were caught up in that building collapse. Obviously it was something where the government did step in at the time to provide some assistance to people who were caught up in it, but it did highlight the need for broader reforms in the industry, in the sector. There are a number of things that need to be amended through this legislation, and part of that is that we need to bring our laws into line with other jurisdictions as well.

Nevertheless this act will enhance consumer protections and update rules for modern building practices. Key changes will include moving the payment schedules and deposit limits to regulations for flexibility, introducing tailored contract types for projects using modern methods of construction and consolidating regulatory functions. The reforms will apply to contracts entered into after the bill passes and comes into effect, with broader implementation expected around late- to mid-2026. Under the Allan Labor government, these ongoing reforms are reshaping the Victorian building system, delivering a safer, more compliant and more durable system for Victorians.

As I said, for many people who save for a family home, it is often their single largest investment that they will make within their lifetimes. It is the foundation for their future. It is a roof over their head, stability for their family, providing a place of warmth and comfort for their family to grow in. Nothing can be more distressing than watching your home being built, only for the builder to go bust. This is why it is critical that the regulatory framework for domestic building contracts needs to be clear and

needs to be effective and modernised to protect the interests of consumers and meet the needs of a dynamic building industry that continues to innovate and adopt new construction methods, including modern methods of construction, to deliver more housing for Victorians. Because that is what this government knows and understands; we know there is a shortage of housing. It is something about which this government is doing everything it can, looking at all the levers available to ensure that it can build more homes for more Victorians.

As I touched on earlier, following the collapse of the Porter Davis Homes building group, the government committed to a review of the Domestic Building Contracts Act 1995 to ensure that it was fit for purpose and to strengthen the protections for building owners while supporting the needs of the building industry, so it is a balancing act. The bill is informed by the outcomes of that review, and it is designed to strengthen consumer protections while supporting the needs of Victoria's building industry. Of course that industry is integral to meeting the housing supply targets that our government has set in the 2023 housing statement. As I touched on, the bill will deliver a modern, fit-for-purpose regulatory framework for domestic building contracts in Victoria to give consumers that greater confidence and security when building or renovating their homes. As I said, when you are going to buy a home or you are investing in a home to live in, it is often the single biggest purchase you will make. The financial implications if you have taken out a mortgage on a home to build it and then it goes bust and you do not have the income to pay your mortgage are just really, really devastating. The financial implications that can follow for anyone who has been caught in these situations would be immense and very distressing. We needed to act to do everything we could to improve consumer confidence but also to make sure that the modern framework that needed to be provided could continue to protect consumers. Importantly, at the heart of these reforms, although they are about consumer protection, they are also about fairness and lifting standards and making sure that Victorians can enter into domestic building contracts with confidence, because a loss of consumer confidence means that people will not invest.

The bill will make other minor amendments to the Australian Consumer Law and Fair Trading Act 2012, the Building Act 1993 and the Building Legislation Amendment (Buyer Protections) Act 2025. As I said earlier, the default commencement date for this bill is 1 December 2026. Some of the other reforms will come in a bit later on, but all of those will come into operation on or after the day that the bill receives royal assent.

I will just touch on some elements of the bill, because there are many, but one of the key ones – and this is something that we have heard a lot about in the media as well – is that when builders get paid under contracts, sometimes they will be waiting on payments from third parties, which then impacts their capacity to either pay or continue to do work. That has been a challenge for some time now, but the rules around when and how builders get paid under a major domestic building contract have not been updated since 1995 and have fallen out of step with changes to industry practice. I just talked about some of the experiences of builders where they are waiting on payment for something or those payments are late and that then prohibits them from doing the next stages of their work. So to enable a contemporary framework to be established, the bill will amend the act to insert a new regulatory head of power that will enable regulations to prescribe deposit limits, progress payment stages and limits specific to different types of contracts. This will provide government with the flexibility to update payment requirements to respond to differing circumstances, such as the extent to which a build utilises modern methods of construction, and to adjust requirements as building methods continue to evolve. The amendment will provide for several contract types for building a home, and for each contract type the payment stages and the limits will be set out in regulations, allowing them to be updated over time.

We have all seen – there have been many, many social media clips – people who have noted that builders have been asking for payments for lock-up stages when clearly the requirements under what would be the criteria that meet the lock-up stage have not been met. Again, you cannot move into a house unless obviously your house has been completed and there has been a certificate of occupancy

issued, so there begins a bit of a stalemate, for want of a better term. That set of circumstances is also distressing to consumers, and it is something that needed to be addressed. At each payment stage, builders will not be permitted to demand or receive more than the limit prescribed in the regulations or more than an amount that directly relates to the progress of the work, whichever is the lower. That clarifies those situations and circumstances, giving greater protection to consumers and greater clarity to the sector as well about how it should conduct itself in regard to such payments. The approach will make the timing of contract payments clearer for consumers and builders while allowing for these requirements to be flexible and more easily updated over time as construction methods evolve. Again, we wanted to ensure that consumers had the utmost protection, and we think this strikes the right balance. A general proportionality requirement will also be introduced as a safeguard so that a builder will not be able to demand or receive a payment more than the percentage of work that they have completed on a home or a renovation. Introducing this mechanism gives greater certainty and greater consumer protection as well. For domestic building contracts that are not specified, such as renovations or extensions, the bill will enable building owners and builders to use custom payment stages and amounts. Again, those things allow for customisation for builders and owners to agree on, and that is something that is important as well.

Additionally, building materials, labour costs and uncertainty around supply and materials have increased for the building industry in recent years. In fact we have seen that almost supercharged since the COVID period, which was a pretty challenging time not only for the building sector but for a range of sectors, but certainly what we saw was building material shortages just increase exponentially. It has taken the building sector a long time to recover and a long time for the supply of materials to come back on line. What we have seen is that when builders have potentially quoted on particular projects, the cost to the builder has increased because of the cost of materials. That is something that when you are locked into a contract you cannot bear, and it has been a very challenging period for builders. But in response to that, builders have advocated for the ability to use cost escalation clauses to enable the price of a build to be increased to reflect unexpected increases in costs of materials and labour as well as unforeseen delays, and that is what I just talked to. We saw COVID really impact the building sector and delays because the unavailability of materials really had an impact on that, so this key reform goes to addressing that particular challenge.

Another key reform will be that the use of these escalation clauses will be in major domestic building contracts with a value of $1 million or more and for an increase of no larger than 5 per cent, so those cost escalation clauses will be permitted in those circumstances. Now, the $1 million threshold was chosen as it best balances the needs of both the building industry and consumers, so that came about through extensive consultation with the sector and with consumers. The threshold of $1 million has been set at this level to reflect the risk that these clauses carry while also reflecting that the $1 million figure outlined already accounts for approximately the top 6 per cent of home builds. Permitting these cost escalations in loans under $1 million unacceptably increases consumer risk, where buyers may be unable to obtain loans or afford the increase. Therefore in those circumstances it is more appropriate that builders cost any possible escalation into the initial contract, which is a really good feature because you can then forecast these things and say, 'Look, perhaps if there are any problems, this is potentially what you may be liable for.' To be forewarned is to be forearmed, and that is a very welcome change.

It is also important to allow flexibility to support the industry to manage unforeseen costs. As I said, it is intended to operate as the exception rather than the norm in domestic building contracts, as it is a high-risk mechanism for consumers. So again, the bill introduces other consumer protections around the use of these clauses, including a 5 per cent ceiling on how much builders can increase the price of a contract. The protections in the bill will ensure consumers can manage price increases without entering a negative equity position or defaulting on loan repayments. We think these changes coupled with the 5 per cent ceiling on price increases also address concerns raised by financial institutions about the use of these clauses by improving price certainty in contracts when they are used. So you can see the extensive consultation that government has had with a number of key players in the sector, not only builders but also consumers and the financial sector, because everyone has a stake in ensuring

that our building industry remains viable and that consumer protection is at the heart of making sure the industry remains viable.

Another key reform is around preliminary works and agreements. Again, this reform will enable consumers and builders to more easily contract around preliminary works. These reforms will amend the definition of 'domestic building work' to allow building owners and builders to enter into preliminary agreements for plans and for specifications. Importantly, this allows builders to obtain up-front payments for this work and gives them the flexibility to do works and draw up plans in a precontractual stage. Again, it gives greater certainty to see what might be in the pipeline and what is necessary for your build. This reform is intended to reduce the regulatory burden for builders and reduce the risk for non-payment of this type of preliminary work while still providing protection for consumers.

It looks like the clock is going to beat me. There are many, many more reforms in this bill, and of course I was going to go into the detail around public consultation because it has been extensive. I have touched on it a little bit, but as I said, the clock is going to beat me and perhaps there will be other speakers on this who will also go to those reforms. I commend the bill to the house.

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (11:29): It has been a really wideranging debate, and I am grateful for the opportunity to have listened to those who have contributed over the course of some pretty expansive discussion on not only the building industry and the need for reform but the way in which changes to the system of regulation and the work to strengthen the integrity of the domestic building system to place a square focus on consumers has enabled us also to talk to the work more broadly across Victoria to deliver fundamentally the outcomes that people are looking for – whether it is people who are buying their own home, making the largest purchase of their lives; whether it is people who are making changes to the homes that they have and the building contracts that we see being entered into every day, having such a focal role in that; or whether it is about providing the measure of certainty and confidence both within and in relation to the industry and the people who work in it.

I am very pleased to have been able to see discussions around this chamber about this legislation and indeed in the other place that have highlighted the need for improved protections for consumers, and I am looking to have some further discussions in the committee stage. In particular I think Mr Bourman, who raised a number of questions in relation to this bill, will be putting those in the committee stage, and I welcome an opportunity to talk to them on the record. This is and should be a collaborative effort to make sure that the beneficiaries of a strong system of regulation – that is, consumers – receive the outcomes that they need and deserve through the legislative process because of collaboration just like this. I want to thank the members of the crossbench in particular but also those from the opposition benches, who have provided confirmation that the bill is not opposed. That recognises the importance, again, of a certain, consistent and best practice approach to regulation in the domestic building system here in Victoria. There are a number of areas around the reforms and how they will benefit consumers that speakers have gone to in considerable detail. I do not intend to prosecute them again. Speakers have been fulsome in the way in which they have addressed the bill generally and how it will work. Again, to highlight a number of the components of a consumer focus, the prohibition on builders demanding or receiving any amount or instalment of the contract price that is not directly related to the progress of work under the contract is one example of the practical realities that have highlighted the need for this bill and for the reforms more generally.

Enhancing community and consumer understanding of rights by clarifying and simplifying the regulatory framework is another really important component of reform, and to that end I want to commend the Building and Plumbing Commission, formerly the Victorian Building Authority. The work that has occurred through Anna Cronin and through the team at the Building and Plumbing Commission since it formally commenced its operations in July has been nothing short of transformative. This has served a number of purposes. It has not only enabled a broader piece on

community and sector education and encouragement of best practice but also enabled a streamlining of the processes on everything from dispute resolution through to the way in which properties and practices are assessed, codes are developed, the importance of regulatory standards is understood and the solutions being offered and the policy changes being effected are fit for purpose. That is entirely down to a steadfast commitment from within the sector and the vast majority of builders and developers, who are good people, who do the right thing and who take great pride in their work. This is part of a suite of reforms, as people would know, further to the Building Legislation Amendment (Buyer Protections) Bill 2025. It was a shame that was opposed by those opposite, but to see that this particular bill has the support of those around the chamber who have previously not been on board with a consumer focus is a good thing. So I do want to acknowledge that.

Making sure that we have benefits to the building industry more broadly is also really important, and modernising the act to ensure that the regulatory framework is clear and effective also reduces the administrative burden on businesses and enables them to adapt to a really dynamic industry that continues to innovate and to adopt new construction methods. This is also about accommodating the changes we know are taking place not just here in Victoria but around Australia and around the world. Modern methods of construction, the work which occurs in partial offsite builds, is something which we know is necessary. It is something which increases the efficiency of building and completion rates, but it is also then about making sure that not only are standards adhered to but that best practice is an expectation that is reasonably part of the way in which people enter into contracts, the way in which builds occur and the way in which they are completed.

I am also looking forward to, subject to passage of this bill in this place, ongoing industry and consumer stakeholder consultation and the way in which we develop regulations and the regulatory impact statement, and that is anticipated to occur on the development of regulations in the latter part of this year. We are looking forward to making sure that we can commence the act at its very latest at the end of next year, unless of course we do proclaim that act earlier as commencing. Those regulations will of course come into effect upon commencement of the act.

The proposed payment timing reforms are a really important complement to other legislation that we introduced in the other place this week, which is about making sure that there is timely and fair payment to subcontractors as part of the domestic building industry and making sure that we place limits on the amount of deposits that a builder can demand or receive under a domestic building contract and also restrictions on how builders can request progress payments under major domestic building contracts. We are making sure that there is an important consumer protection but one which is also contemporary. As a number of speakers have pointed out, this is an update which is sorely needed, because the act, as it commenced back in 1995, has really fallen out of step with those changes in the building industry and on-ground practice, which has evolved and necessarily so to meet the need and the demand but also codes, standards, rules, regulations and minimum expectations. Deposit limits, progress payment stages and progress payment limits will be prescribed in regulations instead of the act. That is also about making sure of course with that general proportionality component in that work that we do have a measure of flexibility and dexterity, again, to avoid precisely the situation that had arisen prior to introduction of this bill and the opportunity through regulation to have three different contract types to reflect different approaches to domestic building and also to make sure that building owners are not being charged for work that has not been completed. A prohibition mechanism on builders demanding or receiving any amount or instalment of the contract price that is not directly related to the progress of works will be an important component of this legislation, unless of course there is an exemption to the proportionality requirement through the regulations.

The three major domestic building contract types, as others have indicated in their contributions, were developed in consultation with the industry. So again, we are making sure we can distinguish between contracts involving a greater amount of offsite manufacturing, such as modern methods of construction, as these types of contracts will often have a front-loaded component of complexity or cost, and that may require higher earlier payments. The typology of build will be directly connected

to the way in which earlier payment requirements might reasonably be anticipated. The contract types are all for building an entire home, and the regulations will prescribe progress payments stages and also the limits that builders need to follow for each contract type. There will also be those general proportionality requirements to make sure that work that is completed is the nexus by which payment can be sought.

To provide certainty about which contracts are subject to which requirements, the types of modern methods of construction will be prescribed in regulation. This will, as I said, provide that much-needed flexibility. We have homes being 3D printed in Victoria. We have work going on to develop modern methods of construction, including partial builds, whether that is bathroom pods or whether that is panels or sections which can then be lifted into place. We want to make sure that, again, the industry is receiving that measure of encouragement and of consistency in order to make sure we are also aligned not only with practice but also the federal jurisdiction and the ongoing work of the Commonwealth government and the Australian Building Codes Board around that regulatory certainty. This is something which I know that other building ministers, other housing ministers and other ministers associated with the consumer focus and with planning reforms around Australia are really determined to address.

These challenges are not unique to Victoria, but the challenges that are not unique to Victoria are being incorporated into regulatory reform that is relatively unique to Victoria. We are setting a pace for significant reform that is enabling the higher level of quality and the better measure of confidence and certainty in the industry and in the sector that has a downstream impact on confidence through investment. We know that where we can provide certainty, where we can provide confidence, we then see more homes started, more building approvals and more construction and completion. The work that we are doing through the housing statement – those transformational reforms first foreshadowed in 2023 – is the reason that significant change is occurring and the reason that as a consequence of these changes those greater volumes of homes are being brought to market, but quality is of essential importance here.

The progress payment work and the way in which there can be contracting out is something that will be prescribed in the regulations. We want to make sure that builders using a custom payment schedule do not have less incentive to complete a contract and therefore a correspondingly higher level of consumer risk. We will not have any opportunity to contract out of requirements for major domestic building contracts to build a home, but for other contract types there will be a capacity for building owners to agree to custom payment stages and amounts using a clause and notice in forms that will be prescribed and published in the gazette.

We do want to make sure that, while we regulate the amount of deposit that builders are permitted to demand or receive, building owner deposits are protected under the Building Act 1993 and that for major domestic building contracts above $16,000 domestic building insurance provides that measure of protection against financial losses. The buyer protection legislation, again unfortunately opposed by those opposite but passed nonetheless, introduces that first-resort statutory insurance scheme, a streamlined process for dispute resolution, a better measure of certainty on rectification orders and that educative function which is so important for the Building and Plumbing Commission as well. This is part of ongoing work, as many speakers have noted, to ensure that our building industry represents and reflects best practice and again does not shoulder the burden of bad practice by a few bad actors on the vast majority of builders and of operators in Victoria who do the right thing and take great pride in doing the right thing. I am looking forward to responding to, I think, only Mr Bourman's questions in committee and to its swift passage from there.

Council divided on motion:

Ayes (38): Ryan Batchelor, Melina Bath, John Berger, Lizzie Blandthorn, Jeff Bourman, Gaelle Broad, Katherine Copsey, Georgie Crozier, David Davis, Moira Deeming, Enver Erdogan, Jacinta Ermacora, David Ettershank, Michael Galea, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Renee Heath, Ann-Marie

Hermans, Shaun Leane, Wendy Lovell, Trung Luu, Sarah Mansfield, Bev McArthur, Joe McCracken, Nick McGowan, Tom McIntosh, Evan Mulholland, Rachel Payne, Aiv Puglielli, Georgie Purcell, Harriet Shing, Ingrid Stitt, Jaclyn Symes, Lee Tarlamis, Sonja Terpstra, Gayle Tierney, Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Sheena Watt, Richard Welch

Noes (1): David Limbrick

Motion agreed to.

Read second time.

Committed.

Committee

Clause 1 (11:51)

Jeff BOURMAN: Minister, what provisions in the bill specifically address the longstanding practice of project builders marketing house and land packages on the assumption of flat and stable sites, despite knowing the land is sloping or has unstable soil and then imposing costly variations – often tens of thousands of dollars – on unsuspecting clients, many of them first home buyers?

Harriet SHING: That depends on the nature of the contract. The sale of traditional house and land packages is excluded from the Domestic Building Contracts Act 1995, and these contracts are regulated under the Sale of Land Act 1962. But if the DBC act does apply to a contract, section 30 already requires builders to obtain foundations data prior to entering into a major domestic building contract if the work will require construction or alteration of the footings of a building or may adversely affect the footings of a building, and there are penalties for that. Section 30 also prohibits builders from obtaining any additional payment relating to foundations data after entering on that MDBC, if that amount could reasonably have been ascertained had the builder obtained the required foundations data.

Jeff BOURMAN: Under modern methods of construction provisions, the bill allows builders to claim up to 50 per cent of construction costs before any materials are delivered to site, particularly in prefab scenarios where the builder is also the supplier. What consumer protections are in place if the manufacturer enters administration or liquidation prior to delivery, and why does the bill not adopt the commercial contract safeguards, such as requiring insurance or bank guarantee to cover the value of unfixed goods?

Harriet SHING: The bill does not actually permit builders to claim 50 per cent of the construction costs before materials are delivered to the site. The amendment that the bill makes that relates to modern methods of construction is to enable progress payment stages and limits to be prescribed in regulations. and the contract types in the bill, as I said in the sum-up, are differentiated by what percentage of the cost incurred by the builder is attributable to one or more prescribed modern methods of construction. So that will enable progress payment stages and limits in the regulations to be tailored to contracts with low, medium and high levels or amounts of MMC. The bill will also prevent builders from demanding or receiving any payment or instalment of the contract price that is not directly related to progress of the work under the contract. Of course I mentioned MDBCs above $16,000, where there is protection against financial losses arising from incomplete or defective work carried out if a builder has died, disappeared or become insolvent.

Jeff BOURMAN: While the bill seeks to improve dispute resolution processes, why has the government not established a clear statutory timeframe to ensure disputes are resolved in a timely manner and consumers are not left in limbo?

Harriet SHING: The establishment of statutory timeframes to resolve those disputes will not necessarily have any impact on the timing outcome of disputes as a range of variables impact upon successful dispute resolution. The building and plumbing dispute resolution components focused

attention on reducing the wait times for people to access dispute resolution services, and we do want to make sure that there is a significant reduction, as has occurred with the overall timeliness of the service under Domestic Building Dispute Resolution Victoria. The legislation, we do want to make sure, will lead to defects on insured building work being fixed more quickly, which will then lead to a reduction in consumers having to take their claims to VCAT and divert matters from the Building and Plumbing Commission dispute resolution services.

Jeff BOURMAN: I am going to roll a few questions into the next one. Why does the bill not impose penalties on builders who fail to disclose this mandatory information at the time of contract signing given it is required for a building permit? Also, why does the bill allow a builder to extend the contract period by up to 50 per cent before an owner can terminate whilst limiting cost variations to 15 per cent? Does this not risk enabling volume builders to deliberately delay projects such as seen in the collapse of Porter Davis, leaving consumers financially exposed by having to pay both rent and mortgage costs without any disincentive for builders to delay? And lastly, where does the government propose the home owner live for between six to 16 months before they can?

Harriet SHING: Section 30 prohibits builders from obtaining any additional payment relating to foundations data after entering into an MDBC if that amount could reasonably have been ascertained had the builder obtained the required foundations data, and there is a requirement for a builder to give any foundations data obtained on payment of the amount owed by the builder for that data. There are penalties sitting in the act in relation to that work. If geotech reports were prepared, they would be provided with the building permit application, but there is no explicit requirement that geotech reports are required for all builds. Under the Building Act 1993, an application will, if constructed, comply with the act and regulations, so if they are needed, they must comply.

The bill will remove a requirement for an extension period of up to 50 per cent to enable a building owner to end a contract if the contract price rises by 15 per cent or more and the contract has not been completed within 1½ times the period it was to be completed by, regardless of the reason for the increased period of time.

Finally, the protection for consumers means that we are doing work with key consumer and building industry stakeholders who have been consulted through the development of this bill, and we do want to make sure that in the course of that work the bill balances those interests and will help more homes get built by modernising the regulatory framework and by making sure that we can meet the needs of the building industry that continue to innovate and adapt new modern methods of construction and other construction methodologies.

Jeff BOURMAN: We are coming in for a landing, Minister. Domestic building contracts for home owners currently tend to only be loosely defined and written in favour of the builder or building company. This leaves consumers exposed to unfair practices. Unscrupulous operators rife within the industry have opportunity to deliberately underestimate provisional sums in key structural components of the work, only to present them as variations to the contract down the track.

The inclusion of a building permit in the contract would mean that the site and structure have been properly assessed and documented, removing the opportunity to mislead the consumer. So the questions I have are: if the intention of the bill is to protect consumers, why has the government not taken meaningful action to protect them? Can the minister confirm that under the Building Act 1993 the building works cannot commence onsite without a building permit? What is the legal obstacle preventing the inclusion of a building permit in all cases? What other options does the government propose to address these issues? Why has the government not made provision for liquidated damages to protect the consumer? And for context, the Housing Industry Association states on its website that the average build time in 2022–23 was 12.5 months for detached houses, 16.6 months for townhouses and 33.3 months for apartments. That is me done.

Harriet SHING: Thanks, Mr Bourman, for that omnibus of questions. The intention of the bill is to protect consumers, and so a builder is prohibited from entering into a domestic building contract that contains an estimated amount for a provisional sum that is less than the reasonable cost of carrying out the work and is required to set out the details of provisional sums in writing in the contract. There will also be variations to existing requirements in the act to provide for a single clear contract variation process, and in addition to that, the bill includes new provisions that require contracts to be written in plain language and no escalation in contracts for projects under $1 million. We are also enhancing consumer understanding of rights by clarifying and simplifying the regulatory framework. In addition to that, building permits cannot be issued until a relevant planning permit, if required – noting the exemption – is obtained. Under section 31, a builder is not able to enter until an MDBC has included the plans and specs for the work and those plans and specs contain enough information to enable the obtaining of a building permit. Finally, the bill does not include a provision for liquidated damages, because the appropriate amount of compensation would depend on many factors, including the nature of the contract and the circumstances of the building owner; that also links into the recently passed buyer protections legislation.

Business interrupted pursuant to standing orders.

Questions without notice and ministers statements

Construction industry

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:01): (1053) My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, Transparency International says the cost of corruption is often in the range of 3 to 8 per cent of government spending, and I note the reports, the frightening reports, in Nine media yesterday and today showing the massive presence of corruption in the government's Big Build program. I note that if Transparency International is correct, corruption could be costing taxpayers many billions, perhaps $8 billion or more. I therefore ask: what action, Treasurer, if any, have you taken to stop the waste, the bleeding, the outright losses from Labor's Big Build projects, given Victoria's dire financial position?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:01): Mr Davis, in a similar theme to yesterday, I reiterate that there is zero tolerance for inappropriate behaviour on worksites in the state of Victoria, whether that be corrupt conduct or criminal conduct. Indeed, to the issues that you have raised, we have acted. We appointed Greg Wilson to undertake a review and provide recommendations to government, and we are well underway in implementing those recommendations. There was $6 million in this year's budget to implement the recommendations. The WIV will be an entry point for people to be able to raise concerns of any nature, which will then be appropriately directed, whether it be to police or IBAC and the like if those are the types of thresholds that are met in relation to the incoming information. This will be an opportunity for anyone, even if they have an inkling, a suspicion or an actual allegation. It will be a good opportunity to make sure that we are continuing our efforts to stamp out any type of behaviour that meets the definition or description of what you outlined in your question.

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:03): I ask consequently: have you been briefed on the cost of corruption on Big Build projects, and if so, when, and what are the estimated costs?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:03): Mr Davis, again, there is zero tolerance for corruption in the public sector, whether it is a matter that has been referred to IBAC or a matter that may have been brought to your attention. I would encourage anybody who has information to raise it with the appropriate authorities, and if any matter is brought to my attention, it is indeed my role to refer it to appropriate bodies.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, I fear that we are going to go around the block and not hear a simple answer. Have you been briefed or not?

The PRESIDENT: I think the Treasurer was getting to the answer in regard to anything that has been brought to her attention.

Jaclyn SYMES: Mr Davis, as I was explaining, if any instances of corruption are brought to my attention, then I will refer them to the appropriate authorities.

David Davis: On a point of order, President, it was a very simple question about whether the minister has been briefed or not. It is not about what others are doing, it is whether she has been briefed or not as Treasurer about the cost of corruption. She either has or she has not, and she can say yes or no or 'I can't remember.' She could say that.

The PRESIDENT: You do not need to labour the point. I will take your point of order into consideration at the end of question time.

Construction industry

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:05): (1054) My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, whistleblowers have alleged gross financial negligence and waste inside multiple government agencies, including the Victorian Infrastructure Delivery Authority. A former senior VIDA official described gross negligence and a lack of care with the use of public money. The government was also repeatedly warned about the major financial impact of unlawful behaviour on Victorian government construction sites. Will the Treasurer request that the Department of Treasury and Finance undertake an immediate audit of all government agencies linked to taxpayer-funded construction projects to find out exactly how much money has been fleeced and wasted?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:06): I thank Mr Mulholland for his question. He has conflated a couple of issues in his question. I think you referred to allegations that have been brought to light by whistleblowers. As I understand it, through reporting, the whistleblower has made complaints to IBAC, so I would not put myself in a position where I am seeking to influence a potentially active IBAC commission. In relation to the role of DTF in relation to infrastructure projects, it is a role of theirs to continue to work with agencies in the rollout of projects but also in relation to contingency payments in relation to milestones as they are reached. Therefore, in your language, there is constant auditing of finances across all government departments and projects.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (12:07): Treasurer, the scale of reported alleged wrongdoing is so very alarming that former IBAC Commissioner Robert Redlich KC has said that there is urgent and ample reason to consider a broad inquiry and that consideration should be given to a royal commission. Does the Treasurer support a royal commission to get to the bottom of this clear misuse of taxpayers money, misconduct and corruption within the government's Big Build?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:07): Thank you, Mr Mulholland. In relation to action, as I have said, we have already had a review from Greg Wilson. We have accepted and are implementing all of those recommendations. When it comes to royal commissions, we have obviously got a history, when it is appropriate, in terms of systemic issues such as family violence and mental health services. That is when we have embarked on royal commissions. In relation to these issues a more urgent response was required, which is why we had the independent review from Greg Wilson, and it is why we have acted immediately to implement those recommendations. It is not a position that I hold that a royal commission is the best way forward here. I would prefer to act now rather than wait.

Ministers statements: housing

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:08): The housing statement represents a nation-leading commitment to build 800,000 homes in Victoria over the coming decade. Our action on these reforms is seeing results. Victoria continues to lead, beyond New South Wales

and Queensland, in building approvals, completions and commencements, and yesterday we announced a plan to open doors for Victorian homebuyers near key transport corridors.

Members interjecting.

The PRESIDENT: Order! Could the clock be reset, please. There may be a point when the minister does get provocative in her ministers statement. I do not know, but I do not think she has so far. Minister, from the top. We will see how we go.

Harriet SHING: The housing statement represents a nation-leading commitment to build 800,000 homes in Victoria over the coming decade.

David Davis interjected.

Harriet SHING: Mr Davis, you talk about the work we are doing to deliver on the housing statement, and then you and your colleagues stand up and block and oppose and deny people the opportunity to have a home whilst also talking about a shortage of housing. The best thing you have built is a narrative of hypocrisy over there.

Our action on this work is in fact seeing results. We continue to lead, beyond Queensland and New South Wales, in building approvals, completions and commencements, and yesterday we announced our plan to open doors for Victorian homebuyers near key transport corridors. So for those of you on the opposition benches who are calling for housing, it would be great if you could get on board with those announcements that we have made. The draft activity centre mapping will help to deliver more than 300,000 homes close to jobs, services and transport by 2051. Let us be really clear: they are draft activity centre maps, because we want to hear people's views on them. And today we have announced that we are going to unlock even more housing for young families by making it easier for Victorians to build a second home or subdivide their blocks. This is about delivering more homes for Victorians in the suburbs where people want to live.

Speaking of which, the member for Brighton in the other place, speaking to the media, said that no-one asked for this announcement, just like no-one asked for treaty or the towers. Well, you know what, people are asking for homes, and I would say to those opposite who are opposing and blocking the delivery of homes to look people in the eye who are wanting to buy or get into a home closer to where they grew up, who deserve the same opportunities that you and that your parents had, and to get on board or get out of the way. While you block, we build.

Cannabis law reform

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:11): (1055) My question is for the Minister for Police, represented in this place by the Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation. I was pleased to hear recent reports that some drug offences are at their lowest recorded levels in decades, and all drug offences remain well below average. I am hopeful that this reflects Victoria Police understanding that drug prohibition has failed. Choosing to direct their resources to violent crimes like assault, which recent reports state is up by 10 per cent, makes more sense. So my question is: will the minister call for the decriminalisation of cannabis so that Victoria Police can continue to prioritise violent crimes?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:12): I thank Ms Payne for her question and her passion on this matter. She has been very consistent throughout this whole term of government, in the 60th Parliament, so I will make sure that that is passed on to the Minister for Police in the other place for a response in line with the standing orders.

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:12): I thank the minister for referring that on. By way of supplementary, people often think that no-one is arrested for cannabis anymore; that is simply not true. Last year 3180 people were arrested for cannabis possession, 398 of which were

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This over-representation is consistent with the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are eight times more likely to be arrested for possession of cannabis instead of receiving a caution. So will the minister commit to addressing the failures in Victoria's cannabis cautioning program?

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:13): I thank Ms Payne for that supplementary question, and in line with the standing orders I will seek a written response from the Minister for Police in the other place.

Disability services

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:13): (1056) My question is to the Minister for Disability. Media reports this week indicate thousands of Victorians with profound disabilities are facing eviction from their group homes when the state NDIS transition subsidy to the government's five preferred providers ends this year. Noting your comments yesterday, Minister, and understanding there are negotiations, if no resolution is reached, will you commit to extending the state funding subsidy until a solution is found to ensure our most vulnerable continue to have a roof over their head?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:14): I thank Ms Bath for her question, although at the outset I would say that she is misrepresenting my answer yesterday, because I did not say that there were negotiations happening. What I explained yesterday – and not just yesterday in response to Mr Bourman but to Mr Ettershank previously and on a number of other occasions – is that we have contributed this year $3 billion to the NDIS for a national disability insurance scheme that provides a nationally consistent framework for people with disability across our country. It was an extremely important reform. There has indeed been further work in recent years, certainly over the last two years, about how we can further reform the NDIS to make it a sustainable system. But first and foremost, the national disability insurance scheme exists to ensure that people are serviced nationally through those state government contributions to provide those services.

The program that is being referred to here was a transition payment which expires at the end of this year, and there is not a negotiation to continue that, as I have said previously in this chamber. What we do say is that the Commonwealth is to use the funds that we pay to the NDIS as a state to ensure the provision of services across the country, including in Victoria, so that through people's plans services are funded. That includes supported living services. What we did here in Victoria was go above and beyond in providing a transition payment which has, in a stepped way, been approaching the end of this year where it terminates. That is the case, that it terminates, and I have not said anything different here, in PAEC or in response to a number of questions both in this chamber and in the media. What we say is that the Commonwealth needs to ensure that there is fair and just pricing for the provision of services to people who have a national disability insurance plan, that they should not be withdrawing any of those plans from people and that they should be making sure that people get exactly what they are entitled to, including their supported living payments.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:16): I thank the minister for her response. Minister, the five preferred providers announced by the state – Aram, Scope, Life Without Barriers, Melba and Possability – have issued a statement saying funding shortfalls will not allow them to continue services. Minister, have you met with these agencies recently on this potential disaster, and if so, what steps have to be taken to ensure they can continue to operate and serve our most vulnerable?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:16): As I have said repeatedly, the Commonwealth government has the responsibility to ensure that there is fair pricing for the provision of supported services for people with disabilities who have an NDIS plan, including their supported living. The providers that you listed off are exactly the providers that we are talking about, and indeed the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, in relation to some of the clients within those providers, have been going above and beyond their state

responsibilities to work with those families and those providers. But this remains a Commonwealth government responsibility, to ensure that there is fair pricing which is adequately then provided for within a plan that pays for somebody's supported independent living service.

Ministers statements: drought

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:17): Despite recent rain, we know drought continues to impact many farmers across the state. With poor rainfall in south-west Victoria for the past 18 months, many dams are still low. Led by the Premier's drought taskforce, our government's $144 million drought support package is supporting water access to farmers in need, and I am pleased to announce that expressions of interest are now open for the Farmer Helping Farmer program. Through this program we will enable drought-impacted farmers to access emergency water for livestock by partnering with private landholders to access underutilised water supplies.

We know that farmers need immediate support. Through Farmer Helping Farmer we will support our agricultural sector in the south-west through the upcoming summer. This is an opportunity now to better utilise the high-quality, drought-resilient South West Limestone aquifer. The program will enable Southern Rural Water to explore infrastructure upgrades for volunteer local landholders in the region to facilitate access to their groundwater bores to help their neighbours in need. This is an opportunity for local farmers with local knowledge to shape a drought response that could benefit the region for many years to come. While many farmers and regional communities are still grappling with the challenges of drought conditions, it is important that we all continue to follow the statewide permanent water-saving rules. Every drop is precious, something our regions know only too well.

Construction industry

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:19): (1057) My question is to the Minister for Skills and TAFE. Minister, the media has revealed the existence of secret spreadsheets maintained by government officials which capture numerous details about extortion and blackmail tactics by a cabal of subcontractors aligned with the CFMEU. In response to a question on notice answered on 1 September 2025, you said that from 1 July 2024 to 12 May 2025 your department made payments totalling $1,326,674 to the CFMEU under the Skills First program. Why is the Labor government still providing taxpayers money to a union with clear and known links to criminal elements?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:20): Can I start by also making it clear that I condemn any form of criminal conduct, and of course I reject the premise that was implied in the question that was put by the member. All RTOs are regulated by the federal regulator, ASQA. All RTOs with the Skills First contract, including those affiliated with unions or industry, are subject to the same audits, reviews and compliance requirements under the Skills First contract. The department, DJSIR, is responsible for administering the Skills First program. For all contracted RTOs, Skills First payments are made on a monthly basis in arrears for training hours actually delivered in that month. The contractual relationship between the department and the CFMEU RTO has been in place since at least 2010, including when those opposite were in government. Except when they were in government, they were paid up-front, not in arrears.

If those opposite or anyone in the community have any allegations in relation to the CFMEU RTO, I urge them to report those to the appropriate authority. The Labor governments are prioritising integrity in our training systems. In 2014, when we came into government, we ran a blitz campaign to get rid of RTOs that were not providing quality training under the state government contracts. The department sets the compliance audit schedule for Skills First providers to be conducted by independent auditors, and these are compliance audits. The auditors will request all relevant documents without prior notice. It would be absolutely inappropriate for me to comment on plans for any potential future audits.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:22): Minister, your response is saying you reject the premise of the question, but it is fact. The government is paying taxpayer money to a union with

clear links to criminal elements. Now, you have just spoken about the audit that is undertaken. Under the Skills First program, the Labor government has provided over $3 million to the CFMEU since 2022. And I can tell you one thing: if it happened under our government, we would have cancelled all of this. In your answer you say the department continuously monitors Skills First training providers, which you have just informed the house of, including a range of inputs including trends and anomalies in training activity data reviewed on a monthly basis across the entire funded training system. So can you assure the house that there have been no anomalies with any of this reporting, given the amount of taxpayers money funded to the CFMEU over this period of time?

Gayle TIERNEY (Western Victoria – Minister for Skills and TAFE, Minister for Water) (12:23): Again, this is just another example of those opposite not understanding the skills and training system in this state. It is absolutely shameful that they then try to come in here and misrepresent the situation. The fact of the matter is that we are not the regulator.

Georgie Crozier: On a point of order, President, I would just like to ask you to ask the minister to not debate the issue. I am responding to her. I am quoting what she has said. Minister, you might laugh at this and you might mock me, but it is a very important issue around taxpayers money. I am reading your own answer from 1 September 2025, and you continue to mock the taxpayer and the rorting corruption and the wrong that is going on in the CFMEU. I would ask the President to bring the minister back to answering this important question: have any anomalies been highlighted through the auditing process?

The PRESIDENT: I think the minister was being relevant to the whole of the question that was asked of her.

Gayle TIERNEY: We are not the regulator for the system, but in terms of the administration of the Skills First contract, it is administered by the department, and the department allocates those Skills First contracts on the basis of information it receives in terms of skills needs across this state. Most of that data is actually generated by the Victorian Skills Authority, and that provides the information to make sure that we allocate subsidised training and subsidised money so that we can have a trained workforce. And that is exactly what is happening and continues to happen. If there are other issues that the member has in relation to this issue, then she should raise them with the appropriate authority.

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:25): I move:

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

Motion agreed to.

Stamp duty

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:25): (1058) My question is for the Treasurer. Recently there was much reporting about this idea of an empty bedroom tax. Although it is an awful idea, it did highlight a real problem and a problem that was identified in the stamp duty inquiry, and this is around the idea that stamp duty distorts the market by disincentivising people to downsize to a smaller home. As an alternative proposal, what I would be interested in is: has the Treasurer received any advice or given any consideration to the idea of providing stamp duty exemptions to people moving into a house with fewer bedrooms than what they currently live in?

Jaclyn SYMES (Northern Victoria – Treasurer, Minister for Industrial Relations, Minister for Regional Development) (12:26): I thank Mr Limbrick for his question and the opportunity to potentially engage in a conversation around positive tax reform. I am always open to good ideas. I think what you have touched on is something that was a motivation for the stamp duty exemptions for off-the-plan apartments, townhouses and units, for instance, because we knew that that would hopefully incentivise downsizing to free up the larger homes for young families and the like, which is where some of the bottlenecks are.

To be specific to your question, I have not received formal advice in relation to the proposal as you have articulated it, but it certainly has been something that has been a topic of conversation before. I think some of the issues you have got to consider are that the cohort of people that would be downsizing are potentially, and quite often, those that already have equity and perhaps already have means, so therefore you are potentially putting them into a contest with those that would not benefit from a stamp duty proposal as you indicated. It might be an unfair contest between perhaps first home buyers and downsizers, so you would have to consider the impacts in relation to that.

I would also question the evidence of whether paying stamp duty is in fact a barrier to downsizing, or would people do it anyway, and therefore if you were to implement such a policy, would you not get a policy outcome and therefore you would just get a reduction in revenue? One of the criticisms of off-the-plan stamp duty is that it is applicable for luxury penthouse apartments and the like, and I think if you are downsizing from an outer-suburban two-storey house into a luxury apartment, is that something that would be fair, considering you might actually be buying a more expensive smaller home and the like? So I think there are a lot of things to think through for a policy like that, but it is certainly not without merit.

As you have indicated, there is a good policy basis for making sure that houses that are too large and not fit for purpose for potentially older people – I would put my parents in that category. They have a four-bedroom house and probably would look to downsize now or in the future. It is nice to go home and be able to stay with your parents, but I recognise that that house is where I grew up and no longer do they have two kids living with them. So I understand the policy intent that you are potentially looking for, and as always I am certainly open to further conversations. I am particularly happy to potentially see if there is any advice that I have got that I could provide to you if you want to give some greater thinking to the policy.

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:29): I thank the Treasurer for that response, and I will proceed to try and get some more information on it.

Ministers statements: autism

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:29): I rise to update the house on the *Victorian Autism Plan Progress Report*. The *Victorian Autism Plan* guides work across government to make things fairer and more inclusive for autistic people in Victoria. The plan was established in 2019 and refreshed in 2023, and it includes 93 actions which are designed to improve understanding of autism in the community and across our workforces. The autism plan progress report updates me as minister as well as the community on how we are tracking against each of the actions, and I am pleased that 10 have been completed, 81 are on track to be completed by December this year, one action is delayed and one was retired. Initiatives like publicly funded autism assessments, the disability liaison officer program, training for the mental health workforce and autistic-led mentoring programs are just some examples of how we are working towards achieving the plan's ambitions.

This report also makes the connection to the new *National Autism Strategy*, and I was very pleased to meet with the advisory group last week to discuss developments on the national disability reform agenda and hear their reflections on the Commonwealth's recent announcement in relation to Thriving Kids. We share their concerns that Victorian children with developmental delay and disability and their families will be worse off under Thriving Kids, and further, I have grave concerns that the Commonwealth are trying to sell out people with disabilities and their families for pet projects across the country. Children with developmental delay and disability should not be traded away for 30 pieces of silver. I would like to thank the advisory group, the Victorian Disability Advisory Council and the interdepartmental committee on disability reform for guiding the development of the plan and for providing oversight of this progress report. I look forward to continuing to work together on making our state more inclusive and accessible for all Victorians. To read the autism plan progress report and find out more, visit the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing webpage.

Disability services

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:31): (1059) My question is for the Minister for Disability. Recommendation 11.3 of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability was to:

> … establish or maintain an independent 'one-stop shop' complaint reporting, referral and support mechanism to receive reports of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of people with disability.

It was not to establish an authority that also deals with other social service complaints, as you have done. Why have you included the disability complaints process into the role of the wider social services regulator, which is not a standalone disability complaints entity, as recommended?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:32): I thank Ms Bath for her question. She is conflating two very important issues there. The first is the national disability royal commission, which did make recommendations about the importance of an independent commission nationally consistent across the country, and as part of the national disability reform ministerial council we remain in discussion about those. Sadly, I will again take the opportunity to say that the Commonwealth has not bothered in recent times to actually call a meeting of the Disability Reform Ministerial Council and is out there announcing things like Thriving Kids without actually even talking to those who are the co-governors of the scheme, and it is extremely frustrating. But I will deal with the second and unrelated part of Ms Bath's question, which speaks to our plan. It has not yet actually been enacted, so it has not actually happened, Ms Bath, but it is certainly part of our agenda to ensure that the social services regulation landscape in this state is cohesive, and that is –

Melina Bath interjected.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Sorry, President. If I am constantly interrupted, it is impossible to answer the question.

The PRESIDENT: The minister to continue without interruption.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: So I am extremely committed, I remain committed, and indeed our statements and response to the child safety review reaffirm our commitment to ensuring that we have a social services regulator that is able to bring together all elements of ensuring that we provide effective regulation and a one-stop shop complaints mechanism as well as a place in which people can make one approach when it comes to the regulation of social services.

It is particularly important, as we all know and have all agreed in this chamber in recent weeks, when it comes to children, including children with disability but all children, that our social services regulatory system is coordinated and the services speak to each other and we ensure that whether people are using social services in relation to housing, in relation to disability, in relation to out-of-home care or in relation to other children's services it is all in a coherent, cohesive and structured way under one regulator that ensures the intersectionality of people's complex lives are reflected in the services that are there to provide for them and in the way in which they are regulated. We remain absolutely committed to the proposal. I would remind everyone in this house that they have also, in recent weeks, committed to supporting those reforms, which will go to improving child safety.

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:34): Minister, the same recommendation states the service 'should be co-designed with people with disability'. Why were none of the six member groups of Disabled People's Organisations Victoria not consulted in line with the recommendation?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (12:35): I am now unclear whether Ms Bath is talking about the national disability royal commission or indeed our proposal in relation to the social services regulator, because two completely different issues have been conflated in the substantive question and then again in the supplementary question. But I will assure Ms Bath that we remain absolutely committed, as we hope the Commonwealth do,

to co-design and ensuring that the voices of people with lived experience are reflected in the way we, one, establish an independent national –

Melina Bath: On a point of order, President, has the minister consulted with the six-member Disabled People's Organisations Group? The minister is not answering the question. I ask you to bring her back to the question.

The PRESIDENT: I believe there was a point of order, but I also believe the minister was being relevant to the question.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I would just point out it is not a point of order to ask the question again just because you have not clearly understood what it is that we are actually talking about in either providing for the substantive or the supplementary. But I would assure the house that we are absolutely committed to working with people with disability to ensure that our negotiations with the Commonwealth reflect their needs when it comes to disability reform across the country, including when it comes to things like safeguarding and independent regulation. And we are absolutely committed to it when it comes to our own reforms, particularly those in relation to protecting children and child safety, including children with disabilities. If you are not, then you should take that somewhere else.

Yallourn power station

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:37): (1060) My question is to the Minister for Energy and Resources in the other place. In March 2021, this Labor government signed a secret deal with EnergyAustralia to continue the operation of the polluting Yallourn power station, burning coal until 30 June 2028. How much are Victorians paying under this secret deal?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:37): I thank Ms Copsey for her question, and I will refer that to the minister for energy in the other place for a written response.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:37): Thank you, Minister, for referring that on. Yallourn's units have been failing regularly, with three of the four units offline last week, so it does not appear that Victorians are getting much out of Labor's secret payments. Doesn't this show we should not be paying to keep coal clunkers open?

Ingrid STITT (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (12:37): Assertions aside, I will refer Ms Copsey's supplementary question to the minister for a written response.

Ministers statements: independent prison visitor scheme

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (12:38): I recently had the opportunity to attend our annual independent prison visitor scheme event and acknowledge the hard work of our dedicated volunteers. Under this scheme, volunteers visit our prisons and meet with people in custody, staff and visitors to survey a range of prison functions. Following each visit, they provide reports on the standards inside prison and whether these are reasonably meeting community expectations. It was wonderful to be able to thank them directly and celebrate their achievements over the last 12 months. Independent prison visitors provide another source of important feedback on prison conditions on the ground, enabling officials to identify and fix issues as they arise and continually improve conditions for both staff and prisoners alike. It is one of the many ways that prison staff and authorities can monitor the frontline experience of our prisons. The scheme plays an important part in our independent oversight of prisons, providing regular reports to me as the minister and the Corrections Victoria leadership about any emerging issues, as well as the good work that is happening behind the four walls.

Volunteers are experienced and knowledgeable, with professional backgrounds in a range of sectors, including education, health, environment, professional services and community services, and the scheme is getting bigger and better. Following a recruitment drive the scheme now boasts 38 volunteers, including six from Aboriginal backgrounds, who visit prisons right across our state. We are aiming to build on our Aboriginal volunteer base by embarking on a new recruitment drive to increase the number of Aboriginal volunteers, because this government understands and recognises that Aboriginal perspectives are integral to a culturally safe service delivery system. Independent prison visitors are an asset to our corrections system and bring a wealth of experience and support, while juggling all the demands of their busy schedules. To all our volunteers, thank you for your hard work in improving Victoria's corrections system. It certainly does not go unnoticed.

Written responses

The PRESIDENT (12:40): Minister Stitt will get answers from the Minister for Energy and Resources for Ms Copsey in line with the standing orders, and Minister Erdogan from the Minister for Police for Ms Payne's questions as well, and I will ask Minister Symes to give a written response to the first supplementary question Mr Davis asked.

Constituency questions

Northern Metropolitan Region

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (12:41): (1834) My constituency question is to the Minister for Environment in the other place. In the Northern Metropolitan Region the Allan Labor government has recently supported the opening of Australia's first battery- and device-shredding facility in Campbellfield. This facility is the first of its kind in the country, in fact capable of safely processing up to 1 tonne of battery-containing devices every hour, using world-leading technologies to safely break down these devices. With only around 15 per cent of batteries currently recycled in Victoria, this plant is much needed and is expected to divert more than 8000 tonnes of waste from landfill every year, recovering really valuable metals and critical minerals while protecting our environment and reducing the fire and contamination risks, importantly. My question to the minister is: how will the new Campbellfield battery-recycling facility support Northern Metro Region as Victoria continues to build a cleaner, safer and more sustainable circular economy?

Western Victoria Region

Joe McCRACKEN (Western Victoria) (12:42): (1835) My question is for the Minister for Education. As the minister may know, there was a huge protest in Ballarat yesterday out the front of the member for Wendouree's office, protesting the $2.3 billion cuts to education funding. I would have thought the Labor Party would have loved to embrace their union members yesterday as they protested against their own government's cuts. The head of the union Mr Mullaly has said:

> Right now, Victoria's public schools are the lowest funded in the country, and our teachers are the lowest paid, with education support staff and school leaders also undervalued.

I would never have thought that the Labor Party would undervalue education like they do in Victoria. It is just an absolute disgrace. So my question to the minister is: when will they restore the $2.3 billion worth of funding and answer to my constituents in Ballarat?

Northern Victoria Region

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (12:43): (1836) My constituency question today is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and my constituents ask: when will the resurfacing works on the Benalla-Yarrawonga Road be completed? While my constituents are delighted to see that resurfacing works on the Benalla-Yarrawonga Road between Yarrawonga and Lake Rowan have been completed, they have raised concerns over the surface conditions between Lake Rowan and Benalla that seem to have been overlooked. Drivers face deep potholes, rutting, rough surfaces and crumbling bitumen in many sections of this stretch of road. This road is frequented by large trucks and cars

travelling between Yarrawonga and Benalla. This is not some back road that should be ignored by the government. Main thoroughfares like the Benalla-Yarrawonga Road should be maintained to a high standard to prevent damage to vehicles and potentially accidents. So my constituents ask: when will the resurfacing works on the Benalla-Yarrawonga Road be completed?

Eastern Victoria Region

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (12:44): (1837) My question is for the Minister for Water. Minister, how is the Victorian government supporting the Gippsland Lakes? Last Friday I was lucky enough to tour the incredible Gippsland Lakes with several of the agencies working to protect and enhance Australia's largest inland waterway. Thank you to Bec Hemming, CEO of East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority, who organised the tour. We were also joined by representatives of the East Gippsland shire, Gippsland Ports, Parks Victoria, Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation, the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority and local Landcare members. The Gippsland Lakes are Australia's largest and most beautiful inland waterways. They cover an area of 600 square kilometres and are home to around 400 indigenous plant species and 300 native wildlife species. The lakes also support nationally and internationally threatened wetland species and waterbird-breeding and fish-spawning sites. It was a fantastic time out on the water, understanding all the work being done across business and community groups, and I thank them again for the opportunity.

Southern Metropolitan Region

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (12:45): (1838) My constituency question is for the attention of the Minister for Planning. Yesterday and further today we have seen the release of information about the government's high-density, high-rise plans for my electorate, Southern Metro. Many of these areas are going to see 16-storey towers put up as of right – and by the way, that is not the end of it. If they do not go through the fast-track process, they can still apply for more and go higher than that, so I still think 20 storeys is on the cards in some areas. What I am asking the minister is: will you commit to releasing all of the submissions that have been made to date about these zones and all of the submissions for the process that is going forward? These should be public. People should be able to see what has been submitted. There should be a contest of ideas if the government is so confident about its approach on tall towers and forced development and its undemocratic approach overriding councils and communities.

Western Victoria Region

Sarah MANSFIELD (Western Victoria) (12:46): (1839) My constituency question is for the Minister for Planning. Constituents in the Surf Coast shire are seeking an update on a formal rezoning approval of land in Spring Creek Valley. Completion of the *Surf Coast Statement of Planning Policy* includes a rezoning of land west of Duffields Road from an urban growth zone to what the community hopes will become a rural conservation zone. This rezoning represents a huge step in a 17-year-long community campaign to place important conservation overlays on land where there is ecological significance, as identified in the area's distinctive area landscape, or DAL, status. Minister, has the Victorian Planning Authority commenced its work to complete this rezoning in Spring Creek Valley?

Northern Victoria Region

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (12:47): (1840) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety. Will the minister urgently repair the gigantic and very dangerous pothole on the Goulburn Valley Highway between Nagambie and Murchison? The Goulburn Valley Highway is a major transport route and also carries large numbers of families commuting to Shepparton and beyond. In recent weeks an enormous pothole has developed in the left-hand northbound lane between Nagambie and Murchison. Motorists are reporting that hitting the pothole at 100 kilometres an hour causes a frightening bang and causes the whole car to shake, and numerous drivers have damaged tyres and wheel rims at this dangerous spot, which must be urgently repaired. After hearing the

concerns of my local constituents about the poor road conditions on the GV highway south of Numurkah and on Vickers Road, Nagambie, I raised these matters in the Parliament, and road repair crews were out to fix the problem a few days later, which I thank the minister for. I now ask the minister to instruct the department to respond as quickly to this complaint, because this is one of the most dangerous potholes that I have seen in a long time.

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Rachel PAYNE (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:48): (1841) My constituency question is for the Minister for Mental Health. My constituent is a resident of Lynbrook. He has expressed concern around the availability of mental health services in his area and the downsizing of Victoria's Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission. The new Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission model was established in response to the recommendations by the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. It aims to ensure government accountability, implement further recommendations and address stigma. Despite this, the government has announced plans to reduce the number of commissioners from four to just one. So my constituent asks: how will the government ensure the effective implementation of recommendations from the royal commission under a single commissioner?

Eastern Victoria Region

Melina BATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:49): (1842) My constituency question is for the Minister for Youth Justice. Minister, in 2024 your government committed $6.63 million to expand Victoria Police's youth crime prevention and early intervention program to high-needs regions including, in my electorate, Latrobe Valley, Shepparton and Mildura. Almost two years later, despite Latrobe Valley's persistent high youth crime rates and significant community concern, the program still has not been rolled out here. The program has been proven to reduce reoffending by nearly half in other areas where it has been rolled out, saving millions in the justice system and improving outcomes for young people. Hallelujah to that. Latrobe Valley and the broader Gippsland population deserve the same access to early intervention, cautions and diversion pathways, noting how much crime is impacting in our region. Minister, when will the program be operational in Latrobe Valley, and why is there such a delay in this vital program?

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:50): (1843) My question today is to the Minister for Transport Infrastructure. Earlier this year I asked about the large number of non-disclosure agreements that residents around the North East Link project have been forced to sign in exchange for compensation following damage to their properties caused by this project. Minister, in your response you mentioned that these confidentiality agreements are necessary 'in managing the private information of individuals and for security purposes'. I just want to be clear whether the minister is seriously trying to tell people in this state that they are being forced to sign NDAs which forbid them from talking about the damage this project is causing to their homes for their own privacy? Do we actually think people are going to buy that? 'Sign this NDA; it's for your own good, trust us.' I mean, what? Minister, I ask: will you ensure that residents are able to freely share their experiences about this project when the inevitable future damage is caused to people's homes by this terrible toll road?

South-Eastern Metropolitan Region

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (12:51): (1844) My question is to the Minister for Police, and my question is: given the proven success of early intervention and community-based diversion programs in preventing youth crime in high-needs areas – according to Victoria's Sentencing Advisory Council, people who received a diversion plan were nearly half as likely to reoffend in the next five years compared to those who received other court outcomes – what specific funding has the government allocated to these programs in the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region,

how is it being rolled out and what system of measurement is being used to measure its effectiveness in reducing reoffending rates?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (12:51): (1845) My constituency question is to the Minister for Community Sport. Parents in my electorate are very concerned to hear of the imminent closure of the gym that St Kilda PCYC runs. This facility runs programs for people across the age spectrum, from children to elderly people in our community. Parents and the school community and wider community are concerned that they are going to lose access to programs and lose access to this vital resource in an area where up to 60 per cent of the community lives in apartments and suffers a profound lack of outdoor space. Minister, what are your plans to ensure the local community continues to have access to vital community sports in this neighbourhood?

Southern Metropolitan Region

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (12:52): (1846) My question is to the Minister for Consumer Affairs. I have been contacted by the Probus club of Maling, which is based in my electorate, to raise concerns about the exorbitant fees charged by Consumer Affairs Victoria, CAV, for incorporated associations. CAV is asking this club, along with 400 other Probus clubs across Victoria, to pay a fee of $437.10 to register an updated constitution, despite these constitutions being virtually identical across all clubs. This fee is much higher than those charged by regulators in other states and territories, which range from $23 to $84, so it is a massive increase. Probus club of Maling will have no choice but to ask their members to fund the additional cost. Given many are on fixed incomes, it places undue financial pressure on them in a cost-of-living crisis. Probus clubs are volunteer run and serve retirees, providing vital social connection. Will the minister review the fees for Probus clubs to alleviate the financial burden on members?

Western Victoria Region

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (12:53): (1847) My question is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety and relates to the condition of Deviation Road, a major feeder road into the Geelong CBD. Deviation Road becomes Aberdeen Street then Ryrie Street, the straightest route to the Bellarine Peninsula from the ring-road, the road which links Geelong to Melbourne. My constituent has previously contacted the minister identifying the dangers of blocked kerbs and channels on this road. Deviation Road carries school buses, trucks and a large number of cars; the poor condition of the shoulders is not merely an eyesore for visitors to the region but incredibly unsafe. If a vehicle were to roll down the steep south side, it would be catastrophic. When will the minister require this road to be cleaned up and made safe?

Eastern Victoria Region

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (12:54): (1848) My question is for the Minister for Police. In 2018 the Labor government introduced laws banning cash-for-scrap transactions in order to disrupt organised crime, but the behaviour continues to thrive. An established Gippsland operator has told me that legitimate businesses are going broke while illegal operators are openly flouting the law. Authorities know this, but instead of shutting them down they just fine them regularly. I am told that illegal operators laugh at these fines, describing them as just a small cost for doing business. The black market is fuelling the state's 41 per cent surge in vehicle thefts and youth recruitment into crime. So my question is: Minister, what actions will you take to address the year-on-year rise in illegal operations in Eastern Victoria Region for scrap for cash?

Bills

Domestic Building Contracts Amendment Bill 2025

Committee

Resumed.

Clause 1 agreed to; clauses 2 to 82 agreed to.

Reported to house without amendment.

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:56): I move:

That the report be now adopted.

Motion agreed to.

Report adopted.

Third reading

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (12:56): I move:

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 Assembly with a message informing them that the Legislative Council has agreed to the bill without amendment.

Sitting suspended 12:57 pm until 2:02 pm.

Business of the house

Orders of the day

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:02): I move:

That the consideration of order of the day, government business, 2, be postponed until later this day.

Motion agreed to.

Motions

Budget papers 2025–26

Debate resumed on motion of Jaclyn Symes:

That the budget papers 2025–26 be taken into consideration.

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (14:03): I rise to speak on the Victorian budget papers 2025–26. I would normally speak on this a lot earlier, but I am back and keen to speak on the Victorian budget and the impact that it is having not only on my community but also on the broader state. We know a few things. The budget that was handed down is a deceitful, reckless and irresponsible budget. It will leave Victorian families worse off, services underfunded and the state drowning in debt. Despite receiving $3.7 billion in GST windfall, Labor somehow delivered a $1 billion worse final result than forecast. That is not a responsible budget. That is what you call an admission of failure. There are fantasy forecasts and spiralling debt. Labor has run a cash deficit, and Victorian debt is now set to blow out to $194 billion by 2029. That will be around $29 million a day in interest – $10 billion a year. That is not to pay down the debt; that is just to service the interest on

the debt, which puts a lie to the COVID debt recovery or down payment plan or whatever they called it, disguised as a massive increase in taxes across the state. Because for every massive increase in tax towards the state, it is not money that goes towards paying down debt, it is money that goes towards servicing debt. We will get to a point where, on the trajectory the government is on, servicing debt per year is going to cost us more than what we afford the entire Department of Education here in this state. That is how dire our economic situation has become.

We know that Labor is addicted to debt and to dishonest forecasts. They promised to hold expenses steady at 0.2 per cent growth; instead they blew the budget by $8.2 billion in just 12 months. We know that supposedly there is still around $600 million in savings due to come through public service cuts through the Silver review, but we have seen those promises before. In particular we saw those promises year after year from former Treasurer Pallas, which never eventuated, again because Labor cannot manage money. Supposedly, which we will hear about soon hopefully, they are dropping another report today. Maybe we will hear about it at 4:59 on a Friday afternoon.

Jaclyn Symes interjected.

Evan MULHOLLAND: I hope it is not the plan; I hope we hear about it soon. Perhaps the Treasurer could table it. It is important, because the debt addiction of this government is having a real impact on services. It is having a real impact on my community. There is a real, stark impact in the works for my community, particularly in the City of Hume, through the emergency services tax – again, a tax that no-one asked for and a tax that imposts costs on families, on farmers and on businesses right across the state. Hume City Council, along with a number of other councils, has helpfully highlighted in red what is a state government charge and what is a council charge. In some cases people are paying more on the state government charge section than their actual rates bill, and it is important for councils like Hume – which has – to differentiate the costs that the state government is lumping on Victorians through their rates notice and the council costs. The emergency services tax alone now in Hume is $249 for residential, $2703 for industrial and $2394 for commercial. This is at a time when families can least afford it. If you are a family in Craigieburn, the most mortgage-stressed suburb in the country, or certainly in Victoria, then those cost imposts count. Every cost impost counts. But this is the issue with the government's addiction to debt and its wasteful spending.

As we were chatting about earlier, there is almost $50 billion in cost blowouts on infrastructure projects across their decade in government, and what those opposite do not understand is that somebody has to pay for that. That does not come from nowhere; somebody has to pay for it. I know much of that amount is now being washed through the hands of gangland figures, the CFMEU, the criminal underworld and people that are fleecing taxpayers money, but somebody has to pay for that. When you have such a huge amount wasted on major project blowouts, then that has to come from somewhere, and we have seen it with the increase in taxes: in land taxes, the emergency services tax, the $50 million cut from Victoria Police at possibly the worst time to cut Victoria Police. And there are cuts to services like Parentline and cuts to services like maternal and child health nurses in the growth areas of Melbourne in another cost-shifting exercise.

This is the kind of price Victorians are paying right now because of the government's mismanagement. We know through S&P Global analysis that the state is already the most indebted among 17 similar subnational jurisdictions across Australia, Canada and Germany. That is not a good statistic, to be the worst out of 17 different jurisdictions. That is not a good stat; that is not something to be proud of. We already have more debt than Tasmania, New South Wales and Queensland combined. This is having a massive impact on both confidence and investment, and certainly it is having an impact on people all across the state, because if you do not have confidence that the government know what they are doing – and not many people do anymore – then it is very difficult to have confidence to invest. If you are a small business wanting to make it a bigger business or if you are a new AI startup, choosing between whether to come to Sydney or Melbourne – and certainly OpenAI chose the former, not us. You have got to ask why. The government's addiction to debt and the government's mismanagement of the economy has a lot to do with it.

Look no further than their decisions, particularly around the Suburban Rail Loop – as Labor federal colleagues call it, the Cheltenham to Box Hill line – where the government has gone off on what they are saying is a $30 billion to $34 billion project but what is actually a $50 billion project, because their business and investment case says that it is based on 2021 construction costs. Since then construction costs have increased by over 20 per cent. But they say that the Suburban Rail Loop will be immune to those cost blowouts, even though that same increase in construction costs has affected every single other development and similar construction project around the state and the country. But the Cheltenham to Box Hill line is going to be immune, apparently, according to those people over there. You are absolutely kidding me.

I know independent research by the Parliamentary Budget Office found that over 50 years this project is going to cost $216 billion plus interest. Speaking to many families in places like Heatherton, they are already paying the price and will be for over a decade. But this government are obsessed with the headline-grabbing projects and are completely neglecting the growth areas of Melbourne. You only have to look at the Craigieburn Community Hospital, which I have made a lot of noise about in this chamber and a lot of noise about in the community, because the government promised it would be open last year. It has been finished for quite some time – the building has been finished since last year – but the community has had to look at it through a barbed wire fence. After we made a lot of noise about this – and it was reported in the *Age* and all the local papers – the fence has come down. In my absence from this Parliament, the fence has come down.

The former Premier and the then Minister for Health – Jill Hennessy I believe it was when this was announced – promised urgent care and after-hours care at the Craigieburn Community Hospital. So you would think when they opened it those services would be available. And it seemed like they opened it and brought down that fence for political convenience, because there are only about two services that are running, being dialysis and I believe a dentist. I have had a few families contact me saying they have gone in there with chest pains or they have gone in there because their son broke their ankle, and they were told they had to go to the Northern Hospital, because there is no funding for the urgent care or after-hours care that they were promised – no funding. It is the same thing that happened up in the north when they built a new ambulance station at Yuroke near the existing Craigieburn ambulance station but did not fund any ambulances. What they did was they moved one ambulance from Craigieburn to Yuroke for the overnight shift so it could be used. And I know that they have had several break-ins at that ambulance station – stealing drugs and whatnot – because there are no staff there.

This is the mismanagement we see on display over and over again, and places like Craigieburn are the epicentre of the growth issues in this state. You have got the Craigieburn train line, which is always delayed. The government promised a turnback at Essendon that would speed up the frequency on the Craigieburn line and cut down the wait times on weekends, particularly Sundays, and they have broken several promises when it comes to frequency. It was supposed to be increased by about 70 per cent; that is not going to happen. And we still have a two-tiered system in Victoria between the north and the south-east. If you look at the Frankston line, wait times are only every 10 minutes – 20 minutes on weekends. If you look at the Craigieburn line, wait times are every 20 minutes and every 40 minutes on weekends – political convenience from a government that does not care about the northern suburbs. We also saw the government promised a turnback at Gowrie on the Upfield line, the single worst performing train line in this state.

Tom McINTOSH (Eastern Victoria) (14:18): Well, it is interesting to see the opposition run out of time with the nonstop negativity. The negativity from those opposite, from the Liberals, is never, never surprising but always draining – draining and uninspiring. But I am up to talk about the incredible good stories right across Victoria and indeed in the electorate of Eastern Victoria. We on this side are passionate about the things that improve the quality of life of Victorians – of all Victorians – and of course one of the most important things is having a job, and I will come back to it. If you listened to Mr Mulholland over there and the Liberal contribution, the negativity, you would

wonder why he has not packed his bags and left Victoria himself if things are that bad. But there is lots and lots of good news in the Victorian economy, and I will step through some of that.

Being on the side of a Labor government passionate about education for Victorians, I am so proud of the early education investment that the Victorian Labor government has made to ensure that our youngest Victorians, when they are at the stage of their most rapid development, are getting those hours of early education. We are getting their parents back to work in the workforce, and as I will go through later in my speech, with unemployment rates where they are we need people back in the workforce, particularly in regional Victoria. As you will see as I go through my speech, the investment that we have made – whether it is in primary schools, whether it is in secondary colleges, whether it is in our special schools or whether it is in our TAFEs – from start to finish has been an incredible investment to ensure that Victorians have the opportunity to access world-class education. This sets up the next generation of workers for our state. Not only is it better for people's personal situation – their ability to earn more money, to contribute more to their employers, their families and our broader communities – but for the productivity of this state having Victorians come through with that world-class education from three years old right through until the time they commence working in the workforce makes us more productive. It makes our economy stronger. It makes all our local economies, whether metropolitan or in regional or rural Victoria, stronger. I am proud to see the sustained investments in education.

Health: we know how important health care is to Victorians. It is synonymous with Labor. When you think of Labor, you think of investment in health care; indeed we created Medicare. We have seen sustained investment over decades. While those opposite close and privatise hospitals, it is the Labor Party that makes the investment in a whole range of healthcare services that Victorians cherish and hold so dear.

Housing: right around the western world we have seen incredible demands on housing. The state Labor government is leading the nation on housing approvals and completions. We know it is so important that Victorians are in a home so that they have got a home to go to – whether they are in education, whether they are working or whether they are retired. When I am talking about those health services, as I mentioned before, it all fits together. On housing, I am incredibly proud of the work the Victorian Labor government has done to assist with electrifying and decarbonising homes. There are solar panels on one in three homes and electric hot water. Victorians are absolutely voting with their feet on lowering their power bills, reducing those cost-of-living pressures around their home. That has been another sustained – and sustainable, I might add – investment out of this budget and others before.

Our public transport is moving people from A to B, whether it is getting to work, getting to education, getting to see one another or getting to our incredible sporting events or to our food and our wine for our tourists – whether they be domestic to Victoria, domestic to Australia or coming from abroad. It is everything that makes this state such an incredible place to live and, for those not from here, an incredible place to visit. Our public transport and road network is so essential to people getting from A to B. It underpins our economy, and that economy is strong. In the last decade it has grown faster than any other state. It is 31 per cent larger than when we came to government.

Employment: 54,400 people have been added into employment over the previous 12 months. Since June 2020, 123,000 businesses and 645,700 jobs have been added to our economy.

I think Victorians are very wise to and aware of the Liberals' negativity, the constant, incessant negativity that they try to use to paper over the fact that they bring no values to Victorians. From those values they have no policies. When they cannot identify a collective set of values and then create policies that will underpin sustained economic growth and improve quality of living for all Victorians, they are not able to articulate a plan. When they are unable to articulate a plan for Victorians, they resort to what they know best, and that is negativity.

Having addressed all that, I am absolutely delighted, thrilled and excited to talk about some of the investments in the region of Eastern Victoria, because there have been many. I will start with Mount Eliza North Primary School – $11.7 million. As I have touched on, education is so important, and these infrastructure upgrades are important not only to our children and the families and local communities of those children but to our teachers and our staff – to have a place that inspires learning and to have a place that students and teachers come into to get the best out of the opportunity they have and their education.

I want to touch on the Red Hill Tennis Club lighting upgrades – $200,000. It is a very active, busy tennis club, and I had the opportunity to drop in and give them the good news on the lighting upgrades. It was very, very well received, and I am looking forward to getting back for a barbecue throughout the summer and to have a hit of tennis, much like I did down at Bairnsdale last week. The back held out all right; I got a serve in, and it was a good evening as well. The Poowong–Loch Junior Football Club is getting an electric scoreboard at the Loch Memorial Reserve. It has been great to join local community members in the past with upgrades we had to the playground, but not only that, we are supporting the juniors with an electronic scoreboard. The club, the families, the kids, the parents – everyone is rapt. So that was a fantastic announcement to come out of the budget. And not too far down the road at Nyora Recreation Reserve we got to announce the new lighting upgrades. It is an impressive club, the football–netball club there. They have done work themselves over near the netball courts. They previously received a grant to upgrade their umpiring facilities, and now this lighting upgrade is another major step for them and their club to be able to see the growing population, the growing participant levels they have – boys and girls. I got to go out and chat to them at training on budget night – that was fantastic – and let the kids, the families and all the players there know what is coming their way.

Another one, again not too far down the road, was Leongatha Secondary College – $11.7 million to upgrade the gymnasium. The level of excitement was massive, and we look forward to the college being able to get those works put in place. Further east in Eastern Gippsland it was sensational to be able to announce on budget day that Lakes Entrance Primary would receive $6.6 million for classroom upgrades. In spending time with the principal there over recent years we have had conversations about how important these upgrades are. They do a fantastic job there in the local community, and as I have said before, it is not only for students and the families, who will receive a massive boost in pride for their school, but also for the teachers and the facilities that they work in. Just up the hill at Lakes Entrance Secondary College I was able to drop in up there and celebrate the half a million dollars for the secondary college upgrades they are making.

The news of investment across Eastern Victoria goes on. I touched on in my opening comments the special development schools. Mornington is one of those, with $6.769 million in upgrades there. I remember dropping in and having conversations about rain flooding – I think it was on Father's Day – just about covering one of the stalls. So the fact that we are upgrading and giving them a world-class site for education for the local kids is absolutely sensational. At Eastbourne Primary School earlier this year I was delighted to join Steve, the principal there, and Rodney Eade of the Fathering Project. We had a paper aeroplane throwing competition with all the kids. That was sensational. I was able to put in a bit of support to get some pizza on for all the kids there and get the dads involved – really strong engagement from the dads there and the community, which is great. How good was it in recent times to have been able to talk about the $9.5 million upgrade for the school. The new classrooms are going to be absolutely fantastic. I should give a shout-out to Lisa Holt, who not only won Principal of the Year in Victoria but has gone on to do it nationally. I think it was announced last week. The upgrades at Rosebud Secondary College, with the $10 million investment there, have just been so incredible for the community, as they have been at the primary school with $13 million, at Dromana Primary School with $9.7 million and the Southern Peninsula Specialist School at $9.479 million, in Dromana.

I should mention the Rye Primary School playground upgrades, just brilliant. I still remember seeing the kids getting to run out to the two new playgrounds – the preppies and grade 1s on one and the

bigger kids on another – absolutely moving. Korumburra Secondary College: the facilities there, between the gymnasium and the classrooms, are second to none – absolutely sensational. South Gippsland Specialist School, as I mentioned earlier with the specialist school upgrades, is a fantastic upgrade. I should mention the East Gippsland Specialist School as well. The specialist schools at Mornington, Dromana, Leongatha and Bairnsdale are all really, really impressive upgrades. Paynesville Primary School – $4.4 million for upgrades. We know they have got a growing community, and again they are so valuable to the school.

On the early education front, an area that I am so passionate about and love so much, I have visited so many kinder openings, including Leongatha Early Learning Centre, Sale Gumnuts Early Learning Centre, Herd learning centre in Mornington – such an impressive centre there. There is the new site at Korumburra Primary School, but also Yarram and Tootgarook – what a great facility that is. Lakes Entrance was recently opened and Dromana.

I am not going to get through all the ambulance stations that have opened, the aged care investments, things like the synthetic turf at the Paynesville bowls club, the Fish Creek footy club opening. There is just so much that I could continue to go on about. I have not been able to get to capped V/Line regional fares or free rego for apprentices, so I will leave my comments there.

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (14:33): I rise to speak on this state budget, which in truth is not a budget for Victoria's future but a budget for Labor's survival. It is the culmination of more than a decade of waste, mismanagement, ideological overreach, denial and stubbornness. The price for this mismanagement will not be paid by the ministers who caused it but by every business, every family and every Victorian now and into the debt-ridden decades to come. The Treasurer may present this document as a triumph of fiscal responsibility, but to anyone familiar with economic fundamentals, it is a monument to imbalance, unreliability and a profound lack of productivity.

This is not a plan to secure Victoria's future. It is a desperate attempt to manage alarming structural decline, a path that will leave our state poorer and less competitive. The most glaring issue is its reliance on a political narrative detached from reality. The government boasts a $600 million operating surplus, but that is a fiction. Beneath that veneer lie cash deficits averaging $8 billion across the forward estimates. We are still borrowing more and more to fund spending. That is not fiscal health; it is a credit card economy. Debt figures confirm this failure. In just over 10 years Victoria's debt will have surged from under $20 billion to nearly $200 billion. Interest payments alone have ballooned to $7.6 billion this year, over $20 million every day, and are set to reach $10.5 billion. That is money that should go to teachers, hospitals and infrastructure, instead vanishing into an addiction to borrowing. S&P's decision to hold our credit rating was not a sign of strength, it was a stay of execution – a signal that we are on economic life support. Rather than restoring fiscal discipline, the government reaches for its favourite lever: higher taxes. State taxes have surged 183 per cent under Labor, while incomes have risen only 38.5 per cent and inflation 32 per cent. We have now had 63 new or increased state taxes and charges since Labor came to power, hammering the private sector. And the retreat is real. Almost a dozen Victorian businesses shut their doors every single day. When businesses close, the jobs they provide vanish. That is the direct result of this government's economic vandalism.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the latest unemployment figures. While the national rate fell to 4.2 per cent, Victoria went backwards, rising to 4.6 per cent, nearly half a percentage point above the national average. For 17 consecutive months Victoria has had the highest unemployment rate in the nation, the longest streak since the –

Members interjecting.

Richard Welch: On a point of order, Acting President, the running commentary does not seem to be directed at anything except making noise, and I would ask to be able to hear Mrs McArthur's contribution, please.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Gaelle Broad): It is a little bit hard to hear on this side too. So if you can continue, Mrs McArthur, and the chamber can just quieten down a little, thank you.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Acting President. I would appreciate some quiet. We listened in patience to Mr McIntosh. He had nothing to say, I might add. That is why we listened quietly. However, let us go back. Victoria has had the highest unemployment rate in the nation, the longest streak since the Australian Bureau of Statistics began collecting data in 1978. We are also lagging behind other states. New South Wales's rate has dropped to 4 per cent. When you factor in wages the story worsens. Over the past decade the cost of living in Victoria rose 31.8 per cent while wages grew just 29 per cent, a net loss of purchasing power for every household. As the Shadow Treasurer noted, the Allan Labor government's policy damage is causing structural damage to our economy. The evidence is clear: high taxes, declining competitiveness, record debt and the longest unemployment streak on record.

None of this is news to those here. Ministers have heard it all before, and they are unlikely to change course. So rather than repeat what others have said, I want to take a different tack as Shadow Minister for Scrutiny of Government, because the story of this budget cannot be told by numbers alone. The figures tell one story, but the numbers that truly matter – the integrity deficit – are hidden, and it is the most dangerous deficit of all. The voices of institutional accountability tell us the truth. The Victorian Ombudsman said to a parliamentary inquiry:

> We have picked up a number of functions … with very little in the way of additional funding.
>
> …
>
> … it makes it very difficult to plan going forward and to adequately perform functions such as prevention, which I consider vital.

She added that they cannot deal with the 18,000 complaints they receive each year, and with limited resources they have to be careful about which matters they take on. IBAC also admitted that in 2023–24 it was able to absorb the gap only by requiring a $1.19 million Treasurer's advance. These are institutionally accountable voices telling us that they are underfunded, overburdened and on the brink, not because of ideology but because of choices made in budget after budget. The integrity deficit is not abstract. We see it in the failure to commission a royal commission into the hotel quarantine disaster. We see it in the billion-dollar projects hidden behind 'commercial in confidence'. We see it when public servants are appointed for loyalty, not merit. We see it when bodies designed to investigate misconduct must ask for advances just to function. The integrity deficit is real. The financial cost of corruption is estimated to be as much as 5 per cent of gross domestic product globally, which if applied to Victoria's gross state product would be over $20 billion. But the social costs are also significant: community distrust in government, reduced participation in public life and ultimately a weakening of democracy itself.

At the end of the forward estimates period Victoria will be spending more on debt interest payments every single week than the entire annual budget for the Parliamentary Budget Office, IBAC, the Auditor-General, the Local Government Inspectorate, Integrity Oversight Victoria and the Victorian Ombudsman. That is madness, and it comes with consequences, avoidable consequences, like the childcare scandal. Our integrity agencies do not exist to reassure ministers; they exist to hold them to account. When they say they cannot do their job, that is not hyperbole, that is a disaster waiting to happen. If you think that this is an exaggeration, please bear with me, for I want to end with just one of the catastrophic real-life consequences of this lack of money.

Most of this I have said before, but it is so inextricably linked to Labor's failing budget that I cannot fail to reference it again. On one hand Labor is wasting money on overspends, vanity projects, not holding the Commonwealth Games and political pork-barrelling without proper business cases. On

the other hand, these are the actual words of the Commission for Children and Young People – the body responsible for the reportable conduct scheme – from its 2021–22 annual report:

> For the first time this year a small number of lower-risk reportable conduct investigations were not fulsomely examined by the Commission before being finalised … it is challenging to manage such growth in demand without impact on workplace sustainability … without risking the objectives of the Scheme …

That is, without risking child safety. The next exhibit is the commission's annual report for 2022–23. Pages 9 and 10 say:

> … the Commission has received no additional funding for the scheme. …we are worried that this underfunding may compromise our ability to ensure the Scheme delivers on its objectives to ensure responses to allegations of child abuse are acted on quickly and effectively by organisations.

Could it be clearer? Somehow the next year's annual report is even more damning. On page 20 it states:

> With no additional funding for the Scheme despite increased notifications, the Commission has progressed a risk-based strategy to manage demand. These measures have seen us significantly reduce our oversight of a high number of investigations.

Significantly reduce a high number of investigations. It continues:

> Our efforts will continue to be focused on the cases of highest risk, however resourcing for the Scheme has started to impact on the Commission's ability to run the Scheme in a way that maximises child safety.

This is not hindsight. We are not being wise after the event here. We are not blaming Labor ministers for things they could not reasonably have predicted. These warnings were public, on the record, in reports directed to ministers. They did not fail to read between the lines; they failed to listen whatsoever. And now we know the terrible consequences.

I did not think there was any worse to come, but there is. It is not just annual reports, but the commission's submission to the government review of Victoria's reportable conduct scheme from November 2022. This was a review purely about the system, and the submission from the body responsible for administering the scheme – not a disgruntled whistleblower, not a mischief maker, not a political opponent trying to spin things; these are the words of the Commission for Children and Young People – says:

> Base funding provided to the Commission to administer the scheme has not changed since 2018.
>
> …
>
> Given the large increase in mandatory notifications, the Commission is currently under-resourced to administer the scheme, which creates a risk of delayed responses to serious safety risks to children in over 12,000 organisations across Victoria.

'Serious safety risks to children'. They continue:

> The Commission is implementing further risk-based initiatives to target its limited resources. However, if no additional funding is received, the Commission will be forced to further reduce its oversight of organisations' responses to alleged child abuse and child-related misconduct in a way that places children at risk.

Finally, they say:

> Without additional funding, the unsustainable workload … presents the following risks:
>
> - delays will occur in notifications to police about potential criminal conduct or to Child Protection regarding concerns about a child who may require protection from harm, abuse or neglect
> - limitations on the Commission's capacity to intervene in a timely and effective way to ensure organisations manage risks to children …
> - … delayed referrals to other child safety regulators, such as Working with Children Check Victoria … This increases the risk that people known to pose a risk to children will continue to be able to work with children for an extended period
> - children will be abused, or continue to be abused, by a person who would have otherwise been prevented from working with children …

They are the words of the commission, not mine. I do not know what more I can say. All the systems in the world, all the bodies, all the regulators, they mean nothing if the ministers responsible for them do not listen when they beg – literally beg – for money to do their job to protect the children of Victoria. Is this the kind of oversight we can accept? A system cracking under neglect, where children are only safe if they suffer high-profile abuse? Would this government really have changed anything at all had the despicable crimes revealed recently remained hidden? This is the consequence of Labor's budgets over the last decade, and this latest is no better. And finally, it begs the question: what other warnings are being ignored? What regulators are left understaffed? What inquiries are postponed? What audits are abandoned? What fraud, corruption, maladministration? What is festering quietly because of these – *(Time expired)*

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (14:48): I rise to talk about a very important topic, and that is the state budget. We have of course seen the budget pass through the Parliament already this year, and I am delighted to take this opportunity to put my contribution onto the record. Along with Mr Welch opposite we have also had the opportunity to take part in extensive budget hearings as part of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee and look forward to discussing that more at some future point when our report is tabled. And we certainly miss you, Mrs McArthur, from the PAEC experience. We miss the volume, the interjections, the uncertainty of what you are going to come out with next. It has certainly been missed by us all.

It is an important budget.

Bev McArthur interjected.

Michael GALEA: I think they do actually miss you, Mrs McArthur. But it is an important budget because it is one that is focused on financial sustainability and it is one that is focused on recovering from the COVID period, rebuilding those elements of the budget, and the government is doing that. It is meeting those objectives year by year, point by point. I acknowledge the work of in particular the current Treasurer in getting us to that point. It is one that is a responsible budget, and it has made appropriate decisions.

What I also want to talk about is not just the state budget but the budgets of 2.8 million Victorian households, because that is also what this budget is about. You do not have a good budget if things are all looking tidy and whatever else in the Parliament but they are not supporting people in the community. A good budget does both, and that is why I am so pleased that this budget has made significant investments in continuing to provide that meaningful support for Victorian families. We have seen it of course with the continued rollout of free school breakfasts and other various programs, such as the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund, seeing that continuation of the rollout so that hardworking Victorian families do not have to make difficult sacrifices or those difficult choices about their children having the same opportunities as everyone else. That is so fundamentally important to the equity of Victorian students. It is a really good program, and it is great to see it continue.

We have seen the very significant announcement of the new youth Myki, meaning that from 1 January next year public transport travel right across the state of Victoria will be free for every Victorian under the age of 18, saving families significant amounts of money, especially if that incorporates school travel. But even if it is just taking the kids out to the footy on the weekend, it is a significant saving for Victorian families. Of course there is also expansion of free weekend public transport for seniors. It currently applies to the zone in which they live and the neighbouring zone each side, and that will now apply statewide as well. So it is very good news for our seniors, but it is particularly good news for Victorians with young and growing families that this new youth Myki is going to make a real difference.

We also have seen significant investments in the space of health care access. I have spoken many times – in fact I have spoken just this week – about the problems that have been caused by the previous coalition government's complete failure to invest in or support primary healthcare services in Victoria and indeed in other states as well. That is why I am so glad to see continued support in this budget for

those 29 urgent care clinics, which provide that critical point of access between needing to go to an emergency room or being able to wait for a GP, meeting that service gap and providing those options for people that need it. We did indeed in the previous round of financial and performance outcome hearings last year receive evidence that not only are these urgent care clinics being used I believe now in excess of 7000 times a week, possibly higher even since then, but approximately half of those users are estimated to have otherwise gone to the emergency department and the other half would have not sought care at all. Both are very, very good testaments as to why the urgent care clinics are so important, because on the one hand you have reducing the pressure on another very important tertiary healthcare service, providing that health care at the most critical moments, and on the other hand you have meeting those healthcare challenges of Victorians and meeting them where they need it and the closing of another one of those gaps to access, which can lead to so many further issues down the track.

We do have 29 such urgent care clinics in Victoria, and 17 of them, I am very happy to say, are now co-funded by the Albanese federal Labor government. I am sure it would be very welcome indeed if they were to join us in co-funding the remaining 12 too – after all, primary care is a federal area of responsibility. But when it comes to supporting Victorians' health care, this government has not let that distinction and those technicalities get in the way of providing those services. We stepped in and funded them fully, as did the New South Wales Liberal government at the time when the federal Liberals were failing to invest. It was a good thing that both states did so. We will continue to invest, and it is very welcome indeed that we have a significant amount of federal support for that program; long may it continue and expand.

We also have of course the Victorian Virtual Emergency Department, a great initiative that is run out of Northern Health but operates across the entire state and provides another point of access for emergency care, and that is emergency care where you may not need to present in person but you can get that specialist video-on-demand advice that you need from the right experts. It also complements other services, such as Nurse-on-Call, which has of course been operating for some time, and it adds another point in that triage of pointing people in the direction of where they best need help, whether that is the physical ED or whether that is another support service. Again, it goes to a more fundamental budgetary point of taking pressure off some of the key emergency departments and taking pressure off those systems as well. But it also goes to the point of providing that greater equity of care, so it is something that is to be welcomed. Some members of the Liberal Party seem unaware that we do have a virtual emergency department in Victoria, going so far as to ask an expert in a committee who was talking about the Victorian Virtual Emergency Department if he had ever heard of any such department operating anywhere in the world and if perhaps we could do that in Victoria, to the bemusement of me and Mr Batchelor, who has just walked in. The witness rightly noted that, yes, we actually do have one. We do have a virtual ED, and that is what he had spent the previous 20 minutes talking about. It is good that we are expanding awareness of this program, even if it is one Liberal MP at a time. Hopefully the word will continue getting out there. There has been some advertising on the VVED as well. I think I saw it in a YouTube ad quite recently and ads talking about the urgent care clinics, talking about the phone support services and talking about the virtual ED. It is really important that Victorians know that these services are there and also of course that those other triaging options are available as well.

I spoke about the federal government. We have seen a recent announcement from them on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. From 1 January next year we are going to see the cost of prescription medications – those co-payments – reduce from just over $30 to about $25, and that is a saving of about 20 per cent, a significant impact on Victorian households. It is something that I certainly welcome as well. Again, it is good to have a government in Canberra that actually cares about and invests in Victorians' healthcare needs. When it comes to accessing prescriptions, we know that many Victorians in the past struggled with having to go to their GP – having to go through the whole process, often without being able to bulk bill because of the failures in bulk billing from the previous federal government – just to get the same prescription that they had got repeatedly before. For those common prescriptions, Victoria has implemented the community pharmacy co-pilot program, which is really,

really important. It actually allows registered pharmacists – those specially registered for the program – to be able to prescribe a select number of schedule 4 prescriptions for a range of around 22 conditions.

It has been a pilot program. It has been established and expanded under this budget to 22 such conditions, everything from oral contraceptives to simple UTI medications and the like. It has been welcomed by the pharmacy industry, and certainly the Pharmacy Guild of Australia has been very outspoken in its support of it. It is not something, I should say, that is exclusive to Victoria. Other states have been moving along with this at the same time, but what is actually exclusive to Victoria is the fact that in this state it is free. Mrs McArthur would be so excited to hear that if she was here, I know, and I am very sad that she is not. But it is free at the point of access. In other jurisdictions you may well have to pay the consultation fee still with the pharmacist in order to get the prescription, but in Victoria it is completely free of charge – again, removing another barrier to access and meaning that more people can get the medications that they need. It is a very, very good program and an exciting program, one that pharmacists in my community that I have spoken to have been excited by as well. Also it is one more way in which we are freeing up that pressure on, in this case, the primary healthcare system, because everything in this space is interrelated.

Despite all the huge investments that we have made, whether it is in new hospitals, including in this budget, whether it is in our wonderful emergency services, whether it is in supporting our paramedics in Ambulance Victoria, whether it is supporting those great people who deal with Victorians when they are in often the worst situations of their lives and those people that work for Triple Zero Victoria as well, we are supporting and continue to support those organisations. But we are also making investments in addressing the cause of some health problems, not just the symptoms, and all of these measures in some way or another help towards that. We have also seen in this budget a number of investments made towards continuing to improve and expand our transport network. I have spoken in this place repeatedly about some of the new bus services in my electorate. So as not to be needlessly repetitive, I will avoid the temptation to talk about them today. In this budget in particular we have seen an expansion of bus services in my electorate as well as particularly in the west of Melbourne, with new services around the Rockbank and Aintree areas. A new route is linking Aintree directly with Watergardens station over on the Sunbury line, which later this year will become part of the new Metro Tunnel, improving those cross-town connections for people in the west as well – whether it is to go to Rockbank station, their nearby local station, or to go to Watergardens and have that direct access to the Metro Tunnel line.

There have also been expanded late-night services in Wyndham and Hume. As a result of the new Metro tunnel opening this year, there is a significant investment in increasing train services, with peak-hour services on the Werribee line and interpeak services on the Sandringham line going up to every 10 minutes. The Craigieburn line is also seeing increased frequencies interpeak and off-peak, and the Upfield line is seeing frequency increases in the off-peak. For V/Line, there are additional peak services on the Seymour line. I am sure that will be of great excitement to Minister Symes, those extra services to Seymour – whether it is the extra weekend services to Bendigo or the 40-minute services, minimum, from 8 am to 9 pm, seven days a week on the Gippsland line.

The Gippsland line is one that not so long ago was barely able to run trains every hour, let alone every 40 minutes. A significant reason for the ability to now provide that much-expanded service is the regional rail upgrade program undertaken, including the track duplication between Bunyip and Longwarry. It is a significant investment in that regional rail line, where you see today that we now have services running at that higher capacity, at that higher speed – so much so that it is hard to believe that just 30 years ago this was a rail line that the Liberal government was shutting down. They actually shut down the line to Bairnsdale. It was opened again by the previous Bracks Labor government and is now significantly expanded under the Allan Labor government, with the new and upgraded Gippsland line providing a much more frequent service.

With the Metro Tunnel coming into effect this year we actually saw an interesting question posed in the Parliament by Ms Bath to the transport minister, asking for a guarantee that V/Line services would still continue to the city once the Metro Tunnel opens and not just terminate at Pakenham.

Jaclyn Symes interjected.

Michael GALEA: It was quite surprising, and you are quite right to note it, Minister Symes. It is quite an odd thing for someone coming from the Nationals to say. It was particularly interesting, because she actually got an answer from the minister very clearly saying, 'Yes, I can give that guarantee basically. Yes, those services will continue to the city.' Despite this Ms Bath decided to then go to the local newspapers in Gippsland and Pakenham and say it was an outrage because the minister could not give a guarantee. I am happy to help Ms Bath, and perhaps at a later time I can dive into this further. This is a very important budget, a good budget, and I commend it to the house.

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (15:03): I rise to make my contribution on the budget. Victoria is a state economically adrift. We have no clear path. We have no genuine leadership. The budget personifies this. The only tax reform we see is more taxes: increased taxes, wider taxes, more punitive taxes and more technical taxes. There is no productivity policy. There is no progress in reducing debt. There is no industry policy of any substance. The only fiscal reform we see is spending cloaked in that very disingenuous use of the word 'investment' – record investment here, record investment there. There is never a word about outcomes. You cannot call something investment if there is no return. That is just spending. Spending more on roads repair is not investment if it actually repairs less roads than before. It is just spending. We spend in Victoria; we do not get returns in Victoria. We spend, but all we get are worse roads, worse hospital services, closed police stations, police officer shortages, hospital mergers and environmental protections gone. We also saw in this budget cuts to domestic violence accommodation, to Parks Victoria, to police, a $2.4 billion cut to education, the slow and steady degrading and hollowing out of our state institutions, the closure of children's courts and cuts to the fisheries department so that there are now more office staff than actual fisheries officers out on the ground. A facade is maintained, but that is all it is.

Here is how that manifests in government promotion of what it does. We now have basic maintenance of schools, basic spending on gutters and toilets, being announced as if it is some kind of special support or investment in a school – that is, basic functions of government are described as an investment. We see the Premier and others out on a near daily basis on social media videos announcing the same thing. I mean, how many times does the Premier need to go and walk through the Metro as if it was the first time she had been there and gaze about in wonder? How many times can you cut the same ribbon? Re-re-announcing and squeezing every last drop of PR out of an announcement is a hallmark of buying time when you have nothing else to talk about and want to distract the community from genuine problems the state has.

Consider this: this was a budget handed down where the debt stabilisation plan increased debt by approximately $10 billion. Only Labor could put that forward with a straight face. It is a budget surplus that has been completely artificially engineered by relying on things as nebulous and spurious as speeding fines to achieve it. No economic growth, no new IP to export, not tourism – road fines. It is a budget surplus so wafer thin it will not survive any new needs that could easily be expected to crop up, like drought support. We are only six months in, and I am in genuine doubt that this surplus exists. I think it is gone.

There is so little of the normal contingency a responsible budgeting government would put into the estimates that when things like the need for drought support come along, or speeding fines are down, we are plunged back into the deficit. The government is so uncertain on what patches it needs to put where, what shuffling of money it needs to move around, that it does not report departmental budgets within their own accounts but allows for unspecified amounts to be held by the Treasurer and provided as Treasurer's advances without scrutiny. Gone are the days when a department's budget was set out and made transparent and had to be stuck to, unless there was clear explanation and accountability for

failure to do so. Our state's budget process has been completely inappropriately compromised. It meets no acceptable standard for transparency, clarity and fiduciary accountability.

But there are more than financial accountability problems in this budget; there are clear competency issues and a clear lack of vision issue, and it leaves the state economically adrift. It is eerily reminiscent of what happened in Victoria in the 1980s, when the lack of planning and economic management led to Melbourne losing the position of the financial capital of Australia to Sydney. We are in the same economic malaise. It has not happened overnight, but it is the result of a decade of financial and industrial aimlessness in the state, a state muddling along, funding everything from debt and building inefficiently while everything winds down around it. This is a state government that is completely oblivious to the wider trends in the national and international economy, papering over the ever-widening cracks in our economy, institutions and society with lazy, rampant expenditure, patching everything and solving nothing. It has created a state that has forgotten it needs to compete and has no overarching economic strategy or narrative for industry, productivity, innovation or entrepreneurship. Victoria's productivity has now lagged the whole of Australia for 10 years.

To get a picture of our lack of competitiveness, Victoria used to have a trade surplus. We now run a state trade deficit of $92 billion a year. We are not a competitive state. We are not an economically driven, hugely ambitious state because, force-fed a diet of state debt, taxes and over-regulation and state enterprises blowing out the cost of doing anything, our private sector has become shuttered, hesitant, beaten down and is looking for better opportunities elsewhere. The unspoken scandal of this budget is that it does not even give the most basic nod towards addressing the fundamentals of building a platform for the future economic security of the state. There is a focus on debt-fuelled spending, the expansion of state powers and regulation and of course increased taxes. It is a totally economically illiterate budget, but even that is being too kind. It is worse than this. Its highest aim is to stabilise debt – that is it. And it does not even do that. It is a budget that screams that its authors do not know what they do not know. There is neither explicit nor implicit reference to the relationship between taxation settings and productivity, between productivity and economic growth and between economic growth and revenue. It does not attempt to grow revenue, it just aims to tax more of it.

The increase of commercial and industrial land tax is the clearest example of exactly this. There is absolutely no understanding of the role that industry working capital ratios play in empowering innovation, capital deepening and slow capital investment. Commercial and industrial land tax on business is a tax on working capital. What the government, in its greed, has engineered is effectively a working capital famine in Victoria. It taxes every company's working capital, starving them of the ability to move forward, and then, get this, graciously offers to return crumbs of it by way of grants and has its own state-owned venture capital firm Breakthrough Victoria there to pick the winners. Consider this: Breakthrough Victoria is a body that was given over $2 billion of businesses' money, of businesses' working capital, to invest in the businesses it chooses. That is it. It confiscated $2 billion of our businesses' working capital to use as its own, and then it trumpets how impressive it is that it spends that money, providing working capital back to those few lucky, hand-selected companies. The irony is deep, profound, and undoubtedly the underlying mindset that allows this is the arrogance, to the point of stupidity, that says that the government knows how to spend your business's working capital better than you do – better than the business that actually created it. How can any business get ahead in this environment? How can any business have the necessary budget and forecast headroom to make patient investment in their own business?

On the one hand, they have to deal with the world's stupidest tax, payroll tax – a tax on employing people, obviously. But more accurately, the best way to characterise it is as a tax on a business's cash flow. That is the underlying consequence which means you cannot afford to employ people. It is matched with the commercial and industrial land tax, which is a tax on a company's working capital, which means you cannot invest back into your business to the extent needed. This is exactly the worst time in history for this state to be so overtly hamstringing its economy and its businesses in this way. This is the worst time in history for a state to be so deeply in debt and so committed to nonproductive

projects, and that is because we are in the middle of a technology revolution, with the advent of AI, automation and 3D printing – incredibly disruptive technologies that demand that our state's laws, capital and capabilities are rapidly realigned to meet them. The world is not standing still. If we fail to make that transfer – and make no mistake, underlying it all, in the most practical sense, it is a transfer of the state's working capital – we will be left behind in a world that not only is willing to do so but, because it has managed its finances more responsibly, is actually able to do so, and much faster than us. Our state's working capital – an entire generation's worth of working capital – is tied up in debt, concrete tunnels and land tax. That is where it is stuck. We cannot adapt. It is locked in. The budget has just compounded that problem. If we want economic success for this state for the next generation, if we want to enjoy the social and equality benefits of well-funded health systems, affordable quality homes for families and law and order systems, we cannot have another budget of this nature. We need urgent reform. We need to not only reduce taxes but have economically efficient taxes that drive capital to productivity.

This is self-evidently a tragedy for our state, and the only people who do not understand this are in the government. Their ignorance of this fact is the ignorance at the heart of this economically lazy, intellectually stunted budget – a budget that takes us from nowhere to a deeper, darker nowhere. Businesses and industry in Victoria, those who rely on employment from them and those who benefit from the taxes they provide to state revenue, please understand this is not a government that understands what needs to be done to safeguard and foster the state's future prosperity. It is a government that only operates within a paradigm of tax and debt to feed government expenditure. There is no perspective beyond this. We are a state that is economically adrift, and it needs to change. If your only language is debt, increased tax and spending with no return, you cannot address it.

John BERGER (Southern Metropolitan) (15:16): I rise to speak about the 2025–26 state budget, which Treasurer Symes handed down in May. This is a budget with a lot in it, and there is a lot going on dealing with the big issues and the big questions of the day. There are some of us that will look at the challenges we are facing – a growing state with a growing demand for housing services and infrastructure – and simply say that it is all too difficult. Those on the other side continue to labour that point. There are others – those of us in the Allan Labor government – who see these challenges and get on with the work of building the things that this state needs to get going for the next few decades.

This is a budget that delivers impactful cost-of-living relief, opens and operationalises nine new or expanded hospitals and operationalises the Metro Tunnel while delivering more trains more often to key lines. It also facilitates the construction of new homes and invests $1.5 billion into building and upgrading schools, all while delivering a surplus of $600 million. Delivering a surplus is never easy, and it is never free. Everything must be paid for, and governments need to make decisions on what to prioritise. What makes this budget so impressive is that the Treasurer has managed to hand down a budget that delivers on every major issue that matters to Victorians and still hand down a surplus.

We know that the cost of living has not been easy over the last few years. That is why this budget delivers $2.3 billion in cost-of-living support. This means delivering a $100 power saving bonus to those who need it the most. This means delivering another 27,000 rebates for heat pumps and solar hot water systems which once installed can save households up to $400 on their energy bills each year. This helps families to make an investment which can drive down their power bills in the long term and gives people the opportunity to produce their own energy themselves, because while one-off cost reliefs can help people save money this year, rebates like this can help people save money every year while simultaneously helping us to fulfil our responsibilities as a state government to reduce Victoria's carbon emissions. This program is popular and effective, and that is why we are continuing with it. Victorians want solar panels on their roofs and energy efficiencies in their homes.

This budget also increases funding for school camps, sports and excursions, helping families with concession or healthcare cards to afford some of these additional costs associated with education. Payments will be increasing from $154 per primary student to $256 per secondary student to $400 per year for all eligible students, helping more than 200,000 school students get the most out of their

education and, importantly, ensuring that students are not excluded or left out of school activities based on their parents' ability to pay for them. This budget also makes public transport free for all under-18s starting next year, as well as making public transport free on weekends for seniors. Families can save up to $755 per child per year in Myki fares. This is one of the fairest, most cost-efficient ways that the government can help families with the cost of living. It will be implemented by creating a new youth Myki, which will remain valid until the holder turns 18. The new youth Myki will be valid for all public transport in Victoria: weekends and weekdays, peak hour and early bird and off-peak times. Whether heading 5 minutes down the street on a tram, travelling to school every day or travelling as far as V/Line will take you, it will all be free for the kids.

I really could not talk more about the public transport issue without mentioning that the new youth Myki will also be valid to touch on at Anzac station, located in Southern Metropolitan Region, which I represent. The station will open later this year as part of the brand new Metro Tunnel. Speaking of the Metro Tunnel, the budget also includes $227 million to operationalise and run services on the Metro Tunnel, benefiting commuters in the Southern Metro but also across Melbourne. The Metro Tunnel has been delivered a whole year ahead of schedule, creating five new stations in the inner city. The Metro Tunnel will also allow for more reliable and frequent turn-up-and-go services across the Sunbury and Cranbourne-Pakenham lines, which will run directly through it. Also, by taking those lines out of the City Loop we will ease the City Loop congestion, allowing for more reliable and more frequent services on other lines as well. For example, the Sandringham line receives funding in this budget to run services every 10 minutes during non-peak periods. Other lines receiving frequency boosts in this budget include the Craigieburn, Upfield and Werribee lines, all thanks to the Metro Tunnel. The opening of the Metro Tunnel later this year will be something to celebrate, and it is an achievement for all Victorians. It will serve to remind us that at our best we are a state of builders and a state that looks forward and that is ambitious and aspirational, where our ambitions are about our infrastructure projects and about giving every Victorian child the best possible education.

On the issue of education, I cannot help but notice that a lot of conversations about education in this budget coming from the other parts of the chamber have completely ignored the fact that this budget is investing $1.5 billion in capital investments for schools. On education investment, no-one in this place should be taken seriously if they disregard the fact that this government promised to deliver over a hundred new schools by 2026. We have already delivered 81 of them, with six new schools opening their doors at the start of this year. And guess what, term 1, day 1 next year, 19 new schools will open their doors for students for the first time. For those playing along at home, that is 100 new schools being delivered in the timeframe that we promised. If, hypothetically speaking, a government had been in power which did not believe in building new schools, then students and families would have suffered. Schools would be facing overcrowding, having to accept more students than the facilities are equipped to accommodate. Families, particularly in growth areas, would increasingly be finding that they would not have access to a school in their local area. I am particularly looking forward to term 1, day 1 next year when Fishermans Bend primary school opens, located in Southern Metropolitan Region, which I represent. The budget also includes the funding necessary to plan for and acquire land and build brand new schools.

Just because we have hit one target, kept one promise and made an impressive achievement in building a hundred new schools, we are not stopping there. The challenges of growth are not going away any time soon; that is why our new investment is not stopping any time soon either. The Allan Labor government understands the reality that education systems will never stop needing new investment. We will always need new schools somewhere, and we will always need to upgrade, improve and refurbish existing schools. There is no finish line on this issue. There will never be a day when the government can finish their last project, pack it up and let the education system run on pure inertia. Things are consistently changing in education. The needs of our state are constantly changing, and responsible governments are alert to these changes. As impressive as our school capital program is, as important as building and maintaining our school buildings is, this is not the only factor to consider when running an education system, and it is not the only challenge we are facing either.

One of the most important things we have to deal with at the moment is attracting, training and retraining our education workforce. It is no good to have all these big, beautiful new school buildings if there are not any teachers to work in them, because it is the teachers who work in the education system who make the education system work. Without teachers we could not have the education system; that is why the Allan Labor government has made workforce recruitment and retention a key pillar of our education investments. This budget uses $68 million to fund school workforce programs, including providing 200 scholarships for tertiary students to study secondary teaching in specialist subjects and making sure that pre-service teachers are paid on their placements by funding 70,000 placement days, thereby making sure that would-be teachers do not have to choose between paying their bills and training for their careers; providing relocation bonuses for teachers who move into the areas most in need of an education workforce; and funding the Teach Today and Teach Tomorrow programs, which will provide 1200 places for on-the-job training. It is important that we offer as many pathways as possible for people to train to become teachers, because it is a big commitment and it is not easy. Everybody's circumstances are different. We need to put everything on the table as we find a way to recruit more teachers and remove barriers to entry into the profession without sacrificing teacher quality.

Additionally, the budget is investing $91 million in our existing teaching workforce, with programs supporting graduate teachers, supporting the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership and offering training and professional development to teachers. The budget also provides $10.4 million to expand the successful schoolwide positive behaviour support program to an additional 400 schools, nearly doubling its reach. We have listened to schools, listened to principals and listened to teachers. The program has worked where it has been implemented, and that is why we are expanding it. Teachers and parents alike are worried about behaviour and discipline in classrooms and the impact that it can have on a student's ability to learn and a student's overall experience at school. We need to make sure that teachers and students have a classroom that is a safe, positive and fair environment, otherwise learning becomes a lot harder.

On the issue of health, I am very proud to be part of a government that is making the largest ever investment in frontline health care, with an additional $11.1 billion being put into the health system and a total investment of $31 billion. This includes an investment in mental health of nearly half a billion dollars. It includes opening and operationalising nine new or expanded hospitals and includes more than $400 million to triple the capacity of the Victorian Virtual Emergency Department. This is important so that we can offer more help to Victorians when an emergency department is too far away or if they are unsure as to whether the emergency department is there or not. It offers free advice and it takes pressure off our hospitals and emergency departments. The budget also includes investing $167 million into improving our ambulance response times, including through hiring more call takers and more dispatchers. There is a lot in this budget for health, and this is because this is a government that fundamentally understands the complexities of the health system. That is why the budget provides both the muscle and the nuance which our health system needs. It provides raw increases in funding that our health system needs. It also delivers the innovation and infrastructure that the system needs to get the best possible value for money.

Community safety is one of the most important issues there is in politics, now and always. People are thinking about it all across the state, and I know people are thinking about it in my electorate of Southern Metro. Earlier this year we passed the toughest bail laws anywhere in Australian law, because the Allan Labor government always puts community safety first. Removing the principle of remand as a last resort put significant financial strain on our justice system, and that is why this budget invested $1.6 billion to provide the funding basics for implementing Victoria's new bail laws. We will provide the police force, the court system and our correctional facilities with the funding they need to accommodate this new burden which we are asking them to undertake. Since coming to office in 2014 this government has increased police funding by roughly 88 per cent. The 2025–26 budget spends $4.5 billion on policing. The Allan Labor government supports our police.

I have touched on a lot of things so far, and I have not come close to covering everything in this budget, but it bears repeating that the Treasurer has handed down a budget which has made investments in the right places, putting the right priorities front and centre, and while doing all of that she has handed down a budget surplus of $600 million. This is a return to an operational surplus in this state for the first time since the pandemic. Of course members on this side of the chamber know that prior to the pandemic the then Andrews Labor government handed down surplus after surplus. It did this while also making the investments in schools, infrastructure, training and health that the state needed. But in the post-pandemic era fiscal conditions are different, and a return to surplus this soon after the pandemic is a testament to the work of the Treasurer and the work of the former Treasurer, Tim Pallas. We only ever see results like this when governments do the hard work – put pragmatism before populism, set out long-term plans and stick to them. This has been a multi-year effort and it has taken half a decade. Victoria's fiscal strategy is a long-term plan to balance the budget and grow the economy. In 2025 the budget is in surplus and the economy is growing. There is still more work to do, and we are on track to meet the targets as set out in the fiscal strategy. There are still years left to go. We are on track to stabilise debt as a proportion of the gross state product by next year's budget, and over the next few budgets we are on track to reduce net debt as a proportion of GSP. Talking about the debt is all well and good but doing some of these things takes work. This state is lucky to have someone like the Treasurer, who is willing to put in that hard work.

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) (15:31): I am pleased to be able to speak today about the state budget papers. I think a lot of people might switch off. They tune out and think, 'Budgets – boring.'

Ryan Batchelor interjected.

Gaelle BROAD: But no, not you, Mr Batchelor. I am glad to hear it, because it is very important. How money is allocated, what the priorities are, is so important. We have three levels of government – the local, the state, the federal – but the state government has responsibility for so many services that are really critical, essential services. When we look at the budget we can see that roads, for example – I hear from people all the time their frustration about the state of our roads, and after 11 years of Labor in government we have seen a lack of funding for the maintenance of our roads.

I had local residents raise this issue just this week. I had one that had been on a recent trip to South Australia. They spent three weeks there and they talked about how smooth the roads were, and then when they came back to Victoria, going along the Calder Freeway and other roads, they got so frustrated at the amount of potholes and the condition of our roads. I was speaking to another lady at Parliament who came just yesterday, visiting from Bendigo, and she was talking about a trip that they had taken to New South Wales and Queensland and then seeing how beautiful the roads were in those states and, again, the frustration on coming back to Victoria. Again, that is a priority. That is where taxes should be going, and under this government they certainly have not.

Health is another crucial area, a core service of government. What we have seen is threats of mergers of services, particularly in regional areas. I know areas that are in need of a lot more beds for hospitals – and we see that particularly around the Albury–Wodonga area, and Mildura is another area in my electorate that is affected by that – and ambulance ramping is a huge issue. This is being felt right across northern Victoria, but I have spoken to a number of people that have rung for ambulances and been told that none is available and have ended up in the position where they are having to take their loved ones to hospital. Again, this is what this state government should be doing. They should be delivering these services, and again, this is why budgets are so important.

Another area that impacts us all is community safety. Yet we have seen crime escalating. The amount of crime that we are seeing and the difference that you see on the streets today in Bendigo compared to 20 years ago, it is just so different. In other states they have made reforms to bail laws – for example, Queensland are seeing their crime reduced. But in Victoria, because this government weakened bail laws, we have seen crime escalate. The money, again, is there from the state government to support our police, who do such an important job, being that first line of defence and keeping us safe.

But right now in our police force we have over 1100 vacancies. We have hundreds more who are currently on leave. We have more officers leaving the force and retiring than we do coming into the force. This is a big challenge for our state. Again, it is a core service of government and we are seeing failure on that front.

Education: crucial. Money from this budget is going to our schools to make sure that they are maintained, their facilities are upgraded and our students have access to the best education standards in the world. That is how it should be, but right now we have a shortage of teachers. We have over a thousand vacancies in our educational system, and that is putting immense pressure on teachers. And we have seen the pressure that they are under and the pressures that principals are experiencing and some of the, yes, complications and the challenges they are facing in the classroom.

Housing is another core area of government, and yet I can tell you, on the steps of Parliament I remember we had the origami houses reflecting the number of families waiting for a home in this state who are in need of social housing. We have over 60,000 people on the waiting list, and Victoria is lagging behind other states when it comes to that provision of housing. Big goals have been set with the new housing, but no, they are certainly not reaching those targets. We have seen in some electorates the amount of housing has actually gone backwards as places are being demolished.

Transport is another core service of government – so important – but in regional areas I know Bendigo has one of the highest cancellation rates. I know wi-fi was promised on the train line many years ago by Labor. Opening of the Harcourt station was something that they had promised, and seven years has elapsed and we still have not seen anything there. It was actually under this government, and I believe it was under Jacinta Allan, who was the minister at the time, that the second track was taken out on the line to Bendigo, which means that you get stuck behind other services as you are coming down. I do travel on the train regularly to Melbourne, so I have experienced some of that frustration or being put into a bus for some of those services. I have spoken to many people that have felt very frustrated, because we do need to be a state of cities not a city state. So supplying transport across the regions is so important, and yet right near Bendigo, very close to Bendigo, we have very few bus services. There are so many areas in our state that do not have public transport. That is one of the reasons that I have been pushing for the lowering of the P-plate age in Victoria, because Victoria is the only state that requires you to be 18. In every other state you can be 17, or younger in some cases, to get your probationary licence. We know that in other places overseas – New Zealand, the UK and America – you can get your licence at a younger age, and that would help more young people get to work, provided they have done the safety driver training, which I think is very important, because you have got to make sure that they are ready to take on that big responsibility. But it could certainly make a huge difference. It has been raised a number of times, and this government continues to say, 'No, we don't believe it'll be in the community's best interest.' So again, we will hope for change there.

Energy is another critical area of responsibility of the state government, but under this government we have seen prices continue to escalate. I have spoken to so many people in business and families that are really struggling with the increasing cost of electricity. It is a huge part of their costs. The Commonwealth Games are in July next year, again. The Commonwealth Games, I should point out, was a massive waste of funds under this government – very poor decisions. But it does remind me about records and setting some records, and we certainly have a record state debt under this government heading towards $194 billion – that is incredible.

I am old enough to remember record players. Do you remember record players? Well, I thought I would share or make up a bit of a soundtrack for the government, a bit of a record, maybe the state budget hits. We will have a few hits. I was just thinking of some songs that would suit this Labor government. I think the first song –

Ryan Batchelor: *Back in Black*?

Gaelle BROAD: No, you are so far away from back in black, I can tell you. Back in black and back on track is something I certainly remember from working with Peter Costello many years ago. I would say this is just the furthest I have ever seen from any government being able to claim that. No, I think the most appropriate song is *Money, Money, Money* – a bit of ABBA, there you go. I would say:

> I work all night, I work all day
> to pay the bills I have to pay
> ain't it sad

That is this government. It is certainly very sad indeed, because we are heading towards $29 million every single day in interest. That is over a million dollars every hour. That is certainly very sad.

Here is another song for you. The second track on the record for this government would be *Bills, Bills, Bills* by Destiny's Child. The lyrics go 'Can you pay my bills?' I think that is something that the Treasurer has probably heard quite a lot from different ministers under this government. We saw the Treasurer's advances absolutely blow out of the water. I think it was $12 billion on the little credit card to pay off the other credit cards there. This was not used for emergency situations; it was used for projects like level crossing removals. It is quite extraordinary and just shows you how out of control they are and how they cannot manage money.

Another one might suit a different demographic to Destiny's Child. A bit of Johnny Cash should go on this record. I think *After Taxes* is an appropriate song, because this government has introduced 60 new or increased taxes since they have been in government. I will not list them all, but you are probably very familiar with them. The emergency services tax is one. We had the holiday tax, the schools tax, the GP tax and the land tax. When I look at the lyrics, they say:

> I feel so good come payday
> I think of all the things I'm going to
> Buy when I pick up my pay
> Don't you know, but then they hand me
> That little brown envelope
> I peep inside, Lord I lose all hope
> Because from those total wages earned
> Down to that net amount that's due
> I feel the painful sense of loss between the two

I think that is what every Victorian family is feeling under this government. I was looking at a few different songs, but Annika Smethurst from the *Age* found a song a while ago that she thought was fitting for this government. It is Taylor Swift's *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*. It is a fitting description of the state's debt predicament. Some of the lyrics there:

> But I'm not the only friend you've lost lately
> If only you weren't so shady

I would say 'shady' is certainly something I hear said about this government quite a lot. The secrecy and the lack of transparency – we have had a front row seat to that. When you do not manage money well, services suffer. When money is going out the door paying interest, there is less to pay for services. This government also does not really know what is free. They say 'free kinder and free dental care and free TAFE'. It does all actually cost money to run these services. People do not work for free, and nor should they. The state government is there to provide services like education, police, health and roads, like I said before. The government collects taxes and then uses the funds to deliver these services. But when they do not manage money well, services decline, and that is what we are seeing under this government, big time.

They like to suggest that on this side of the house we may cut things. Again, I want to set the record straight on that because this government has been in office now for 11 years, and it is cutting programs, particularly in regional areas. We have had the rural maternity program cut, the By Five program. We

have had mental health jobs cut in regional police stations. I have spoken to people, and I understand there are about 20 jobs that were lost in that. That is a critical service for our police to have that support in regional stations – again, it has been cut. Regional Development Victoria had jobs cut. Parks Victoria had funding slashed and programs cancelled. We have had tourism funding cut by 85 per cent. We have had road maintenance programs cut. I will say, SprayLine is up for sale – there we go. This is something that the government like to spruik as well, yet here they are selling a government service that is to maintain our roads. We have had court services asked to cut over $100 million over four years. Our education – we heard Mr Welch talking before about the delayed state funding for public schools. The Public Accounts and Estimates Committee revealed cuts to our emergency services: the CFA, $42 million cut; Fire Rescue Victoria, over $100 million cut; and SES, $8.4 million cut. Our police had over $50 million cut. The Victorian budget showed a $3.2 billion cut to the public sector over the forward estimates. The Helen Silver review is meant to be giving a bit more insight into all of that. We have seen time and again this government cannot manage money.

I will say I do not want to be all negative. Mr McIntosh said we can be negative. I am saying, no, I am excited and I am getting more excited, because we are only about 60 weeks away from the next state election, people. So I think there is plenty of reason to be very excited because we need to fix the broken record of this government that we hear time and time again, and a Liberal and Nationals government will get us back on track.

Ryan BATCHELOR (Southern Metropolitan) (15:45): I am really pleased to join the debate today about this budget – this excellent, responsible budget for Victorians that delivers cost-of-living relief, investments in infrastructure and frontline services to Victorian households, which Victorian families in particular rely on. I think it is a budget that is emblematic of a Labor approach to managing the state's finances, where we take responsible decisions. Sometimes we have to take tough decisions, but every decision that we take is fairly and squarely framed through the reference point of what we can do to be on the side of Victorian families, to be on the side of Victorian households and to make sure that they are getting the cost-of-living relief that we can provide to them and to make sure that they are getting improvements to services, investments in schools, investments in health care and support for police and community safety. We will continue to build more homes for more Victorians, we will continue to build the infrastructure improvements – the roads, the rail – by getting rid of the level crossings, building the new train stations and building the new train lines that are going to transform our city. That is what a Labor government does, that is what a Labor budget does, that is what this budget does, and I am very, very proud to be part of a government that is delivering like this. I want to, at the start, pay tribute to the Treasurer for the budget that she has, with her colleagues, put together and delivered. I think she has done a great job in delivering this budget for Victorians.

I want to start my contribution with just a bit of an overview about the way the budget is helping to support the continued strength and the continued growth in the Victorian economy, and particularly to support our key objective as a Labor government to make sure that we are creating jobs and economic opportunity for all Victorians and to make sure that they have got a stake in the economic future in this state. What you have seen in Victoria is that our economy is continuing to grow. Economic investment – business investment – in this state is exceeding what we are seeing around the nation.

Ann-Marie Hermans interjected.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I know that the Liberal Party and Mrs Hermans like to scoff at the investments that are being made in Victoria. But this side of the house, the government, the Labor Party, do not talk down Victoria. We do not talk down the Victorian economy, we do not talk down Victorian businesses and, unlike Mrs Hermans, we do not laugh at them. We do not think that Victorian businesses are a joke. That is what they do; the Liberal Party talk down Victoria. They think –

Ann-Marie Hermans: On a point of order, Acting President, I am actually highly offended by the comments of Mr Batchelor. I am not laughing at the businesses, I am laughing at the government's behaviour. So I take offence and would ask that Mr Batchelor please withdraw his comments.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): That is not a point of order, but I ask that Mr Batchelor just be wary.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I am very much aware about how well the Victorian economy is growing and about how strong business investment is in this state compared to around the country, evidenced by the fact that our economy is estimated to be about 14 per cent larger in real terms in 2024–25 than it was in 2018–19, before the pandemic. And over the last decade Victoria's economy has grown faster than any other state's. Over the past year business investment has grown by 3.7 per cent, compared to a 1.3 per cent fall across the rest of Australia. As at the production of the budget, more than 113,000 new businesses had been created in Victoria in the last five years, an 18 per cent increase – the largest percentage growth in new businesses created in any state in the country. Victoria's economic strength has resulted in 648,800 Victorians finding jobs, as of the budget, since the start of the pandemic in September 2020, rising by more than 20 per cent – more than any other state over the same period. Business investment and employment growth – that is what Labor is delivering in Victoria.

We are obviously doing so in an environment and in a context where there is significant global uncertainty. You just need to look at the front pages of the newspapers, particularly over this calendar year but really since global uncertainty began several years ago with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, to see that the resilience of the Victorian economy is even more stark considering the economic conditions and the economic uncertainty that we see in other parts of the world. Victorian households, households around the country and households around the world have certainly felt significant cost-of-living pressures in the last couple of years. We have seen significant inflationary pressures here in Victoria, as have people right around the country and right around the world. But what we are seeing recently and what this budget update tells us is that those pressures are easing. We are well off the peak of inflation. The cost-of-living increases, as measured in the CPI, are now far lower than they were at their worst a couple of years ago, and that I think is welcome relief for Victorian households.

On the topic of relief for Victorian households, what this budget does is make targeted additional investments to provide extra cost-of-living relief for Victorian households to make sure that we can give them a little bit of extra help when and how we can. We cannot fix all of the pressures, all of the issues, that confront Victorian households, because we do not have all of the economic levers. But the economic levers that are available to us as a state we are acting on to make sure that we are delivering assistance where we can.

I want to go through a few of the measures contained in this year's budget that Labor is delivering that are providing cost-of-living relief and cost-of-living support to Victorian households. Obviously some of the big ones are that from next year all kids in this state get free public transport, which will be saving families whose kids use the train to get to school, to get to sport, to get around to other parts of the community around 700 bucks a year per child. That is what the average the family will be saving if their students are using public transport on a regular basis – a huge win and a huge relief to the everyday hip-pocket concerns of Victorian families. We are also providing free statewide public transport for seniors on the weekend from 1 January next year, particularly to enable them to get out and about on the weekends, maybe with their grandkids, also travelling free. What they might be able to do is ride a train through the new Metro Tunnel, but I will come back to our investments in transport infrastructure in a minute.

We are providing free pharmacy care by making permanent the community pharmacy program, which provides free consultations and prescriptions dispensed by pharmacists for certain common ailments. Unlike other states where people have to pay for this program, it is free here in Victoria, saving time and money so that people do not have to go to the doctor to get repeat prescriptions or to get prescriptions for common ailments. Unlike in other states, here in Victoria when you do that at the pharmacy you do not have to pay.

We have got $400 vouchers for sports and excursions for eligible primary school and secondary school students. We have got the kids active vouchers – $200 to help with uniforms and equipment – and

there is a $100 power saving bonus that has just started for eligible concession card holders, providing additional and targeted cost-of-living support to help those most in need with energy costs. I am really concerned if members of the Liberal Party who consistently interject do not care or understand about the cost-of-living relief. That just shows, I think, how little they care about the cost-of-living pressures that are being faced by Victorian households, but Labor cares, because we are delivering relief and we are delivering support in this budget.

The other big area that I wanted to talk about in terms of the investments that this budget is making is in the area of education and particularly the investments that we are making as a state government in our education infrastructure and in our schools. Labor is building more schools – Victorian Labor is building more schools – than we are seeing anywhere else in the country. We are upgrading schools right across the system, and particularly in the Southern Metropolitan Region there have been significant investments in this budget in local schools. Caulfield South Primary School has received funding in this budget of around $10 million, I think, to build a new competition-grade gymnasium and make some other improvements. Hampton Primary School has received nearly $10 million in funding to build a gymnasium and a new performing arts space and some new classrooms as part of a modernisation and upgrade project. Gardenvale Primary School – $11.7 million in funding; I visited the school with the Deputy Premier and Minister for Education just before the budget. We did a tour, met some great kids and saw some great facilities, but we could see how much better that school could be with this sort of investment – $11.7 million into Gardenvale Primary School for the next stage of their modernisation and upgrade project. Labor is investing in new schools right across the state. We are building and upgrading schools, particularly in the Southern Metropolitan Region, and I am really proud to represent a part of Melbourne that Labor is investing in. These are three new schools that are getting additional funding, and there are many others that I will not have time today to go through that have received additional funding from Labor over the last few years.

Not all investments that matter are large; you do not have to spend millions and millions of dollars to have a real impact on certain local communities. One of the things that I was really proud of in the budget was the $250,000 that Labor has committed towards the upgrade of Peterson Reserve in Highett – better facilities for the two ovals at Peterson Reserve in Highett, home to the Highett West Cricket Club and the Hampton Hammers football club and also used by the East Sandringham football club, with whom I played my one glorious season of under-10s. I am absolutely sure that the investment that we will be making there, which will have some funding contributions matched by the Bayside City Council, is going to deliver additional and improved facilities at that reserve, helping the local community.

The other significant investment that obviously has been made by this Labor government over the past decade has been the construction of the Metro Tunnel, and the Metro Tunnel is going to transform the way Melburnians move around. It is going to create a connection between Sunbury in the north-west and Cranbourne–Pakenham in the south-east with a brand new high-speed, high-tech train line that cuts a new path through the city, the new Metro Tunnel. This budget funds the operationalisation of the Metro Tunnel, and I am very much looking forward to riding that new train when it opens with my constituents, hopefully with some younger constituents who are on the train for free. But particularly for people who live in and around that Caulfield area who will have access to both the city loop on the Frankston line and the Metro Tunnel on the new Metro line and will be able to get from Caulfield to Melbourne Uni for the first time with a direct-connection service, and I am sure that will be of great benefit to many in the local community. The Metro Tunnel is enabling us to make improvements to other lines as well. Alongside the introduction of the Metro Tunnel, the Labor government is increasing frequency of interpeak services on the Sandringham line. We are now going to deliver services every 10 minutes between peak instead of every 15 minutes, improving the level of service to the Sandringham line, as well as the improvements that are being made for people who live on the Cranbourne–Pakenham line, who can get through to the Metro Tunnel. Those on the Frankston line will be going back around the City Loop again.

These are real improvements that are being made to the metropolitan train network that are really going to benefit the residents of southern metropolitan Melbourne. They are funded in this budget because Labor is investing in infrastructure, because Labor is investing in the things that matter to Victorian communities. We are doing so in a way that is measured and responsible. We have got a fiscal strategy that has got us on track. We are creating jobs, we are bringing the budget back to operating surplus and we are stabilising net debt, and we are doing so while continuing to deliver on important and vital services. This is a budget that delivers for working Victorians, and I strongly support it.

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:01): I rise to respond to what can only be described as a con job of a state budget, a budget crafted not to deliver outcomes for Victoria but to save face for a tired, arrogant and out-of-touch Labor government that has lost control of both its finances and its priorities. In May the Treasurer had the audacity to stand up in Parliament and claim victory, to wave around an illusionary $600 million operating surplus and hand out token cost-of-living sweeteners. But Victorians are not stupid. They see through the spin. They know what Labor calls a surplus. It is built on unsustainable debt, savage cuts and record tax hikes. Let us be clear: this government is presiding over the most indebted state in Australian history. That is right.

According to the budget papers, net debt is projected to skyrocket to $194 billion by 2028–29, the highest of any jurisdiction in the country. Interest payments will soon hit $11 billion per year. You heard it right: interest payments alone, $11 billion per year. That is nearly $30 million a day. That is more than what is spent on our schools, our hospitals, our roads and our police. It is not a recovery; this is a fiscal calamity. After 10 years of Labor, this is their legacy: a debt burden of $26,000 for every Victorian. Do you know what that works out to be per week? That is $500 a week for every Victorian. Some people are paying someone else's share, so they are paying even more than that. Interest repayments of $1 million every hour and capital project cost blowouts have become the norm, not the exception. This is not a budget that invests in the future of Victorians. It is a desperate attempt to plug holes created by more than a decade of mismanagement and incompetence by the Allan Labor government.

Let us look at infrastructure, where the government has turned waste into an Olympic sport, which is just as well as they could not deliver the Commonwealth Games. The airport rail link is paused indefinitely under this government. You will not be able to use the airport rail link because they are not investing in it, not because of planning but because the money has gone. Poof – $67 million flushed away just to stop a project. The Metro Tunnel is $827 million over budget, but listen to those on the other side of the chamber. They are saying how great the Metro Tunnel is, but can you believe it is $827 million over budget? The Big Build has become the big blowout. In fact it is the biggest budget blowout. And then we come to the Suburban Rail Loop. Well, do not even get me started – Labor's white elephant, projected to cost up to $125 billion, with a benefit–cost ratio that barely scrapes above 0.6, that is 60 cents back for every dollar spent. And what do Victorians get in return? Nothing. Debt, debt, debt that results in taxes, taxes, taxes. Higher taxes, fewer services and a declining quality of life.

Michael Galea: On a point of order, Acting Speaker, I just want to clarify if Mrs Hermans is actually saying that Victorians will get nothing out of the Metro Tunnel project?

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Jeff Bourman): That is not a point of order.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: But nowhere is this government's betrayal more shameful than in education. As a former high school teacher, I cannot stay silent while this government trashes the future of our young people and burns through the goodwill of our educators. Education is meant to be the great equaliser, but under Labor, it has become the great afterthought. The government crows about being the Education State. That is what they call themselves. It is on our number plates – the Education State. But their actions speak louder than their slogans. We have the poorest paid teachers, and we have schools scrambling to get upgrades. Some of those upgrades are simply toilet renovations, for goodness sake.

The 2025–26 budget delivers a brutal $2.4 billion cut to public education. The promise to fully fund public schools? That is delayed until 2031, eight years too late for today's students. Cuts to TAFE and vocational education? Oh, that is all buried in the fine print. Investment in early childhood education? Well, that is token at best. Let us not forget the schools that were promised upgrades. Clayton South Primary School and Seaford North Primary School are just some of the schools in my area and in my electorate. They were told they would receive funding. They were told construction would begin. Instead they are stuck in tender preparation limbo. They are victims of a government that cannot manage money and cannot keep its promises. The Australian Education Union said it best:

> … this makes a mockery of the government's claim that Victoria is the 'education state' …

The union said that, the education union. Interestingly enough, on this side of the chamber we have four former teachers; on that side of the chamber I do not know if they have a single one. This is not an education state. The unions are right in this case, and NAPLAN results reveal the damage. Almost 30 per cent of students are not meeting minimum standards in English and maths. Two-thirds of year 3 Indigenous students are failing grammar and punctuation. Seven in 10 year 9 students from non-university educated families are falling behind. This is not just underperformance, it is systematic neglect.

And what of our teachers, the ones who are meant to hold it together? They are being driven to burnout. A government-commissioned review found they are buried in red tape, suffocated by compliance tasks and robbed of time to actually teach. I can attest to that. They become teachers to teach. But no, they are doing all these other things. Offering $50,000 to relocate is just a gimmick. It will not fix the culture of overwork, the endless administrative burdens or the broken system that this government refuses to reform. Then there is the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, the VCAA, the authority responsible for managing our senior school exams. After several botched exam papers and catastrophic errors, the independent review was scathing. This is what it found: a total lack of board oversight, weak risk management, poor executive leadership and no evidence of crisis planning.

Labor's failure has not just been economic. Labor's failure is cultural, it is structural and it is political. The result is a system in which students are left behind and teachers are abandoned. Our trust is broken. This is not a government focused on people; it is a government focused on headlines.

Joe McCracken interjected.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: It is obsessed with spin. It is absolutely obsessed with spin. It is addicted to debt and allergic to accountability.

Joe McCracken interjected.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: They hate transparency, and Victorians are paying the price, with higher taxes, with failing services, with declining confidence in the basic institutions of government. This budget is not a road map, it is a cover-up. It is a desperate attempt to hide the damage caused by years of financial negligence and warped priorities. I say to this government: stop the slogans, own your mistakes and start governing for the future, not just the press conference, because this budget is not just a political document, it is a statement of who you serve. You are supposed to be public servants, and tragically Labor have shown us that they are no longer able to serve the students, the families, the small businesses – all working Victorians. They serve only themselves.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (16:11): I rise to make a contribution on behalf of the Greens to Victoria's state budget for this year. At its core a budget is a list of priorities. It tells Victorians what the government believes matters most right now. When you look closely, this budget fails the big tests that Victoria is facing – acting in accordance with the speed of the climate crisis, funding public schools fairly and tackling the housing emergency with solutions that will actually help renters and first home buyers. At the same time this is a budget that finds room for almost $1 billion of new prison spending and hundreds of millions of dollars for luxury upgrades attached to the grand prix. Tellingly, the Treasurer's budget speech did not mention climate or environment once. That

omission is not just symbolic but rather reflects the way that climate programs and environmental protection have been treated across the budget papers, with little to no new funding to reduce emissions quickly, to support households to electrify at scale or to restore degraded ecosystems that protect communities from floods, heat and fire in this budget.

Victorians are already living with climate impacts – smoke, heatwaves, flooding, coastal erosion and biodiversity loss. They expect a budget that moves urgently to cut emissions and build resilience, and that would start with practical measures that we know will work – electrifying homes and small businesses so that energy bills fall permanently, with a special focus on renters and low-income households, helping people move away from gas and getting rid of that bill entirely; delivering frequent, reliable and affordable public transport services so people can leave the car at home; and protecting and restoring nature, including urban tree canopy as well as our wetlands, rivers and coasts, because these are our natural defences in a hotter, drier climate and for our wildlife as well. There are some positive steps, but they are outside the budget, including standards for rental energy efficiency, for example. But still, the investment in these does not meet the scale, the need and the urgency of this moment.

Victorians also really value public education. And in fact not so long ago we called this the Education State, yet this budget pushes full funding for public schools out beyond the estimates and delays the Gonski uplift that we owe until 2031, effectively ripping $2.4 billion out of the Victorian school system across that period. However, the government chooses to characterise it, schools are feeling this gap now, with fewer teachers and aides than are needed, older buildings waiting longer for basic upgrades and more and more fundraising needed by school communities and parents to cover the essentials. This is not just a theoretical argument. Principals are juggling rising employment costs and complex post-pandemic needs amongst student populations. Teachers are already carrying really heavy workloads. Students deserve smaller classes, specialist support and safe and modern facilities. So many are lacking. Deferring full school resource standard funding shifts the costs onto families and school communities, who are already stretched with cost-of-living pressures, and in many cases students and teachers will simply be going without.

I have had teachers and union representatives in my electorate reach out, fed up beyond belief that it is a Labor government that has reneged on its own Gonski commitments. The Greens are joining the calls to bring forward full and fair funding in this term of Parliament, not 2031; to publish a transparent schedule for capital works so school communities can plan around construction, not speculation; and to make sure that funding is being allocated based on need rather than other political reasons. If we can find hundreds of millions of dollars for corporate event infrastructure like the grand prix and billions of dollars for prisons, we can fund our public schools properly. The return on investment in this case is so obvious: better learning, better wellbeing and long-term social and economic gains that completely dwarf that up-front cost.

Speaking of prisons, the budget finds nearly $1 billion of new money for prisons. It is the government's own bail settings, sadly, that are exploding remand numbers. The response in this budget is to pay for more prison beds, which is the most expensive and least effective way to manage disadvantage and harm and in many cases will magnify it. Evidence shows that smarter, safer investment earlier in the pipeline – secure housing, mental health care, youth programs, diversionary programs, alcohol and other drug treatment, and bail support – are the interventions that will reduce crime, will reduce reoffending and then overall will reduce costs while also investing in our community. If you spend the lion's share at the back end, as we continue to do, Labor and those opposite will always be chasing their own tails, our community will not be safer and the cost of this will keep rising – human and financial.

Victorians are living through a housing crisis, with rents rising, vacancy rates low and first home buyers being locked out, and the budget's only significant housing change is an extension of the uncapped stamp duty concession, which is overwhelmingly benefiting buyers of higher end properties rather than people who are doing it tough. That does little for a renter who is in a mouldy flat facing a

rent rise, and it does little for a nurse or tradie trying to buy their first home near to where they work. At the same time, the government continues with this shameful plan to demolish all 44 public housing towers across Victoria. This approach risks pushing thousands of people into deeper insecurity, while replacement homes are many, many years away – if they arrive at all. As we have seen reported just in the last week, tenants living in so-called affordable housing under the ground lease model have had their rent steadily increased to a point that it is not affordable and they have to move out anyway. A responsible budget would accelerate construction of new public and genuinely affordable homes on public land so that we do not go backwards on public housing in this state. It would also adopt stronger renter protections and minimum energy standards to make homes healthier and bills lower now, not in a decade.

Housing is the foundation for health, employment and education, and it is also key to a smarter justice system. I have heard personally in my electorate office and through my portfolio duties from a number of people who already qualify for parole – who have done their time, who have been through prison and been rehabilitated – but are unable to access it due to precarity of housing being a barrier to their release. If we invest in homes, we reduce costs in every other area where homelessness and housing insecurity exacerbate other social disadvantage, and they are countless in number.

The Treasurer's silence on climate in the budget speech sits along an *Economic Growth Statement* that talks up fast-tracking new fossil gas projects. That is a clear signal of priorities, and bold action on climate is not at the top of Labor's list. Pursuing new gas is taking us in entirely the wrong direction. It will delay the bill savings that households can get from efficient electric appliances, and it locks in pollution that we then have to pay to clean up later. And it sends investors very mixed messages about where Victoria is headed at a time when we need rapid investment in and expansion of renewables. The practical path is the one that Victorian households are already choosing – induction cooktops, efficient electric heating and hot water systems, rooftop solar and storage, and public transport that is frequent and clean. Targeted electrification support for renters and apartments continues to be vital and must be expanded. It is a win–win to back faster electrification – we lower household bills, we cut pollution and we make communities more resilient. But when we chase new gas, as Labor continues to do, we literally go in the opposite direction. I will also make the point that many LGAs are behind at the moment in their greening targets. The budget is silent on urban greening at scale, and we have concerns about the government's ability to meet its own canopy expansion targets. Shade and biodiversity are not only worthwhile public health infrastructure investments, they are essential in a warming state for keeping our suburbs livable and our amenity high.

The Greens have put a concrete revenue plan on the table in response to this budget. We could raise $14.7 billion by fairly taxing big banks and large corporations, and that money could then be invested in housing, climate action and essential services. This is about asking those who at the moment have the largest profits and dividends to contribute a fair share to the state that they rely on – its workers, its infrastructure and its legal system. With that revenue Victoria can bring forward full public school funding, clear the capital backlog, further scale household electrification, build public and affordable homes rapidly on public land and shift justice spending to prevention without leaving us with widening gaps in safety.

When the government says there is no money for schools or climate but finds billions for prisons and premium event infrastructure, the problem is not the balance sheet, it is the government's priorities. Victorians want the opposite. They want public schools that are funded fairly and fully, with buildings that are safe and fit for purpose for students' learning. They want homes that are secure, affordable and healthy, especially for renters and people in public housing. They want clean and frequent public transport. They want no more public investment in dirty gas and coal, locking us further into fossil fuels. They want nature protected and restored and better urban greening so communities are safer in heat and floods. And they want a justice system that prevents harm, not just pays through the nose to manage it after the fact. They want honest numbers as well on major events, with our public parks kept for people first.

All of this is achievable. The Greens have set out a way to pay for it by asking those who have done very well to contribute fairly, and we have tabled practical, evidence-based steps the government can take this year, not in 2031, to improve people's lives. If the government truly want to fund what matters, they should work with us to bring forward school funding, to properly reinvigorate and expand public housing, to accelerate the state's shift to electrification, to shift justice dollars into prevention and to shine a light on major event spending. Victorians will thank us for choosing substance over spectacle and over spin and for acting with the urgency that these times demand. I will leave my remarks there.

Sheena WATT (Northern Metropolitan) (16:23): Today I rise to speak on the budget papers, which see this government deliver on some of the most important projects in the state's history. It is a budget that includes some big wins and small for my local community in the Northern Metropolitan Region and delivers on what I have been hearing from so many locals. One of the biggest wins in this budget is the investment in transport, and not just in the big projects but also in expanding services up the Upfield and Craigieburn lines. This will mean that on Sundays and weeknights we will have extra services so that both lines will have a 20-minute minimum across the week, so whether you are heading into the city for a Sunday shop or coming home from a late shift, we will have you covered.

The investment in transport does not stop in Northern Metro, with the four out of five Metro Tunnel stations in my electorate receiving funding to finalise their opening and begin operation. The Metro Tunnel is one of the most significant and transformative infrastructure projects in Victoria's history, and it is set to transform the way people live, work and travel across Melbourne and beyond. By creating a new rail line through the heart of the city, the project will not only reduce congestion on the network but also unlock capacity for thousands more passengers every day. This means trains can run more often and more reliably and connect more Victorians to jobs, education and essential services. At the very centre of the transformation are five brand new underground stations: Arden, Parkville, State Library, Town Hall and Anzac. Each of these has been carefully designed to improve accessibility and to provide seamless connections to trams, buses and existing train services. Students will now be able to get in at the new Parkville station and get straight to uni. Now you can trade in the packed morning trams for a train in the tunnel, something I am sure many Melbourne Uni students are looking forward to.

Beyond transport, the Metro Tunnel will reshape Melbourne's urban environment. Each new station precinct is designed with open spaces, bike facilities and pedestrian-friendly areas, encouraging more sustainable forms of travel. In this way the Metro Tunnel is not just about moving people more efficiently but also about shaping a more connected and a more livable city.

I have got to let you know that the Metro Tunnel will also deliver longer-term benefits by supporting jobs and economic activity. Thousands of Victorians have already been employed through the project, and the improved transport links will continue to strengthen productivity into the future. Reduced travel times and more reliable journeys mean businesses can operate more effectively, while workers spend less time commuting and more time contributing to the economy or enjoying their personal lives.

Perhaps most importantly, the Metro Tunnel futureproofs Melbourne's transport network. As the population continues to grow, demand for reliable and frequent public transport will increase. This project ensures Victoria is equipped to meet that challenge by taking cars off the road, reducing overcrowding on existing lines and supporting sustainable growth. The Metro Tunnel will stand as a legacy that transforms Victoria into a more connected state.

The other Metro Tunnel station I cannot forget is Arden. This marvel of engineering is the crown jewel of the Arden precinct that is being transformed by this government with homes, facilities and amenities, one that I know the Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts is enormously proud of. One of these amenities that I am very proud to talk about today is this government's commitment for a secondary school within the Arden precinct to serve the Arden community and surrounds and educate the next generation of Victorians. Arden is in fact one of the fastest growing parts of my

electorate, with a vibrant and diverse community forming around this area, and you can now look forward to a high school being the beating heart of Arden.

The investments do not stop either. One item in this budget that will make a huge difference, that I heard many constituents raise all around the region, was the need for greater accessibility in train stations – a simple, practical investment that will make more difference to so, so many Victorians. A major upgrade program includes construction of brand new accessible stations at Albion and Sunshine, with modern designs, elevators, tactile indicators and step-free access to support users with disability, seniors and families, boosting safety and inclusivity. We are anticipating great take up through the Metro Tunnel to Parkville station in fact, which is home to the brilliant Parkville medical district; I know that that will be very much welcomed by so many. You see, anyone and everyone should be able to use Victoria's public transport system, and they should be able to do that with ease of mind and ease of access. We also have statewide investment in tram stop and bus stop accessibility, such as the $27 million for accessible tram stops outside Footscray Hospital, which is about to open, paired with $72 million for tram safety infrastructure, ensuring the network is more secure and user friendly.

Victoria is growing. Melbourne is on track to reach the size of London by 2050. We need a long-term plan to build more homes in connected communities close to jobs, transport and services. That is why we have cut red tape in the planning system, opening up government land for new homes, and sped up the renewal of our social housing. This budget continues that work, unlocking planning, reducing the cost of purchasing off-the-plan apartments, units and townhouses, and building new homes faster, including $61 million to extend the stamp duty concession announced in October of 2024, slashing stamp duty on eligible off-the-plan apartments, units and townhouses until October of 2026. There is $24 million to deliver new planning controls for activity centres in metropolitan Melbourne, so Victorians are not forced to move away from the communities they grew up in to find a home or move away from their communities when they want to downsize. There is also the delivery of the Suburban Rail Loop, which is Australia's biggest housing project, which will support more than 70,000 new homes over the next 30 years. And I can see the enthusiasm from the Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop as I speak. Actually she is bursting with excitement because there is also $249 million, I have got to tell you, to enable infrastructure works such as roads, sewerage and water, which will increase housing supply across the state, including $88 million for regional Victoria. There is $61 million to help people experiencing homelessness find a permanent place to live, which is just so critical here in our community.

I have also got to let you know that, importantly, there is more money in this budget to support efforts to advance our commitment to self-determination through the $167 million in funding for culturally controlled services in health, education, housing, justice and beyond. These investments are going to empower communities, improve outcomes and support treaty-informed reforms. There is $25 million to strengthen Aboriginal community controlled organisations (ACCOs) in child protection and family services, ensuring that First Nations children and families receive culturally informed advocacy and care. There is $18 million for pilot programs for community-controlled VET, growing the First Nations vocational education workforce and creating pathways driven by community needs. There is $18 million allocated to First Nations led diversion programs and legal services, tackling over-representation in the criminal justice system with some community-based solutions. I was excited to also see $16 million to support First Nations mothers during pregnancy and post birth, importantly, ensuring culturally safe maternity care via our Aboriginal community controlled organisations. There is also $5.3 million to establish culturally responsive early years services, including kindergartens, under the early childhood education transformation.

Furthermore, I have got to tell you there are incredible investments in our First Nations community, including $5.6 million to assist First Nations businesses to compete locally and internationally and also to host the 2025 World Indigenous Business Forum. I have got to tell you the $5.4 million to expand the Aboriginal community infrastructure program is especially welcome. This will enable ACCOs to lead community-identified infrastructure projects. The $4.9 million assigned in this budget

for the creation of the First Peoples Leadership Academy is especially exciting for our young people and will nurture emerging leaders across all sectors.

The Koorie Youth Council is an organisation I have spoken about, and I have outlined my engagement with their predecessor organisation, VIYAC, the Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council. There is also the Koorie Heritage Trust, an organisation with which I had the good fortune of celebrating 40 years of their commitment to community. Cultural events as well that elevate First Nations leadership and heritage are in this budget, receiving $3.8 million. There is more to come, including $2 million to back young diverse creatives, helping First Nations talent thrive in festivals and careers across the arts; $8.4 million ensuring Yorta Yorta traditional owners continue to jointly manage country with the state; $1.5 million to strengthen the Wamba Wemba Aboriginal Corporation in cultural decision-making; and $1 million to support traditional owner corporations participating equally in Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010 negotiations.

It would be wrong for me to not mention the government investments in health, because there is in fact in this budget an additional investment of $11.1 billion in health, and as a result the budget bills provide for over $31 billion in funding for our health system this year alone, the biggest investment ever in frontline care. This investment covers the globally increased cost of providing care while making sure that Victorian hospitals, our much-beloved hospitals, have everything they need to look after patients and their families. It includes $634 million to open and operationalise nine new or redeveloped hospitals, with one of them, Craigieburn, in my electorate, so I look forward to seeing the positive results this hospital will produce for the community. There is $57 million to upgrade infrastructure at Royal Melbourne Hospital, ensuring it delivers the very best care to patients; $52 million to support new and upgraded medical equipment, supporting operating suites, emergency departments, surgical wards, intensive care units and neonatal and maternity services in hospitals right across the state.

I have spoken before about the 12 urgent care clinics across the state, and there is a $27 million investment to give more Victorians access to free health care when they need it, without needing that trip to the emergency department. There is $203 million to back our healthcare workers, ensuring they have the support and resources they need to keep delivering world-class care, as well as $437 million for the virtual emergency department, which has taken off in this state, let me assure you.

I have spoken at length about Triple Zero Victoria, an important organisation that is there to really target the bottlenecks in emergency departments, get paramedics on the road sooner and improve ambulance response times with more call takers, more dispatchers and supported of course with a $167 million investment.

There is a commitment to additional funding under the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. We will recall that very powerful piece of work, and this budget has ensured $497 million for it to continue its important work. There is $23 million to expand our mental health and wellbeing locals, and $6 million to support the existing networks.

I need to let you know that one that I am pretty excited about and that I have a long history with now is the Parkville Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing Service, which will be established with a $35 million investment in mental health and wellbeing for children and young people. So under that $35 million is that carve-out for Parkville. For our LGBTIQA+ community there is $25 million to support suicide prevention programs, and we have also got $50 million for public aged care, including new government-funded aged care beds.

This budget is about building for today while preparing for tomorrow by investing in the services and infrastructure most relied upon, like health care, housing, education, transport and, importantly to me, cultural self-determination. It ensures that, as our population grows, no Victorian is left behind. It supports workers with better transport, families with more schools and hospitals, First Nations communities with treaty-driven reforms and everyday people with more affordable homes. The

investments we make today will shape the Victoria of tomorrow. This is a budget that delivers, and I am proud to commend it to the house.

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (16:38): It is a real privilege to be able to speak from the government benches about the work that continues to deliver budgetary outcomes that are balanced, that are considered and that are responsible. I do not think anybody for a second seeks to ignore or diminish the challenges Victoria has faced and has endured in recent years. I have heard contributions from people in this place relating to COVID debt recovery, to the five-step fiscal strategy that was outlined firstly by former Treasurer Tim Pallas and latterly by the current Treasurer Minister Symes, the leader in this place. And the contributions that have been made around the budget quite willingly ignore the reality and the necessity of support that was required and indeed demanded from government during the period of an unforeseen, unimaginable challenge to every part of our system, from public health through to workforce, frontline support, housing, education, health care and the very way in which we connected to each other and to the world around us.

The fiscal strategy that we see as part of this particular budget continues with a trajectory based in responsible decision-making, and returning to an operating surplus shows very clearly that the steps that have been outlined, those responsible fiscal decisions, are enabling us to return to those settings which were in place prior to circumstances which required and indeed demanded unprecedented support for people in need in any number of different ways and in any number of different circumstances across the entirety of the state. That is one part of the work and the landscape within which we are operating and in which the budget has been set. When we talk to the priorities in the budget and the decisions around allocations, we can also see that those enduring concepts – those values around fairness, around equity, around opportunity – are infused within the various portfolio allocations, whether that is schools and continuing the investment for the bonus programs that have helped more kids be able to get support to participate in more activities; building on the school sports, education, uniform and excursions fund; the Active Kids vouchers; the work to deliver the breakfast club; the ongoing assistance to specialist developmental schools; the huge capital upgrade program that has continued; or the work to make sure that Smile Squad can continue to provide little kids with the opportunity to ensure their dental health is front of mind. These are the sorts of things that make a real and practical difference for families.

I want to turn to the way in which this sits over a range of programs dedicated to or with the impact of improvement relating to the cost of living. We have seen and we saw prior to the Reserve Bank's decision to cut interest rates a steady increase in the amount of household income that was going towards servicing mortgages. At the same time, we saw stagnation in wage growth, we saw cuts in penalty rates in real terms and we saw challenges around security of employment, which, as we all know, in vulnerable industries like retail and hospitality have an over-representation of women. What we have done here at a state level with the levers available to us is to ensure support to counteract those cost-of-living challenges.

When we look to the delivery of free TAFE, with more than 80 courses on the free TAFE list and more than 200,000 people having undertaken a free TAFE course, we know that it is having a profound impact in a number of different ways. Firstly, it is ensuring that people who have not been in the paid workforce are able to gain a relevant qualification in a growth area, in a sector where jobs demand exists and will continue to exist, and have therefore been able to derive an income following completion of part or all of that course.

Some like to talk about completion rates and argue that non-completion rates indicate that free TAFE is not working, but that is a very, very, very naive way of looking at the way in which the TAFE system is assisting people into work earlier and more frequently and more enduringly than any program that was ever offered under the coalition, where TAFE campuses were closed and locked, where sham courses flourished. We have taken what occurred under coalition governments, a system starved to the brink of existential viability, and we have opened campuses, we have delivered free TAFE across the

state and we have delivered first-class learning facilities and resources to complement the work that we are doing across our school system in STEM and in access to learning opportunities for students, whether in the middle of Melbourne or out to the borders of the state, whether that is through the high-tech schools or through programs involving partnerships to encourage students to get involved in a range of different course and subject offerings and choices to give them the best possible opportunity to reach their full potential.

The TAFE system is one part of the cost-of-living support which has been provided, and as I have indicated, a free TAFE course is a very useful starting point for that work. But importantly, when we look at free TAFE and we look at the uptake, we see that in a number of parts of that system, more than 80 courses, it is women who are benefiting significantly. We see therefore that when women are moving into paid work – and I say 'paid work' very, very deliberately, because all too often the work that women do is work but is not paid – this is an area that then provides input and income to households. It ensures that where there have been no incomes, for example, there may be one; where there has been one income that may increase to two. If we have two income earners in a household and that ensures that children are able to have universal access to three- and four-year-old kinder, the saving of more than $2000 per annum per child is an additional way in which the cost-of-living assistance is having an impact.

When we add to that the further work that is being done to provide better access to health care, this is of essential importance. I want to go to the women's health angle and the priority and the focus that this government has placed upon the health of women, whether in accessing services and support within our health and hospital system, the community pharmacy work that is occurring, the Hospital in the Home programs or the work with Nurse-on-Call. Providing better and more accessible assistance for women in managing health care that all too often has been ignored, has been kept sidelined because it has not been deemed legitimate, is something which the women's pain inquiry has very clearly identified as an area for improvement – that we need to undo generations of misogyny, systemic misogyny, in health and hospital systems of care. This is again an area where we see an uptake at last from parts of the media who were all too prepared to turn their backs on invisible illness and the challenges that women face in being believed and not derided or dismissed or misdiagnosed in the health and hospital system.

Minister for Health Mary-Anne Thomas has led the charge in this work, and alongside her work we continue, through the reforms in the mental health portfolio, to make sure that the many people who experience mental illness or are diagnosed with a mental illness in the course of their lifetimes or are caring for somebody who is living with mental illness have the support and the care and the expertise that they need and that the billions of dollars that we have invested in response to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System is squarely directed at making sure that we can lean into those challenges, those uncomfortable truths of disadvantage because of psychosocial circumstance, and move toward better outcomes based in stepped care, community care or a health and hospital system that is more equipped and better able to respond to the needs of people with often complex presentations.

I want to also acknowledge the work that is happening in the way in which we move around. Public transport is a key priority for this government. Not only have we removed I think 86 level crossings now but we continue the work to deliver better access to public transport as the city grows. People would be aware that the city is growing at a significant rate. This is not our growth – it is growth which is inexorable; it is growth which is inevitable – but the way in which we grow is a choice, and the choices that we have made, the choices made by the Allan Labor government, are squarely directed to making sure that people can experience good growth. This includes the work to provide access from the beginning of next year to anyone up to the age of 18 to get free public transport. This is another measure not just to assist with the cost of living but to provide people with better opportunities to connect.

Fares across our regional network being capped at metropolitan prices have also enabled people to move around more easily and to discover rural and regional Victoria from the middle of Melbourne or vice versa. This has, in turn, increased access to the best of our events calendar. When we look at the statistics showing that more than 113,000 businesses have been created in Melbourne since 2020, we can see very clearly that the activation of our city and a very, very full calendar of events is having a significant impact. Every month this year, I think bar one, we have seen our hotels and our accommodation within metropolitan Melbourne at their highest ever rates. Whether you are coming for the Australian Open or for the grand prix, whether you are coming for the NRL and for this trilogy of epic, iconic events or whether you are coming for the art exhibitions, for the work that happens to celebrate our cultures, celebrate our stories and bring those international drawcards to Melbourne, we can see that that activation, that economic activity, is translating to jobs, is translating to economic growth and is translating to a momentum that is not being experienced in other parts of Australia. In short, we are growing to prosperity. We are growing into further opportunity. We are growing into additional jobs, supports, services and potential for people irrespective of their age or their socio-economic circumstance.

When we talk about rail too, it would be remiss of me not to refer to the Suburban Rail Loop, a project which is on time and on budget. Notwithstanding the fact that those opposite continue to do more backflips than Nadia Comaneci when it comes to their position on the Suburban Rail Loop, we have only ever had one position, and we are building it. Cheltenham to Box Hill – we will see trains running on that line in 2035. Tunnel-boring machines arrive later this year, and they will be in the ground next year. We continue the work not because it is a good idea but because it is a necessary investment in our growing city.

Housing: 800,000 homes. We are at 98 per cent of our target under the Commonwealth accord. The things that we are doing under the housing statement are working and not by accident. It is precisely because of our investments that this growth is occurring.

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (16:53): I rise to make a contribution on the budget take-note motion. I have had the benefit of listening to a number of speakers today who have done an amazing job outlining all of the things that the Allan Labor government is investing in, but again, disappointingly but predictably, those opposite have done nothing but talk down Victoria and complain. They hate each other, but they complain and whinge and whine about everything rather than looking at the bright side, because there is lots to look at on the bright side. In fact I might just talk about some of those things on the bright side. I am going to go through and detail some of the signature investments in our budget. But I am also going to talk about how Victoria since 2017 has also, as part of delivering on our state budget, prepared a 'Gender Equality Budget Statement' and has embarked upon gender equality in Victoria through responsible budgeting and how it impacts women. That is an analysis of budgets and of how, when we spend money, it might impact on women, whether that is in an overt way or in an unintended consequences kind of way. It is sort of interesting, and I will get to that. Gender responsive budgeting looks at decisions that relate to spending and how that might impact on women. But I will come to that in a moment.

What I want to talk about first of all is the record $2.3 billion of spending to deliver new and expanded cost-of-living help for working people and their families. I know that in my region, in the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region, we just did a recent community survey and cost of living is certainly number one, on the top of the pops and at the forefront of people's minds in my region. We knew our budget needed to target that as an issue and provide lots of support for people who might be doing it tough. There are lots of cost-of-living measures, and I will just go through some of them. $320 million to make public transport free for Victorians under 18 every day, and then for seniors every weekend across our state. I know people have been talking about the savings that that will mean for families, but I also want to point out that if you are a young person, perhaps between the ages of 15 and 18, you may be catching public transport to go to your part-time job, so it will also save you money if you are purchasing your own Myki fares. Mum and dad might have got you a card to get you to school or

whatever, but if you are becoming more independent because you have got your own economic independence, you have got your own little part-time job, then you are also going to benefit from that. It is not just a benefit and a saving to mum and dad, it is also a benefit to you as a young worker.

Also, there is $18 million to enable pharmacists to treat more Victorians and more conditions, saving them time and money in visiting a GP – it is expensive to see a GP often. If you have some of the conditions that need treatment like non-complex UTIs and the like, rather than going to see a GP you can now go to your pharmacist and get treatment for those sorts of things. Also, $50 million to deliver a new $100 power saving bonus for Victorians. We have seen that has been incredibly popular amongst Victorians, because getting some help and cost relief with the cost of power bills has come in extremely handy. That puts money back into the pockets of Victorians so they can use that money for other things rather than their power bills. That was very welcome relief. Another cost-of-living measure was $859 million to continue free kinder, saving families up to $2600 a year per child in fees. I remember when my children needed to be enrolled in three-year-old kinder; it certainly was not funded back then. We had to find the money for that and then four-year-old kinder. It is a very welcome saving; $2600 is not an insignificant amount of money, so it is good to put that back into the pockets of Victorian families.

Then we have $152 million to increase support for families to pay for camps, sports and excursions. We have heard before how important camps are to kids; they get to go away with their classmates, hang out and get up to all sorts of mischief and hopefully come home in one piece and not horribly ill. They normally come home with a bag full of smelly washing that they have either worn or not worn as they have been in the same clothes for maybe three or four days. All those sorts of stories, parents will relate to very well around Victoria. But the kids have a great time, and it is important that they are able to go out on those camps and excursions.

Community sports: we have seen absolute growth in community sports and not just the usual suspects. It is not only football but things like karate or tennis or other sorts of sports, even table tennis. Whether or not it is the usual sorts of sports that get most of the attention, we are seeing a greater uptake of sports. One of the things our government also does is invest in upgrading sporting facilities. There is $15 million to deliver more than 65,000 extra Get Active Kids vouchers – again helping families with the cost of kids sports – so things like uniforms or equipment, whether it is particular balls or knee guards or shin guards or whatever it is, again that all costs money. Soccer boots, footy boots, whatever – a little bit of relief towards the cost of those things goes a long way. Of course when kids are young they grow out of shoes at a rate of knots, and they might have a pair of shoes for one year and before they are even worn out they need another pair, so that is also very welcome relief.

There is $18 million in food relief to support those that are doing the toughest. We know that food insecurity is increasing within our community. It is sad, but it is a fact and a reality of life at the moment, so $18 million in additional money for food relief. Then additionally $900 million in new cost-of-living relief as well – an extra $11.1 billion to make sure Victorians can rely on great health care, including opening and operationalising nine new and expanded hospitals, including the new Footscray Hospital and the redeveloped Frankston and Maryborough district hospitals.

The next thing I am going to mention is the Metro Tunnel, and I know many people are looking forward to seeing it open. There is $727 million to switch on the Metro Tunnel, delivering more services for the Sunbury, Cranbourne and Pakenham lines, as well as an additional $99 million to deliver even more services across the network, because we know Metro Tunnel is significant and key to unlocking the ability for us to plan more services on our network. With Metro Tunnel opening later this year, I know many, many people are looking forward to that. We cannot wait.

I know those opposite talk down our roads and complain about roads up hill and down dale. Well, there is $976 million to fix and resurface our roads in this budget through the better roads blitz. I know those opposite keep saying that there is no money for roads and the potholes and this and that and whine and complain, but there is actual real money there – $976 million to fix and resurface our roads.

It is something that comes up a lot in my electorate office. I know we get some inquiries about it, but we make sure we let our constituents know that local councils own I think 90 per cent of the road network, so local councils do have some responsibility. But also there are opportunities for people to nominate roads under the federal blackspot program, for example. Anyone can nominate a road that they feel needs attention of blackspot funding. They can do that. Then also of course we are investing in upgrading our roads, and we have got some very significant road upgrade projects. Particularly in my region, the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region, we have the North East Link, which I know I cannot wait to see open. It is going to be a very welcome project, taking tens of thousands of trucks off roads each and every day and returning local roads to local communities. I cannot wait to see that open. It is going to have a massive impact on my local community. We are also upgrading the Eastern Freeway as well. We have seen some recent closures there to bring in some newly upgraded bridges, and those works are part of the overall North East Link package. There are some very significant state road upgrades as well.

Then there is $2.7 billion to give our kids a great education, building new classrooms and supporting our teachers. We are building many, many new schools and upgrading many existing schools. I have just this year been out to open a number of upgraded schools. I just last week went to East Doncaster Secondary College and opened their new buildings that they got – modular classrooms and upgraded toilet facilities as well. Then there is $1.6 billion to strengthen our justice system and keep communities safe.

In the last 5 minutes I have I am going to talk about gender-responsive budgeting and what that actually means. As I said earlier, gender-responsive budgeting looks at decisions about our spending and how our budgets are spent. It identifies how investments in areas like health, education and social services affect different groups and focuses resources on people who need them the most and those who experience existing inequalities. It also ensures new projects and programs benefit the whole community.

I will just talk about one initiative here, gender-responsive budgeting in action. The focus area is on apprenticeships. Gender-responsive budgeting seeks to understand the effects that policies, programs or services have on Victorians from all walks of life. Of course women are less likely to undertake apprenticeships than men, and where they do, they can face challenges with sexism and structural barriers like inequitable care responsibilities and the like. So of course these sorts of structural inequalities limit the capacity of and the opportunity for women to pursue careers in trades. With that understanding, Apprenticeships Victoria is working with industry to break down those barriers to women completing their apprenticeships, and that includes continuing to support priority cohorts, including women, to address workplace harassment, mental health and wellbeing. With that in mind, we have seen increased participation of women in the apprenticeship system, including on our Big Build projects, where female apprentice representation is almost double the state average. So you can see that with those sorts of investments that target structural inequalities and barriers and by focusing on those areas and looking at them through a gender-responsive budgeting lens, we can see real change and improvements for women who want to access trades.

We made history with the passage of the Gender Equality Act 2020. This was a landmark step in breaking down discrimination and gender barriers in the workplace, and last year we embedded gender-responsive budgeting into legislation, amending the Financial Management Act 1994. These reforms allow the Treasurer to request gender impact assessments for any matter concerning the Financial Management Act, and they help decision-makers understand the gendered impacts of policy. Some of the other achievements that I can talk about in the few minutes that I have left in terms of a gender-responsive approach to budgeting include the following. We have established or continue to establish 20 women's health clinics across our state, with five clinics opening in 2024 and a further five to open in 2025. These clinics will deliver free comprehensive care to women and girls. We have also delivered six further sexual and reproductive health hubs to improve women's access to care, adding to the 14 hubs currently in operation in Victoria. I note the Minister for Health today made an

announcement that the sexual and reproductive health hubs will have access to ultrasound machines, so women who are seeking abortion care will not need to make additional appointments to have an ultrasound to confirm the gestation of the pregnancy. That is a fantastic announcement and saves much-needed time when the clock is ticking on those sorts of matters. We are also delivering an additional 10,800 laparoscopic surgeries to diagnose and treat conditions like endometriosis, and we are dispensing 25,000 free pads and tampons across nearly 70 public locations, making sure women and girls are not caught out and delivering cost-of-living relief. If you are out somewhere and you do not have a pad or tampon on you because you have got your period, obviously we are making them free and available in public places so you can get them when you need them and at no cost to you. That is a very welcome policy initiative.

We are also leading the nation in the prevention of violence against women with support for victim-survivors of family violence, the rollout of our women's safety package, non-fatal strangulation criminal offence law reform, delivery on the new Safe Workplaces for Women initiative in partnership with the Victorian Trades Hall Council and the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and also support to make sure that family violence victim-survivors have secure and safe housing with homes provided as part of the Big Housing Build. They are all incredibly welcome initiatives as part of our budget, and as I said, these sorts of initiatives and reforms come about because our government is a leader in this area. Not only did we think that gender-responsive budgeting was a good policy initiative, we made sure that we enshrined it in law, amending the various financial acts to make sure that it was embedded in the law so that we continue to make sure that any structural barriers and discrimination, whether intended or unintended, can be dealt with.

There is more to talk about, and I have just been told I have got to keep going for another few minutes. It is amazing. There is so much to talk about; I am glad I have got some more time. Also the rollout of the women's safety package continues to target root causes of violence towards women, and this, again, is a signature reform of our government, particularly the Royal Commission into Family Violence and all of the –

Lee Tarlamis: I move, by leave:

That Ms Terpstra have another up to 5 minutes.

Motion agreed to.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Wonderful. Thank you, because I get to talk about all these amazing gender-responsive budgeting initiatives that our government is doing. Again, $4.4 billion was invested in this year's budget to address gender equality in Victoria. So there are lots and lots of initiatives, including $1.4 billion to help with the cost of living in targeted support to assist those cost-of-living pressures which disproportionately impact women and a further $844 million for services that recognise and respond to the unique health needs of women and girls, ensuring care is inclusive and accessible. As I said before, President – I do not think you were in the room, but I will just repeat this for those who might be playing along at home now and watching us on the live stream – just recently I visited the virtual women's health clinic last week, which is based at EACH in Ringwood, and it was fantastic to see. I visited that facility with the Minister for Health. The virtual women's health clinic is now up and running. That means it can provide health assistance to women and girls right across Victoria. We were informed that within a few days of it being up and running about 400 calls had resulted in appointments, and they had many, many more calls that perhaps were just inquiries. Of those 400 calls, 70 per cent related to abortion services. It just goes to show that women and girls across Victoria require and are demanding better access to abortion services. It was a really proud moment to visit that service and to see the fantastic healthcare workers – the nurses and the dedicated nurse practitioners who are the backbone of that service and who will be able to reach so many more women and girls who need abortion care – and to hear about the amazing networks that have been created as a result of that service so they are able to connect women up with the services that they need without delay. That is a fantastic initiative.

Additionally, there is $1.2 billion to break down barriers Victorian women face to full economic participation and to help women to reskill and train for the jobs of tomorrow. Economic independence is critically important for women. Breaking down barriers to full workforce participation is incredibly important, because women obviously carry the bulk of caring responsibilities and that does limit their capacity and ability to fully participate in the workforce. Any of these sorts of measures that are going to help women to reskill and train for the jobs of tomorrow are very welcome. One example of that would be the free TAFE initiative. We have seen a lot of women take up the opportunity to train and retrain, perhaps when their children are grown or if their marriage has broken down and they find that they need to go back into the workforce. Free TAFE has been a fantastic initiative for that.

There is also $797 million to prevent family violence and to keep families safe, including making courts safer for women and children. There is nothing worse than having to sit in a court and face your abuser. I note that there have been a number of changes made to the way that courtrooms are situated so that women who need to go to court do not have to necessarily face their abuser, which is quite confronting. They are very welcome initiatives as well. Very importantly and significantly, almost right on cue –

Harriet Shing interjected.

Sonja TERPSTRA: 'Dierdre Chambers, what a coincidence!' Importantly – and I should not be flippant about this thing – we saw this week the introduction of the Statewide Treaty Bill 2025 in the lower house, and importantly there is $81 million to support self-determination and services to improve economic, social, health and wellbeing outcomes for First Nations women. That is a really nice way of talking about supporting our First Nations women as part of our budget and as we saw the treaty bill introduced into the lower house earlier this week.

Helping more women into housing: there is $81 million to tackle housing affordability and provide support for people experiencing homelessness, noting that women face greater hurdles to renting and buying and are more likely to access homelessness services than men. I might leave my remarks there. I just got the wind-up from the whip, so I am being very observant. I think we have landed exactly right on time for messages. I commend the budget to the house.

Lee TARLAMIS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:13): I move:

> That debate on this motion be adjourned until the next day of meeting.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned until next day of meeting.

Bills

Casino and Gambling Legislation Amendment Bill 2025

Introduction and first reading

The PRESIDENT (17:13): I have received the following message from the Legislative Assembly:

> The Legislative Assembly presents for the agreement of the Legislative Council 'A Bill for an Act to amend the **Casino Control Act 1991** and the **Gambling Regulation Act 2003** 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) (17:14): 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) (17:14): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

Opening paragraphs

In accordance with section 28 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*, (Charter), I make this Statement of Compatibility with respect to the Casino and Gambling Legislation Amendment Bill 2025 (Bill).

In my opinion, the Casino and Gambling Legislation Amendment Bill 2025, 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 Bill amends the *Casino Control Act 1991* (CCA) and the *Gambling Regulation Act 2003* (GRA).

The Bill amends the CCA to increase scrutiny of the casino operator, support the implementation of certain recommendations of the Royal Commission into the Casino Operator and Licence (Royal Commission) and make minor technical changes.

The Bill amends the GRA to increase the number of gaming machine entitlements a club venue operator may hold and make minor technical changes and consequential amendments.

Human rights issues

The human rights protected by the Charter that are relevant to the Bill are the rights to:

- privacy and reputation (section 13)
- be presumed innocent (section 25).

Section 13 – Privacy and reputation

Section 13 of the Charter provides that a person has the right not to have their privacy, family, home or correspondence unlawfully or arbitrarily interfered with.

Clause 18 of the Bill engages the right to privacy because new section 167(1)(da)(va) of the CCA provides the Governor in Council with authority to make regulations imposing requirements on the casino operator for checking player cards and verifying a person's identity before allowing a person to play a game. These processes will likely involve the collection of personal information.

However, the amendment does not limit the right to privacy in a way that is unlawful or arbitrary. The regulation-making power is lawful and supports existing provisions in the CCA, requiring the use of an identity-verified player card. Any potential interference with privacy is not arbitrary as it will apply only to patrons seeking to gamble at the casino. The new head of power will not expand the current carded play scheme but merely empowers the government to set processes for the checking of cards and identification. This represents a reasonable and proportionate response to concerns raised by the Royal Commission, which recommended that the casino operator should be able to identify all patrons gambling at the casino, in order to reduce the incidence of money laundering.

Section 25(1) – The right to be presumed innocent

Section 25(1) of the Charter provides that a person charged with a criminal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty. The introduction of a new offence that includes an exception, exemption, excuse or other defence may affect rights under section 25(1).

Clause 8 of the Bill inserts new subsection 28AA(1A) providing an offence where the associate of a casino operator (other than a corporate associate) fails to comply with the requirement to notify the regulator of a change in situation. The offence is accompanied by a penalty of 20 penalty units. While the amendment introduces an offence, its effect is essentially to amend the scope of the existing offence provision at section 28AA(1) of the CCA so it is limited to associates who do not fall under the new category of 'corporate associate'.

It is my view this amendment does not limit the right under section 25(1) of the Charter because it is a technical amendment and because it does not impose a burden of proof on the accused in a manner that would engage the right to be presumed innocent.

The Hon. Enver Erdogan
Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation
Minister for Corrections
Minister for Youth Justice

Second reading

Harriet SHING (Eastern Victoria – Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop, Minister for Housing and Building, Minister for Development Victoria and Precincts) (17:14): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

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

The Casino and Gambling Legislation Amendment Bill 2025 will amend the *Casino Control Act 1991* to deliver on government commitments to ensure the casino operator continues to run the Melbourne casino to the highest standard while reducing gambling harm. It will increase scrutiny of Crown Melbourne and support the modernisation of casino operations and implementation of Royal Commission reforms. The Bill will also amend the *Gambling Regulation Act 2003* to provide additional flexibility in the electronic gaming machine (EGM) entitlements market for Victorian club venues.

Casino suitability amendments to support Royal Commission reforms

Following the Royal Commission, the government established the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission (regulator) as a regulator focused solely on the gambling industry. This Bill enhances the powers of the regulator by enabling it to take to disciplinary action against the corporate associates of Crown Melbourne. It also increases the disciplinary action the regulator can take against Crown Melbourne for non-compliance with a direction specifically related to the Melbourne Transformation Plan (MTP).

Melbourne Transformation Plan

The MTP was developed by Crown Melbourne. It includes over 100 initiatives and outlines its program of improved compliance, operations, customer experience, gambling harm minimisation and investment.

To incentivise Crown Melbourne to continue its transformation and deter against loss of momentum and delays, the Bill ensures that non-compliance with a direction issued by the regulator that relates to the MTP, can be met with specific and strong disciplinary action.

Such action includes an additional fine not exceeding $1 million for every day of non-compliance with that direction.

Corporate associates

The Bill further strengthens the regulator's powers in relation to corporate associates of Crown Melbourne to address the material influence such corporate associates have over compliance behaviour.

Amendments to the Casino Control Act in 2022 expanded on the new definition of 'associate' to capture the broad range of individuals and organisations that could influence the casino operator. The Bill builds on this by inserting a new definition of 'corporate associate', which is a subset of an associate and captures associates that are companies within the meaning of the *Corporations Act 2001* (Cth).

Companies related to Crown Melbourne are likely to have influence over its operations and transformation and currently, the regulator is unable to compel information about Crown Melbourne from such companies without initiating Court proceedings. The Bill addresses this by inserting new grounds for disciplinary action that the regulator may take against a corporate associate. Such grounds include where a corporate associate has failed to comply with a duty to the regulator, with a notice issued by the regulator, and of a change in the situation of a corporate associate. A further ground includes where the regulator considers the corporate associate unsuitable to be associated with the business of the casino operator.

If a ground of disciplinary action is met, the Bill provides that action the regulator may take includes a letter of censure process, and fines of not more than $1 million for non-compliance with a direction regardless of whether the corporate associate has already been fined in relation to the same matter. Certain current penalties that apply to associates will not apply to corporate associates.

To continue to uphold the high standards expected of Crown Melbourne and its associates, the Bill further amends the Casino Control Act to provide that any disciplinary action taken by the regulator against a corporate associate can be considered in determining the suitability of that associate.

Modernising casino operations and supporting Royal Commission reforms

The Bill will make several amendments to the Casino Control Act to support the casino to modernise its operations and allow sufficient time for Royal Commission reforms to be properly implemented.

Phasing out cash at the casino to increase transparency and deter crime

As a cash-intensive business, a traditional casino is vulnerable to criminal activity, such as money laundering and terrorism financing. With these concerns in mind, the Royal Commission recommended phasing out the

use of cash at the casino, save for transactions under $1,000. Amendments to the Casino Control Act in 2022 inserted a requirement that the casino operator must, from 1 December 2025, limit the amount of cash it can accept from, or pay as winnings to, a patron. The limit is $1,000 per 24 hours.

The Bill extends the deadline for the daily cash acceptance and payment of winnings limits, from 1 December 2025 to 1 December 2027. The extra time will enable the casino operator to develop, test and roll out cashless technology and transition its staff and customers. Consequential amendments will be made to other provisions that relate to that date.

The Bill introduces new provisions so a patron will be able link their digital wallet at the casino to a personal bank account in their own name. This means they can top up electronically, without ever bringing cash into the casino. This expanded approach to cashless gaming will transform the casino environment, removing anonymous transactions and deterring criminal activity.

Safeguards around cashless gaming will ensure patrons have an opportunity to reflect on their spending when adding money to the digital wallet. Under the Bill, a debit card may be used to top up the account, but only if that transaction is processed by a member of staff or via an app or website. The Bill also inserts a regulation-making power so that future regulations can be made to restrict or prohibit automatic top-ups to cashless gaming accounts. Other potential future regulations – such as requiring the casino operator to allow patrons to set a transfer limit on their account – are already within regulation-making powers.

The Bill also makes a technical change to the period to which the daily cash limits apply. Rather than a rolling 24-hour period, the Bill aligns daily limits to a calendar day to make it easier for patrons to follow their cash spend and simplify how the casino puts this into practice.

The Bill also makes technical amendments to the Casino Control Act to clarify the difference between everyday cashless gaming accounts and the types of accounts used by high rollers.

Phasing in account-based play on all games at the casino

The Royal Commission recommended making the use of a player card mandatory for all gambling at the casino. The Casino Control Act was amended in 2022 to make carded play mandatory and establish a framework for phasing in the requirement at different times for different game types. A player card has been required to play any EGM at the casino since December 2023, and it is intended that mandatory carded play will be declared to apply to electronic table games in December 2025.

More time is needed for Crown Melbourne to adapt its business model to the impacts of carded play on traditional table games. The Bill will extend the implementation deadline for the use of player cards on this remaining undeclared game type to 1 December 2027.

Once carded play is implemented at traditional table games in 2027, the casino operator will be penalised if a player card was not used at a table game because of wrongdoing or recklessness on the part of the casino. The Bill also includes regulation-making powers to support carded play requirements.

Clarifying collection of player activity statements

Player activity statements at the casino provide information on electronic gaming and help players keep track of time and money spent. The Bill will specify that a player activity statement may be collected anywhere in the casino complex. This change will not materially impact a player's ability to access their gambling records.

Club EGM entitlements limit

The Bill will also amend the *Gambling Regulation Act 2003* to increase the number of gaming machine entitlements that can be held by a club venue operator. The club cap will be increased from 840 to 1260 entitlements.

The new cap will continue to support balanced ownership across the industry, as a single operator will not be able to hold more than about 10 per cent of club entitlements.

However, this increase will create additional flexibility in the entitlements market. It will provide more options for clubs seeking to reduce or exit the pokies business by making it easier to find a buyer for their entitlements.

Statute law revision

Finally, the Bill removes obsolete references to bodies corporate in the Gambling Regulation Act, updating the body corporate definition to bring it into line with the Corporations Act.

I commend the Bill to the house.

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:14): I move:

That debate be adjourned for one week.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for one week.

Domestic Animals Amendment (Rehoming Cats and Dogs and Other Matters) Bill 2025

Introduction and first reading

The PRESIDENT (17:15): I have received the following message from the Legislative Assembly:

> The Legislative Assembly presents for the agreement of the Legislative Council 'A Bill for an Act to amend the **Domestic Animals Act 1994** in relation to the rehoming of dogs and cats 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) (17:15): 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) (17:15): I lay on the table a statement of compatibility with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006:

> **Opening paragraphs**
>
> 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 Domestic Animal Amendment (Rehoming Cats and Dogs and Other Matters) 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**
>
> The main purposes of the Bill are to amend the *Domestic Animal Act 1994* to repeal the foster care registration scheme under Part 5B of that Act and provide for an authorisation scheme for pet rehoming organisations. The new scheme will provide for councils to be informed about animals in foster care in their municipal districts and provide for the collection of information about outcomes of efforts to rehome dogs and cats by the authorised pet rehoming organisations.
>
> It also includes:
>
> - an amendment to section 74(2) of the *Domestic Animal Act 1994* to clarify that authorised officers have the power to enter any part of a premises (including a backyard), excluding a building that is occupied as a residential home, and any vehicle that is not used as a residence (e.g. campervan or caravan) in order to determine compliance with the Act, regulations, licences and notices to comply.
> - an amendment to ensure there is clear authority for regulations to prescribe a class of dog for which reduced registration fees are payable.
>
> **Human Rights Issues**
>
> Human rights protected by the Charter that are relevant to the Bill
>
> The right to privacy (section 13 of the Charter), property rights (section 20 of the Charter) and the right to a fair hearing (section 24 of the Charter) may be relevant to the Bill.
>
> In practice, it is likely that the Bill's provisions relating to the new pet rehoming authorisation scheme will mostly regulate entities rather than natural persons. To be able to apply for authorisation under the new scheme an applicant must provide the applicant's ABN and confirmation of Charity registration with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission. The applicant may be an incorporated entity, an unincorporated entity or a natural person. Corporate entities are not considered a 'person' under the Charter and as such, do not engage human rights specified in the Charter.

For the following reasons, I am satisfied that the Bill is compatible with the Charter and, if any rights are limited, those limitations are reasonably and demonstrably justified having regard to the factors in section 7(2) of the Charter.

Right to privacy (section 13 of the Charter)

Section 13(a) of the Charter provides that a person has the right not have their privacy or home unlawfully or arbitrarily interfered with.

Part 4 of the Bill inserts a new requirement for the Secretary to maintain an information register (pet rehoming register) which will contain information pertaining to a pet rehoming organisation including the names and contact details of the person or persons who are or will be responsible for administering that organisation. Persons whose information must be included in the register are those who have voluntarily chosen to participate in the scheme.

New section 68ZJ in clause 39 of the Bill will enable certain persons to inspect, in accordance with any regulations, information on the pet rehoming register. These persons include –

- the Secretary or a person employed in the Department, acting in the course of the Secretary or person's duties under the *Domestic Animal Act 1994*;
- a Council or person engaged or employed by the Council acting in the course of the Council or person' duties under the *Domestic Animal Act 1994*;
- a departmental authorised officer or a Council authorised officer acting in the course of the officers duties under the *Domestic Animal Act 1994*;
- a person responsible for administering an authorised pet rehoming organisation for the purpose of providing information regarding the organisation as required under the *Domestic Animal Act 1994* or regulations;
- an animal shelter or Council pound for the purpose of providing information in accordance with the *Domestic Animal Act 1994*, regulations or a business code of practice.

Access to the information is to either enable those persons to undertake their duties or, in the case of non-governmental employees, to access and update their own data. As such access to the information on the pet rehoming register is limited to legitimate purposes.

New section 68ZK provides that the general inspector, as identified under section 18(1)(b)(ii) under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986*, may request in writing that the Secretary provide the general inspector with information from the pet rehoming register that relates to the fate and location of an animal under the management and direction of an authorised pet rehoming organisation. Information disclosed under this new section does not include personal information of natural persons and therefore does not limit the right to privacy.

Under clause 42, members of the public will have access to source numbers of pet rehoming organisations for the purpose of purchasing or obtaining a cat or dog. The source number assists members of the public to ensure that animals they purchase or obtain are from a valid source.

The right to privacy may also be engaged by amendments to section 74 of the *Domestic Animal Act 1994*, which enables authorised officers to access any premises other than a building occupied as a home or any vehicle that is not used as a place of residence. The purpose of this access is to enforce compliance with the *Domestic Animal Act 1994*, regulations and other instruments issued under that Act. Excluding buildings occupied as a home and vehicles used as a place of residence from the scope of the power, reduces any impact on the right to privacy.

The collection and disclosure of information for the purposes of the pet rehoming register is neither unlawful nor arbitrary. It is limited to clearly defined circumstances and for a legitimate purpose. Similarly, the powers conferred on authorised officers to access premises is clearly defined and is therefore neither unlawful nor arbitrary. Therefore, in my opinion the right to privacy is not limited.

Property rights (section 20 of the Charter)

Section 20 of the Charter provides that a person must not be deprived of their property other than in accordance with law. For the purposes of section 20, property includes all real property interests recognised under the general 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 property rights to be limited, any interference must constitute a deprivation of property. International jurisprudence indicates that a deprivation of property will extend to include a substantial restriction on a person's use or enjoyment of their property.

Clause 45 of the Bill amends section 74(2) of the *Domestic Animal Act 1994* to clarify that an authorised officer may enter any premises other than a building occupied as a home, or any vehicle that is not used as a place of residence, for the purpose of enforcing compliance with the Act, regulations and other instruments issued under that Act. It is important that authorised officers have clear powers to access premises to enable timely action to be taken under the *Domestic Animal Act 1994*, for example, to seize animals that may pose a threat to public safety.

While this may restrict a person's use or enjoyment of their property, it is confined to circumstances clearly set out in legislation and for a legitimate purpose. The amendment does not remove the need for an authorised officer to obtain a warrant before entering into a person's private home.

Therefore, in my opinion the amendment does not limit property rights under section 20 of the Charter.

Right to a fair hearing (section 24 of the Charter)

Section 24(1) of the Charter relevantly provides that a party to a civil proceeding has the right to have the proceeding decided by a competent, independent and impartial court or tribunal after a fair and public hearing. The concept of a 'civil proceeding' is not limited to judicial decision makers but may encompass the decision-making procedures of many types of tribunals, boards and other administrative decision-makers with the power to determine private rights and interests. This right may be engaged by new section 68KF, inserted by clause 7 of the Bill, in relation to revocation of pet rehoming organisation authorisation. In relation to decisions to issue or renew a licence, unless a decision determines existing rights, it is understood the fair hearing right is unlikely to apply. Accordingly, the Secretary's power to revoke an authorisation – which is similar to a licence – in clause 7, revokes an existing interest and therefore could engage the right to fair hearing. In any case, the Bill applies various procedural fairness safeguards to a decision to revoke an authorisation. New section 68KF(2) requires the Secretary to give notice to the holder of an authorisation and to consider any response made by the holder of authorisation before making a decision to revoke an authorisation. New section 68KF(3) requires the Secretary to give notice of a decision to revoke, including reasons for the decision. On this basis, the right to a fair hearing may be engaged but is not limited by the Bill.

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) (17:15): I move:

That the bill be now read a second time.

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

I am pleased to rise to speak on the Domestic Animals Amendment (Rehoming Cats and Dogs and Other Matters) Bill 2025.

The Victorian Government recognises the valuable services provided by Victoria's pet rehoming sector.

We are committed to supporting the sector and its people, most of whom volunteer their time and dedication to take in, rehabilitate and find new homes for cats and dogs in Victoria. This Bill has its origins in the Taskforce for Rehoming Pets, which our government established to investigate and recommend ways the government could improve and further support the rehoming of dogs and cats in Victoria.

The Bill demonstrates the government's commitment to implementing all 17 recommendations the Taskforce made in its final report.

This Bill formally recognises, for the first time in our state, the significant contribution that Victoria's pet rehoming organisations make in finding homes for cats and dogs.

The Bill delivers on five recommendations of the report from the Taskforce on Rehoming Pets.

This includes recommendations to implement a regulatory framework which creates a voluntary authorisation scheme for pet rehoming organisations. This scheme would achieve two key improvements:

- First, organisations authorised with the scheme can access specific benefits to reduce financial burdens and enhance rehoming opportunities for animals under their management.
- Second, organisations authorised with the scheme must meet certain requirements including the reporting of animal fate data, harmonising requirements amongst all pet rehoming services including shelters and pounds.

A growing number of cats and dogs in Victoria need new homes, and it is vital that local and state government have a better understanding of where these animals are, and how they're being rehomed.

Extensive consultations with the pet rehoming sector over the past 4 years has informed the Bill and the regulatory framework it proposes.

A Rehoming Pets Working Group was established, comprising representatives from community pet rehoming organisations, pounds, shelters and local government, who have provided their advice and input.

Surveys and workshops with pet rehoming organisations have also informed these important reforms.

I take this opportunity to thank members of the Rehoming Pets Working Group and all those who have contributed their advice and input to date.

Overview of the Domestic Animals Amendment (Rehoming Cats and Dogs and Other Matters) Bill 2025

Preliminary matters

The Bill provides for delayed commencement of 10 April 2027, but some Parts can be proclaimed earlier than 10 April 2027 where required.

The proposed commencement period is intended to support the development of subordinate instruments and to enable Agriculture Victoria, local governments, pet rehoming organisations, and shelters and pounds to transition to the new arrangements.

This Bill will establish the Pet Rehoming Authorisation Scheme.

This scheme will enable charitable pet rehoming organisations to apply to the Secretary of my department to be authorised.

Authorisation will be granted subject to certain conditions imposed by the Secretary and/or prescribed in regulations and remain in place for no more than 3 years, at which time a pet rehoming organisation could apply to renew its authorisation.

The Authorisation Scheme will be voluntary for pet rehoming organisations, with benefits offered to incentivise their participation.

If a group chooses not to become an authorised pet rehoming organisation, they will still be able to operate, but they could not access these benefits, which I'll speak about shortly.

The Bill provides for the State Government to undertake the administrative, regulatory and compliance functions for the Pet Rehoming Organisation Authorisation scheme.

Subject to the Bill passing, regulations will set out additional requirements that authorised pet rehoming organisations must meet.

These requirements will include reporting on the location of animals under the care of an authorised pet rehoming organisation and may include mandatory pre-adoption activities such as desexing and vaccination, or the reporting of animal fate data to government.

Setting these requirements will improve animal welfare outcomes for cats and dogs in the rehoming sector and enable pet rehoming organisations to demonstrate their high standards of animal management and care.

The Bill proposes to repeal the current voluntary Foster Care Registration Scheme from the *Domestic Animals Act 1994*.

There has been very low take up of the Foster Care Registration Scheme since its introduction as part of the puppy farm and pet shop reforms we made in 2017. Acknowledging this, and the sector-identified need to recognise organisations rehoming cats and dogs, rather than individual foster carers, the Bill will remove the Foster Care Scheme.

Instead, the Pet Rehoming Authorisation Scheme will centralise animal foster care activities under authorised and regulated rehoming organisations; whether they are an authorised pet rehoming organisation, or an animal shelter or pound.

Foster carers will continue their valuable role in the cat and dog rehoming and care process, but the proposed changes will alleviate regulatory and administrative burden for volunteer foster carers and recognise the critical role of pet rehoming organisations.

The Bill will require the Secretary to keep and maintain a Pet Rehoming Information Register to record the granting, renewal or cancellation of the authorisation of pet rehoming organisations.

This Information Register will support notification requirements from pet rehoming organisations to state government and local government.

The Information Register will also support the reporting requirements of pet rehoming organisations, pounds and shelters to state government on the fate of animals in their care.

A central repository for all reporting information requirements of the Pet Rehoming Authorisation Scheme will eliminate administrative complexity and burden for authorised organisations, most of which are led and operated by volunteers.

The Bill proposes a range of amendments to the *Domestic Animals Act 1994* to support the rehoming activities of organisations that participate in the Pet Rehoming Authorisation Scheme.

These amendments include enabling authorised pet rehoming organisations to hold adoption days to rehome cats and dogs at pounds, animal shelters and at pet shops.

The Bill will enable pet rehoming organisations to hold adoption days in pet shops that are prescribed as domestic animal businesses under the *Domestic Animals Act 1994*.

This will provide similar rehoming opportunities to pet rehoming organisations as are currently available to pounds and shelters.

Adoption days at pet shops will provide a wider exposure to animals available for adoption by authorised pet rehoming organisations, and support the rehoming of more animals.

Pet rehoming organisations will be able to promote their activities on these adoption days, and to educate the community about the rehoming work they do.

This is not a relaxation of Government policy in relation to the sale of dogs and cats at pet shops. Strict conditions will apply to adoption days held by pet rehoming organisations at pet shops.

Current minimum age requirements for the sale of cats and dogs at these events will remain unchanged, at 6 months for dogs and 8 weeks for cats.

Consistent with current offences set out in the *Domestic Animals Act 1994*, penalties will apply to any authorised pet rehoming organisation that sells or gives away a dog or cat at a pet shop under these ages.

Notification and reporting requirements are proposed before an adoption day and to confirm 'sales' after an event, which aim to support compliance and monitoring by the state government and local councils.

Authorised officers will have powers to shut down adoption days if they reasonably believe the welfare of animals is at risk.

The Bill also provides for benefits which are aimed at reducing the financial and administrative costs for scheme participants. The scheme allows for participants to access an exemption from registering foster cats and dogs with their local council for the first 12 months an animal is held in foster care, while a permanent home is being sought.

The *Domestic Animals Act 1994* requires the owner of a cat or dog to register an animal with their local council if the animal is over 3 months of age.

Our consultation with pet rehoming organisations highlighted that registering cats and dogs in their temporary care with their local council can be a financial and administrative burden.

Many animals are coming into their care often for only short periods of time, which means that council registration can be cost prohibitive.

The exemption from registering an animal in their care with the local council for the first 12 months will alleviate cost and administration pressures for authorised pet rehoming organisations.

An authorised pet rehoming organisations will be issued with a 3-year, **no-cost source number** via the Pet Exchange Register to match the period the authorisation remains in place. This will remove the need for scheme participants to renew and pay for a source number every year, as is currently the case.

The Bill also provides a head of power to prescribe the types of organisations that local councils can enter into agreements with to undertake animal management activities such as giving animals to pet rehoming organisations to facilitate and permit permanent rehoming.

These agreements, known as 84Y agreements, are currently available to local councils.

This change will not impact the ability of local councils to enter into agreements with other rehoming partners such as animal shelters and veterinary clinics.

The Bill also provides for an authorised pet rehoming organisation to have limited access to inspect the Victorian Declared Dog Register, to review the declared or menacing status of a dog surrendered to them.

Providing limited access to the Declared Dog Register is necessary, as it is intended that pet rehoming organisations be prohibited from rehoming dogs declared on the Register, consistent with requirements for pounds and shelters which are prohibited from rehoming aggressive or antisocial animals.

To appropriately manage privacy and information security, an authorised pet rehoming organisation will not have access to all information on the Declared Dog Register, or be able to amend information on the Register, such as the identifying information of a dog owner.

An authorised pet rehoming organisation will only have access to the Declared Dog Register to determine the status of a dog.

Organisations that choose not to participate in the Pet Rehoming Authorisation Scheme will not be able to access these benefits.

Those organisations will still need to meet the requirements of the *Domestic Animals Act 1994* and local laws, including registering animals in their care.

For non-authorised pet rehoming organisations, failure to meet these requirements could result in penalties or offences under the relevant legislation.

Definitions

The Bill replaces the definition of *community foster care network* with pet rehoming organisation.

The term pet rehoming organisation more accurately describes the activity of the sector, which is made up of organisations that label themselves as community foster Care networks, rescue groups, or pet adoption groups.

These groups conduct the same core activity; that is, arranging temporary housing for cats and dogs in private residential premises, and seeking permanent homes for these animals.

The term pet rehoming organisation is more inclusive than community foster care network, and reflects the entire sector and its activity.

Minor consequential amendments to three other sections of the *Domestic Animals Act 1994* will also be made to support this change.

Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission registration

The Bill sets out that a pet rehoming organisation may apply to the Secretary for authorisation on the condition the organisation is registered under Part 2-1 of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012 (Commonwealth).

The key principles set out in the Victorian Permissions Framework were considered during the development of the Pet Rehoming Authorisation Scheme. The Permissions Framework was also applied throughout the development of the draft Bill.

The Bill includes two additional amendments to the *Domestic Animals Act 1994* to clarify two minor issues in relation to Powers of Entry and Registration Fees.

Powers of entry

The proposed Bill amendment will clarify that authorised officers may enter whole or part of any premises, excluding a building that is occupied as a residential home.

Specifically, this amendment will clarify that authorised offices can enter a residential backyard.

Currently, section 74(2) of the Domestic Animals Act sets out the arrangements for entry by authorised organisations exercising a power under sections 72(1), (1A) or (1B) – to determine whether the Act and its regulations as well as licences and notice to comply are being complied with.

The Domestic Animals Act prescribes that authorised officers may at any reasonable time and by any reasonable means, and with any assistance which an authorised officer require entry to any premises or part of a premises not occupied as a place of residence or any vehicle; or search the whole or any part of any premises or any vehicle.

The phrase 'premises not occupied as a place of residence' as described has given rise to legislative uncertainty as to whether an authorised office can enter a residential backyard. This change will remove any legislative uncertainty and clarify this provision to align with the original intention of the section.

Authorised officers currently require a warrant to enter the inside of a home. There is no intention to change this requirement.

Reduced Registration Fees

Regulation 13 in the Domestic Animal Regulations 2015 is currently relied on to allow microchipped hounds registered with the Game Management Authority to qualify for a reduced registration fee with councils.

To ensure there is clear authority for the regulations to provide for these reduced registration fees, the Bill will amend the Schedule in the Domestic Animals to clarify that regulations can prescribe a class of dog that is entitled to a reduced registration fee. This amendment will also remove current inconsistencies and ambiguity within the DA Act, specifically within the Schedule, about whether all animals that are microchipped (other than dangerous, menacing or restricted breed dogs) are entitled to a reduced registration fee with councils. This is a legacy issue. Microchipping was once a criteria that made an animal eligible for a reduced registration fee. However, microchipping has been compulsory for 20 years. All animals should now be microchipped. It is now inappropriate for microchipping to be legislated as a criteria for a reduced registration fee.

Other currently listed criteria for dogs that are eligible for a reduced registration fee would not change.

I commend the Bill to the house.

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

That debate be adjourned for one week.

Motion agreed to and debate adjourned for one week.

Adjournment

Lizzie BLANDTHORN (Western Metropolitan – Minister for Children, Minister for Disability) (17:16): I move:

That the house do now adjourn.

Education system

Jacinta ERMACORA (Western Victoria) (17:16): (1957) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Education. The Allan Labor government is rolling out mandatory phonics education across the state. The action I seek is for the minister to provide an update on what resources the government is providing to help reduce teacher workload, ease costs for schools and help every Victorian student build strong foundational skills for a lifelong love of learning.

Timber industry

Renee HEATH (Eastern Victoria) (17:16): (1958) My adjournment matter is to the Premier. Victoria's native timber industry was callously shut down seven years earlier than planned. It was an ideological decision that devastated communities, crippled local sawmills and left many timber workers uncompensated while leaving us to depend on inferior imported timber. Since the closure hardwood imports into Victoria have absolutely surged. We now rely on many countries, like Brazil, Indonesia and Malaysia. Eighty-six per cent of these countries have significantly worse environmental standards than Australia. These imports are also often linked to criminal networks. They also carry a massive carbon footprint as they are shipped thousands and thousands of kilometres. We are enriching foreign interests while impoverishing our own, all the while increasing the total pollution. In 2023 it was revealed that the Victorian government was importing up to 40 truckloads of logs from Tasmania per week, and my constituents tell me this is continuing. Former Premier Daniel Andrews repeatedly claimed material shortages were the biggest driver of Victoria's housing crisis. In response the Labor government decided to remove a critical part of the supply chain – our own locally sourced, sustainable timber. This government shut down its own world-leading sustainable forestry industry. Now, with already stretched global demands set to outstrip by 2050, Victoria is faced with more scarcity, rising costs and greater environmental harms. Contrast this with France, which rebuilt the Notre Dame using native timbers from forests sustainably managed for centuries. France understands that foreign capability and environmental stewardship can work together, but this Allan Labor government does not. The action that I seek is for the Premier to explain when the timber workers who lost their contracts with the government – unexpectedly cut short by seven years – will receive the reimbursement they were promised years ago.

Virtual women's health clinic

Sonja TERPSTRA (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:19): (1959) My adjournment matter this evening is directed to the Minister for Health, and the action I seek is for the minister to provide an update to the house on how Victorian women and girls are benefiting from the virtual women's health clinic, particularly in accessing abortion care. The Allan Labor government's virtual women's health clinic is now open to Victorian women and girls of any age, providing free and expert advice on a wide range of health needs, including endometriosis and pelvic pain, menstrual health, cervical screening, menopause care, breast health and sexual and reproductive health such as contraception and abortion. The clinic is led by specialist nurses and can be accessed via telehealth, either online or by phone. This makes it easier for women across the state, especially in regional and remote communities, to receive timely care without the barrier of distance. Traditionally services such as contraception and abortion have been harder to access outside metropolitan areas, and this initiative ensures that geography is no longer a barrier to essential care. Operated in partnership with Each, the clinic delivers initial assessments and treatment and connects patients with GPs and other health professionals close to home. Referrals can also be made to community services supporting mental health, alcohol and drug treatment and family violence support. This service complements the mobile women's health clinic, which continues to travel across Victoria operated by BreastScreen Victoria, with a strong focus on Aboriginal women and those in regional communities. Both the mobile and the virtual clinics are part of the government's landmark $153 million women's health package, transforming the way women's health care is delivered across our state.

Sex workers

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO (Northern Metropolitan) (17:20): (1960) My adjournment matter this evening is for the Attorney-General. Sex worker advocates, including Vixen, have reported that although Commonwealth Operation Inglenook has formally ended, border force raids on massage parlours and brothels are continuing here in Victoria. These raids overwhelmingly target Asian migrant women. These raids reinforce stigma and discrimination against Asian sex workers that assumes these women have no autonomy over their choice to participate in sex work. Our office has heard harrowing accounts of sex workers being detained while naked, unable to put on clothes or being questioned by border force for hours without access to a lawyer or interpreter and of visas being cancelled on the spot. One trans woman was even placed in a male detention facility, where she was sexually assaulted.

This is racialised targeting. It is traumatising workers, driving them underground and directly undermining the purpose of Victoria's decriminalisation reforms, which were designed to protect dignity, safety and equality. These practices have left sex workers terrified, with some suffering PTSD and others relocating to regional areas out of fear. Advocates warn that this climate of fear isolates migrant workers and makes them more vulnerable to exploitation, not less. These ongoing raids, when conducted with the cooperation of Victoria Police, raise serious questions about whether our Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities is being upheld. The action I seek from the Attorney-General is that she investigate whether Victoria Police have assisted or cooperated with border force in these raids and explain to me how the government assesses any such cooperation for compliance with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities.

North-Eastern Metropolitan Region housing

Richard WELCH (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:22): (1961) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Planning. This week a large number of activity centres had their precinct plan drafts presented and put out for consultation. There was obviously a lot of shock and surprise in that we had many, many sites with high-rises of 16 storeys being imposed on their communities. However, there was an anomaly. In my community in Blackburn we were promised we would go into consultation on this in June. It got pushed back to October. It turns out that, strangely and mysteriously, out of all these, the Blackburn draft precinct plan was held back. We have been running a campaign to save Blackburn

over the last few months. It might be heartening to think that perhaps we have caused pause for thought. But probably more realistically it is cause for worry, because we have no information and we do not know if the consultation is now going ahead without even seeing the precinct plan – the plan that shows us how many high-rises there are going to be and how tall they are going to be and what the scale of change is going to be in our community. The community is anxious to know. I have raised this with you before – about providing us information wholly and completely and stopping presenting information in little salami slices that prevent people scrutinising the whole. When we go to consultation my intention is that this community will be fully informed of all the implications so they can make an informed judgement about the suitability of this plan for their community. But I forewarn you – and I think you know – we do not want 10-, 12-, 16- or 20-storey towers in Blackburn. So the action I seek, Minister, is to now (a) without further delay release the precinct plan so the community can scrutinise it and (b) please give the community clarity as to when you are actually going to consult. I also note that in Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearings there was an assurance that all of these precinct plans would be approved by June next year. You are now running out of time for that process. Either you are going to meet that commitment or you are going to break it. If you do not provide Blackburn with their precinct plan, you are at risk of breaching that commitment.

St Josephine Bakhita Catholic Primary School

Michael GALEA (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:25): (1962) My adjournment is for the Deputy Premier and Minister for Education. The action that I am seeking is for the minister to provide me with an update on the works to build a new STEM building at St Josephine Bakhita Catholic Primary School in Clyde North. This terrific local primary school, which in fact just opened this year, providing more educational opportunities for the growing Clyde North community, has celebrated the sod turning of the new works of these new buildings, which is thanks in part to funding from the Allan Labor government. With $6 million towards the project funded by the Jacinta Allan Labor government, this is going to ensure that local students have the modern facilities that they need to thrive and to succeed both now and into the future. The action that I am seeking is how the government is supporting schools such as St Josephine Bakhita in Clyde North.

Victoria Police

Aiv PUGLIELLI (North-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:26): (1963) My adjournment matter today is to the Minister for Police. The action that I seek is for you to make inquiries as to why Victorian police officers are still wearing thin blue line badges in our state. The thin blue line badge, as has been widely documented, is a symbol of violence. It is a symbol of racism, and it is a symbol of white supremacy. Minister, last year you confirmed, as I have raised this previously, that Victoria Police officers are not authorised to wear patches referencing the thin blue line on their uniforms and that it was the responsibility, in terms of enforcement, of Victoria Police supervisors to enforce this. Last month Victoria Police again confirmed to the ABC that the patch was not approved, yet following recent anti-immigration protests, reports have been raised with me again of officers apparently wearing the patch while neo-Nazis demonstrated behind them. Earlier this year we saw photos of an officer wearing the same symbol at a rally in Footscray for Abdifatah Ahmed, an African Australian man shot dead by police. We saw it again on the uniforms of security contractors hired by the City of Melbourne to crack down on begging. I will note for the record the use of the symbol by police officers is not limited to this state. We have seen it in New South Wales and Queensland and recently in the Northern Territory. Minister, the connotations of the thin blue line symbol are not ambiguous. The potential of this hinting at a broader cultural issue among police officers where far-right attitudes, racialised policing and the use of violence as a first response are at risk of being more widespread is incredibly dangerous. How can migrants or First Nations people feel safe on our streets while this symbol is being openly displayed? The ban on these patches is evidently not being properly enforced at this stage, and more needs to be done to rid it from the force entirely.

Northern Metropolitan Region bus infrastructure

Evan MULHOLLAND (Northern Metropolitan) (17:28): (1964) My adjournment is to the Minister for Public and Active Transport, and it concerns the appalling conditions of bus shelters for residents in Greenvale, Roxburgh Park and Meadow Heights. The action I seek is for the minister to urgently investigate what can be done to improve the dire, almost Third World state of the road along Somerton Road in terms of the bus shelters and more broadly in the area. The bus stops along Somerton Road are appalling. Residents are forced to cross in dangerous places and walk through mud and gravel just to get to the bus stop. My constituents regularly raise with me the lack of protection from weather and the need to stand in the mud or gravel or in the weeds while waiting for a bus. It is unacceptable, and it is symbolic of Labor's failure and refusal to even upgrade the most basic of infrastructure in the northern suburbs.

I regularly get complaints, particularly about the corner of Somerton Road and Ravenhill Boulevard in Roxburgh Park. You literally cannot access it without walking onto a busy Somerton Road if you want to get to the bus stop. If you do not want to walk directly onto busy Somerton Road, you have to walk through mud and you have to walk through slippery grass. So if you are an elderly resident, and I have spoken to many in Roxburgh Park, you literally cannot get to the bus stop. That is not good enough. You would never see a situation like that in Brunswick or Richmond or Northcote, but you do see it in places like Roxburgh Park because of the neglect that this government has shown. These bus stops are not accessible for disabled people, for our elderly, leaving vulnerable local residents without any access to public transport and contributing to isolation and a reduced sense of community.

I want to particularly shout out to my friend Cr Sam Misho, who has also been advocating to the state government through his role on council. Residents of the north and my constituents deserve safe access to accessible bus shelters and bus access. So I repeat my action to the minister: to urgently investigate what can be done to improve safety at these bus stops on Somerton Road.

Ravenhall Correctional Centre

David LIMBRICK (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:31): (1965) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Corrections. I was recently contacted by a member of the public whose partner is incarcerated in the Ravenhall Correctional Centre. Before I proceed let me acknowledge that Ravenhall is a private facility and this matter is not directly under government control. However, she mentioned that, due to short-staffing and perhaps structural issues to do with staff remuneration, prisoners are routinely locked down on weekends due to no fault of their own. This may mean that they do not get any visitors or do not receive daily medication on time. My request for action is for the minister to ask the operators of Ravenhall for an explanation and see if this issue can be resolved.

Midland Highway

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL (Northern Victoria) (17:31): (1966) My adjournment this evening is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and the action I seek is for the Midland Highway between Benalla and Mansfield to be repaired. My constituent Darren recently contacted me about the appalling condition of the Midland Highway between Benalla and Dobson Road for approximately 8 kilometres heading towards Mansfield. Darren has counted at least 40 potholes in this section of road, with most measuring 400 millimetres and 100 millimetres deep. Darren says he has witnessed vehicles swerving to miss these potholes, some even crossing onto the wrong side of the road to do so. This makes for very dangerous conditions for drivers. Many use this road to travel to Mansfield. Darren has reported to me that he knows of a number of motorcycles and other vehicles damaged by these potholes. Minister, the action I seek is for the Midland Highway between Benalla and Mansfield to be repaired.

Crime and corruption

Ann-Marie HERMANS (South-Eastern Metropolitan) (17:32): (1967) My adjournment is to the Premier, and the action I seek is for the Premier to immediately establish a royal commission into the infiltration of organised crime and corruption within Victoria's infrastructure sector, including a focus

on organised retail crime, and to monitor and address serious concerns about illegal and unregulated activity in our marine environment and, with this in mind, to commit to expanding the powers and resourcing of the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission. The revelations published today in the *Australian Financial Review* are damning. Whistleblower testimony and leaked documents expose what appears to be endemic corruption in the Victorian government's flagship $100 billion Big Build program. The former IBAC Commissioner Robert Redlich KC described the scale of misconduct as very alarming and warned that it is beyond the capacity of current oversight bodies to address. We are talking about extortion, blackmail and kickbacks said to be linked to CFMEU operatives and criminal syndicates, public money allegedly used for private home renovations of project managers, Indigenous and small subcontractors being excluded or pressured for bribes and a culture of silence where complaints to IBAC, departments and even ministers are simply ignored.

When the opposition moved to establish a select committee this year, the Labor government blocked it. They have refused to act, and the public is paying the price. But these problems are not confined to construction; retail crime is out of control. According to the Australian Retailers Association violent retail crime is up 52 per cent in Victoria. Store theft offences exceeded 38,000 in 2024 and a staggering one in four retail incidents involve violence or intimidation. This is not random. It is organised crime operating in full view, emboldened by inaction and weak enforcement, and now we are seeing signs of the same regulatory failure in another critical area, our waterways. In Port Phillip Bay there is an increased concern from recreational fishers, local communities and environmental stakeholders about illegal fishing activity, overharvesting and black market distribution. Yet what do we see – fewer fisheries officers, inconsistent patrols and very little enforcement presence during peak periods of risk. Once again an area vulnerable to organised and illicit activity is left without adequate oversight. This opens the door to exploitation of our marine resources, damage to ecosystems and further expansion of underground markets, often tied to other criminal operations.

We need decisive action: a royal commission with full powers of inquiry, expanded IBAC jurisdiction and resourcing and proper enforcement in Port Phillip Bay to protect our environment and our marine resources. Victorians deserve to feel safe in their jobs, in their communities and on the waters.

Michael Galea: On a point of order, President, from my count that was at least four action items. I could not quite tell if Mrs Hermans was asking for a royal commission, for expanded IBAC powers or for an intervention in fisheries or retail crime. There were a wide array of things, and I do not believe that is an appropriate use of the adjournment debate. The adjournment debate is to raise a single action item, and I have no idea what single action Mrs Hermans is seeking.

The PRESIDENT: Mrs Hermans, you do not have to read it all again, but could you repeat the action item and who you would like it directed to?

Ann-Marie HERMANS: The action item is to the Premier to establish a royal commission into the infiltration of organised crime and corruption within Victoria in both the infrastructure sector, looking also at retail crime and with the serious concerns about the marine environment.

The PRESIDENT: Maybe just put it into everything.

Learner driver safety

Georgie PURCELL (Northern Victoria) (17:36): (1968) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and the action that I seek is for driving instructors in Victoria to have mandatory cameras and GPS trackers installed in their cars. Picture this: you are a shy and quiet 17-year-old going for your first ever paid driving lesson. Many people listening right now may still remember what this experience was like. You may have felt a bit nervous and intimidated to be in such a confined space with someone you had only just met. In this situation your instructor tells your parents that students just tend to do better without a parent supervising. The instructor then takes you away from the main test route to a secluded area on the edge of town, praises your driving and places

a hand between your legs. This incident is disturbing, but it is not totally fictional. It was 17-year-old Bodhi Genis's experience during her first paid driving lesson. Last week an ABC investigation uncovered that more than 300 people have been sexually harassed by their driving instructors, the majority of them being young women and young girls. The alleged incidents date all the way back to the 1960s, with numerous women recounting how they were groomed, groped and verbally abused in an environment that was meant to be safe and educational.

Driving instructors are required to have a working with children check and vulnerable people check, but if this year has taught us anything about the systemic failures in safeguarding Victoria's minors, a check is not enough to keep them safe. There is currently no legal requirement for driving instructors to install cameras or GPS tracking systems in any state or territory across Australia, with the exception of South Australia, which is set to introduce such legislation soon. In Victoria taxidrivers are required to have a camera inside the car, a measure to protect both drivers and passengers from potential harm or abuse. Like taxis, learner drivers are collected from their own homes, revealing their private address, and are strapped into a car with a complete stranger, yet no legislation exists to prevent instances of instructor misconduct. For some women the impact of their sexual assault and sexual harassment during the process of obtaining their licence has led them to abandon ever getting one altogether. This is unacceptable. The action that I seek is for Victoria to follow South Australia's lead by introducing meaningful protections for learner drivers, including mandatory cameras and GPS trackers in driver training vehicles.

Calder Park train station

Trung LUU (Western Metropolitan) (17:39): (1969) My adjournment matter is for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure regarding transport services on the Sunbury line, particularly around Calder Park and surrounding areas. The action I seek is for the minister to commit to the funding of the proposed Calder Park train station. I recently received correspondence from Melton City Council expressing concern about the lack of public transport options in the Calder Park area and the heavy reliance on the nearby Watergardens station. Over the next two decades a forecast additional 92,000 residents are expected to live in the catchment zone of Watergardens station, which will increase pressure on already overcrowded facilities. A new station at Calder Park would help alleviate the pressure, reduce road congestion and decrease car dependency. I had a conversation with residents from Hillside describing the current parking situation at Watergardens station as terrible and stating that getting to the station during peak hours is like a nightmare. With the forecast of 92,000 residents in the area, the situation will only get worse if no new station is built. Therefore I ask the minister to commit to funding the development of the proposed Calder Park station to futureproof our public transport for the west. This project will not only alleviate pressure on existing stations on the Sunbury line but also make Victoria's train network more accessible for everyone.

Housing

Bev McARTHUR (Western Victoria) (17:41): (1970) My adjournment is for the Minister for Planning, and the action I seek is that the minister immediately cut the unnecessary state regulations, taxes and charges that are killing housing development in Victoria. 'Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.' Those words of Ronald Reagan could not be more pertinent to Victoria today, a state facing crisis after crisis, all of Labor's making. Let us talk about housing. This crisis has been created and fuelled by government interference, which distorts the market and drives up prices. I have met with many stakeholders involved in the industry. I have met with councils, and I have met with developers, builders and planners. They are all unanimous: it is simply too expensive to build homes in this state.

The *Age* recently revealed that three-quarters of Melbourne's councils are set to fall short of their housing targets – half a million homes short by 2051 – yet when you look at the data, councils are not the deadlock and the roadblock. Take Manningham, in Melbourne's east: since 2020–21 their approval rates have been between 81 per cent and 93 per cent. Last year alone, 733 applications came before

them and 82 per cent were processed within the statutory timeframe, with only 2 per cent refused. So who is to blame for the 16,500-home shortfall projected in Manningham by 2051? Safe to say it is not the council; it is this Allan Labor government. Instead of fixing the real problem, Labor strips councils of planning powers and lectures older Victorians about selling their homes. Meanwhile regulations, taxes and charges pile up and choke off supply. Excessive planning rules, ever-changing compliance requirements, duplicative approvals – all of them add unnecessary time and money. And then come the state-imposed levies, taxes and infrastructure charges that get loaded on to the final price of a home.

The *Age* also reports that the cost of planning suburbs in our growth corridors has skyrocketed by 750 per cent. As Villawood's Rory Costelloe has said that Labor's obsession with cramming high-rises into established suburbs while stalling precinct structure plans in growth areas is strangling supply and driving up costs. The inner-city dwellers on the other side of the aisle might like tall towers, but it is not what families want. They want backyards and more bedrooms, but Labor will not respect those preferences. It would rather dictate from Spring Street than empower industry to meet demand. The outcome is entirely predictable: fewer homes at higher prices and ordinary Victorians left footing the bill. This government could not build a chook shed, let alone solve Victoria's housing crisis.

Housing

David DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) (17:44): (1971) My matter for the adjournment tonight is for the attention of the Minister for Planning. We have seen this week a series of maps released of high-density, high-rise development across many parts of Melbourne – 20 indeed of the 60 that have been listed by the government for this intense high-rise, high-density development treatment. Certainly 'treatment' is the word for it, because this overrides councils, it overrides communities and it takes away planning control that for many years has been democratically linked with local government. A number of these have not been released in full detail or in a way that enables the community to understand. Earlier today I asked the minister to release all the submissions on which the government have relied to date and all of the forthcoming submissions in any discussions that they have.

There are a couple of areas in particular in the Southern Metropolitan Region that I want to focus on. Ashburton has been told that there will be a high-rise, high-density development up to four storeys, but the maps have not yet been released. The government need to come and actually meet with the community properly, host a proper open forum – not their half-baked approach – and come clean on what is going to happen to the 800-metre zone around Ashburton.

In the case of the Glen Waverley line, which runs in Stonnington to the south of Ashburton, Glen Iris, Holmesglen, Darling and East Malvern stations, and the 800-metre zone that the government announced would be around those, there is a lack of clarity here. The government have announced in the Stonnington wedge a series of maps, many of which are very, very high rise and very impactful, but they have not been clear about what will happen on the Boroondara side on the north of Gardiners Creek. That is within the 800-metre zone. I think people are entitled to be concerned, because the earlier planning amendments that were put in place certainly allow high-rise, high-density development to occur, potentially with a significant area around that development. Those maps have not been released for the north of the Gardiners Creek area. What is going to happen there? It is time that the government came clean. The government tried to intimate that it might not allow development in that area. I certainly would see intense high-rise development of up to 20 storeys as entirely inappropriate there. But they have not made public announcements that they are stepping back from that. There is just an absence of maps. So it is time the government came clean and released the maps, and the minister should do so.

Health system

Georgie CROZIER (Southern Metropolitan) (17:47): (1972) My adjournment matter is for the attention of the Minister for Health. This week I spoke to a woman who was quite distressed, actually – Lisa. She contacted me about her significant and ongoing health issue due to a deteriorating eye

condition. Lisa's right eye muscle has detached from the eyelid, requiring surgery. As a result of the condition she suffers from severe irritation and photophobia and is prone to eye infections.

Despite her GP referring Lisa to the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital over 12 months ago, she has been advised that the wait time for an appointment is five years. This is totally unacceptable. This is an unacceptable delay for someone who is experiencing daily discomfort and potential long-term damage to her vision given the risk of infections in other areas, which she has to deal with each day. Her case was then referred to Monash Medical Centre, but she was informed that she would not be placed on their waiting list unless her case was approved by the board. It has also affected her ability to work. Unfortunately, Lisa lost her job last week and cannot afford private surgery. As she told me, Lisa has paid taxes her entire working life, yet she cannot get care when she needs it. Lisa has expressed her frustration and distress at the lack of access to timely public health care.

She is not alone. I have so many people contacting my office every day, every week about their inability to get the surgery they need. As I said, she is not alone. There are just far too many Victorians that are waiting in pain. Their health is deteriorating. It is affecting their ability to undertake normal daily activities. As Lisa said, she is fearful that she will not even be able to get a job because of the condition she has and the unsightly issue of this eye condition – the fact that her muscle has detached and the impact that is having on her eye socket and eyeball. It is really distressing for her. The action I seek from the minister is to urgently address the unacceptable waiting time for essential surgery.

Stamp duty

Wendy LOVELL (Northern Victoria) (17:49): (1973) My adjournment matter is for the Treasurer, and the action that I seek is for the Treasurer to bring parity to the stamp duty exemption cap for first home buyers along the New South Wales–Victoria border. There are 200,000 reasons why this needs to happen now – that is the difference in stamp duty free thresholds for properties that, while separated by the river border in neighbouring cities, are in reality the same community. In New South Wales the stamp duty free threshold for Albury and its suburbs is $800,000; in Wodonga it is $600,000. This is the same community where people crisscross the border for work and recreation. Property values are almost identical. In the Albury suburb of Thurgoona the average property price is $679,500; in Wodonga's growth corridor of Leneva it is $680,000, but if you buy your first home in Leneva in Victoria you pay about $18,000 extra in state government stamp duty. Over in Thurgoona the charge is zero. If you factor in the federal first home guarantee program, a first home buyer in Wodonga, Leneva, Baranduda or Killara is paying more than $45,000 more in duties than their New South Wales neighbours. The cap on the scheme that removes the need for mortgage insurance for people with just a 5 per cent deposit is $800,000 in Albury but just $650,000 in Wodonga. The difference is inexplicable, but the difference forces the Wodonga first home buyer to find another $27,000.

Property is not cheap in Albury or Wodonga; prices reflect a demand driven by cashed-up remote investors attracted by substantial rental yields in both cities. I have heard stories of remote investors paying well above the asking price to get into the border property market. The ultimate effect is that it remains incredibly tough to buy your first home on the border and more than $45,000 tougher if that home is on the Victorian side of the border.

The Commonwealth has responsibility for the part it plays in this, but it is Victoria's stamp duty caps that need to be amended in this place. People on the border deal with these anomalies every day, but they are often ignored by citycentric Labor ministers. The government should never bring a bill into this place before the responsible minister has closely considered the consequences for cross-border communities. Victorian government departments and agencies should be required to consider and compare regulatory settings in neighbouring states when proposing new rules and legislation. Had this happened with stamp duty concession, Victoria would be more competitive for first home buyers on the border and generally fairer overall. All Victorians, especially those living in the border communities, should know that the Battin Liberal government will scrap stamp duty for first home buyers on all properties up to $1 million.

Firewood collection

Gaelle BROAD (Northern Victoria) incorporated the following (1974):

My adjournment is to the Minister for Environment.

Local residents around Bendigo are increasingly frustrated by the lack of accessible firewood collection points.

We have record fuel loads in our forests, debris piling up everywhere, yet current government policy continues to restrict community access to this renewable resource.

As DEECA field-based crews are undertaking protected industrial action which includes a ban on the felling of trees to be used as firewood, and without contractors, no wood is available for collection.

Bendigo is a major regional centre and used to have firewood collection spots nearby, but now residents are being forced to drive hundreds of kilometres in a round trip, hoping to find some firewood.

That's unacceptable, especially when many families rely on firewood to heat their homes and the fuel required to travel to collect firewood is so expensive.

Previously thinned areas in the Wellsford forest are thriving, with a healthy understorey and reduced fuel loads.

With electricity and gas prices soaring, people are desperate for firewood to heat their homes.

I ask the minister to review this matter and take action to make firewood more accessible and ensure responsible fuel load management in our forests.

Responses

Enver ERDOGAN (Northern Metropolitan – Minister for Casino, Gaming and Liquor Regulation, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Youth Justice) (17:53): There were 17 matters raised in today's adjournment: Ms Ermacora to the Minister for Education; Dr Heath to the Premier; Ms Terpstra to the Minister for Health; Ms Gray-Barberio to the Attorney-General; Mr Welch to the Minister for Planning; Mr Galea to the education minister; Mr Puglielli to the Minister for Police; Mr Mulholland to the Minister for Public and Active Transport; Mr Limbrick to the Minister for Corrections – me – which I will give a written response to; Ms Tyrrell to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety; Mrs Hermans to the Premier; Ms Purcell to the minister for roads; Mr Luu to the Minister for Transport Infrastructure; Mrs McArthur to the Minister for Planning; Mr Davis to the Minister for Planning; Ms Crozier to the Minister for Health; and Ms Lovell to the Treasurer. I will make sure all those matters are referred for an appropriate response.

Katherine COPSEY (Southern Metropolitan) (17:53): President, I have two adjournment matters that are now outstanding. Those are adjournment numbers 1622 and 1761. The time for response having expired, I now seek an explanation in the chamber.

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Ms Copsey, for those. I take note that I will seek an appropriate response.

The PRESIDENT: The house stands adjourned.

House adjourned 5:54 pm.